

**THE ATTITUDE OF THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE TO
HOMOSEXUALITY: TOWARDS A SOCIO-SEXOLOGICAL THEOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATION**

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A thesis submitted to
The University of Birmingham
For the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Theology and Religion
College of Arts and Law
The University of Birmingham
July 2010

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ABSTRACT

The issues raised by the phenomenon of homosexuality among the Shona are so complex in their nature. The widely held assumptions are that firstly, there is no place for gays and lesbian within the Shona culture and secondly, God Forbids. To justify these claims they point to prevalent socio-cultural as well as ecclesiastical intermediary systems that serve as authorities to enforce and monitor specific rules of conduct and moral goals. The study explores these conventional notions and attempts to establish the reality in which these moral actions are carried out. It marks the beginning of the work of demystification and deconstruction of various existing theories and theologies of sexuality. By scanning through the intricate socio-cultural and ecclesiastical structures the study seeks to identify the place of homosexuality among the Shona and discuss the paradoxes and contradictions presented by the Church's approach. This study is an analysis of the underlying issues in regards to homosexuality among the Shona. Such an analysis helps in identifying and developing contextual sexual theological approaches.

DEDICATION

To my Mother Europea Mudavanhu.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Martin Stringer, my supervisor for his valuable guidance and assistance, for through his enduring support I have managed to achieve a task that was for me, extremely taxing. This work would have failed had it not been for his encouragement throughout the PhD process. I recall that at one supervision, when the academic pressure was beginning to take its toll on me he brought it to my attention that what I was experiencing was only 'The learning curve'! And the whole academic journey was a real learning curve for me. I am also grateful to Professor Stephen Pattison for his much-needed pastoral support and Dr Garnet Parris for his support with a grant for African Studies, which was very helpful.

I am indebted to my Church, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, for giving me permission to carry out this study from one of their circuits as well as using their archival documents. I am so grateful to all research assistance for offering their precious time to make this project a success. My gratitude also goes to my family for their love, encouragement and constant support, especially to my mum for enduring such a long time without me, and to my sister and brother-in-law for having to put up with my research work frustrations. Amongst my peers Rev. Kennedy Gondongwe was kind enough to read through my work and make valuable corrections and suggestions, and Rev. Tsitsi Madziire was always there with her prayers, motivation and enormous support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GLOSSARY	i-iii
ABREVIATIONS	iv
CHAPTER ONE	1
1.1 Preamble	1-5
1.2 Stating the Problem	5-16
1.3 Methodology	16-24
1.3.1 Interviews	24-26
1.3.1.1 Group Interviews	26-27
1.3.1.2 Individual Interviews	27-28
1.3.1.3 Gossip	28-33
1.3.2 Questionnaires	33-35
1.3.3 Documents	35
1.4 Significance of Study	35-40
1.5 Review of Related Literature	40-46
1.6 Structure of Thesis	47
CHAPTER TWO	48
AFRICAN CONCEPT OF SEXUALITY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS	48
2.1 Introduction	48-49
2.2 History of Shona Sexuality	49
2.2.1 Shona Sexuality and The African Worldview	49-53
2.2.2 Shona Sexuality and Culture of Silence	53-56
2.3 Known Sexual Practices Among the Shona	56
2.3.1 Shona Heterosexual Monogamous Marriages	56-57

2.3.1.1	Marriage perceived as a process	58–63
2.3.1.2	Marriage perceived as having religious significance	63–67
2.3.1.3	Procreation as the primary purpose in marriage	67–71
2.3.1.4	Procreation: Religious, socio-economic and political aspects	71-73
2.3.1.5	Marriage is a communal affair	73-75
2.3.2	Heterosexual Relationships Outside Monogamous Marriages	75–76
2.3.3	Same-Sex Practices	76-78
2.4	Conclusion	78-79

CHAPTER THREE 80

THE NATURE, CHARACTERISTICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE AMONG THE SHONA 80

3.1	Introduction	80-81
3.2	Homosexual Practice Among the Shona: Socio-Cultural Analysis	81-83
3.2.1	Oral Tradition	83-84
3.2.2	Sexual Taboos	84-87
3.2.3	Spirit Possession and Witchcraft	88-90
3.2.4	Marriage	90
3.2.4.1	Children Socialised for Marriage	90-92
3.2.4.2	The Custom of Kupindira or Kusika Rudzi and Musengabere	92-93
3.2.5	Language	93-94
3.2.6	Patriarchy	94-96
3.3	Essence of Shona Traditional Family: A Preliminary Glimpse	96

3.3.1 The Nature of Families	96-98
3.3.2 Authority Patterns Within The Traditional Family	99-100
3.3.3 The Nature of Residence	100-101
3.4 The Changing Scene: Nature and Impact of Urbanisation Traditional Sexual Relationships	101-102
3.4.1 Homosexual Practice: A Result of the Weakening Contacts Between Kin	102-103
3.4.2 Homosexual Practice: A Quest for Independence	103-106
3.4.3 Homosexual Practice: Urban Living Arrangements	106
3.4.4 Homosexual Practice: Unbalanced Sex Ratios	107-109
3.4.5 The attitude of the Colonial Government Towards Homosexuality	109-111
3.5 Homosexual Practice in Contemporary Zimbabwe	111-113
3.5.1 The Government and Homosexuality	113-114
3.5.2 Homosexuality and The Role of GALZ	114-116
3.5.3 Homosexual Practice: A Survival Strategy in Contemporary Zimbabwe	116-120
3.6 Conclusion	120-122

CHAPTER FOUR 123

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE AND HOMOSEXUALITY:

APPROACHES TO SEXUALITY ANALYSED 123

4.1 Introduction	123-124
4.2 The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe: A Brief Historical	124-126
4.3 Missionaries and Homosexuality: Analysis of Their Approach to Sexuality	126-127
4.3.1 The Concept of Christian Homes	127-128
4.3.2 Education	128-131
4.3.3 Marriage	131-134

4.3.4 <i>Rooru</i> /Bride Wealth	134-138
4.3.5 Rites of Passage	138
4.3.5.1 For Babies	138-141
4.3.5.2 On Adolescence	141-143
4.3.6 Freedom of Choice	143
4.3.6.1 Marriage	143-144
4.3.6.2 Children	144-145
4.4 Contemporary Methodist Church Attitudes to Homosexuality: Analysis of their Approach to Sexuality	145-146
4.4.1 Approach to sexuality Discussed	146
4.4.1.1 Church Membership	146
4.4.1.1.1 Full Members	146-148
4.4.1.1.2 On Trial Members	148
4.4.1.1.3 Adherents	148-150
4.4.1.2 Worship Discussed	150
4.4.1.3 The Organisations Discussed	150
4.4.1.3.1 The Boys Christian Union (BCU)	151-152
4.4.1.3.2 The Girls Christian Union (GCU)	153-154
4.4.1.4 Marriage Discussed	155-156
4.5 The Church and Homosexuality: Findings From Questionnaires Analysed	156-157
4.5.1 Responses from the Questionnaire Briefly Analysed	157
4.5.1.1 Section A	157-158
4.5.1.2 Section B	158-164
4.6 Conclusion	164-166

CHAPTER FIVE	167
THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	167
5.1 Introduction	167-168
5.2 The Bible and Sexuality: A Theological Analysis	168
5.2.1 Genesis 1-2	168-172
5.2.2 The Model of a Sexual Relationship	172-177
5.3 The Bible and Homosexuality: A Critical Theological Analysis	177-178
5.3.1 The Biblical Perspective Presented	178
5.3.1.1 Genesis 19:1-29	178-181
5.3.1.2 Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13	181-183
5.3.1.3 Romans 1:26-27	183-186
5.3.1.4 1Corinthians 6: 9 – 10; 1 Timothy 1: 10	186-188
5.3.1.5 Areas of Theological Concern	188-191
5.3.2 The Ethics of Homosexuality	191-196
5.3.3 Compulsory Heterosexuality	196-201
5.3.4 Tradition versus Modernity	201-204
5.3.5 Conclusion	204-205
CHAPTER SIX	206
THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF SEXUAL SECURITY	206
6.1 Introduction	206-207
6.2 The Shona Ideology of Sexual Security	207-212
6.3 The Church and the Sexual Security Ideology	212-213
6.4 The Security Theology	213-216

6.5 The Sexual Secrecy Theology	217-226
6.6 The Church and Homosexuality: Theology of Sexual Secrecy	226-229
2.7 Conclusion	229-230
CHAPTER SEVEN	231
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	231
7.1 Introduction	231-233
7.2 Church and Homosexuality: A Patriarchal Phallogentric Ecclesiological Model	234-236
7.2.1 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: Sexuality is Functional	236-238
7.2.2 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: Sexuality is Marriage Bound	238-240
7.2.3 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: Sexuality is Hierarchical	240-241
7.2.4 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: A Selective Hermeneutics	241-246
7.2.5 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: Traditional Models Apply	246-247
7.3 The Church and Homosexuality: Shona Sexual Theology	247-251
7.4 Conclusion	251-255
APPENDIX 1	256
QUESTIONNAIRE	256-259
APPENDIX 2	260
QUESTIONS FOR GOSSIP	260
APPENDIX 3	261
QUESTIONNEER FOR GAYS/LESBIANS	261-263
APPENDIX 4	264
QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS	264
REFERENCES	265-273

GLOSSARY

Akanditemera nyora - The process of administering traditional medicine by making incisions on skin and rubbing in the medicine.

Ane chitsinha - Evil spirits.

Ane shave - Being possessed by some alien spirit.

Ambuya - The mother of your wife.

Arikubika mapoto – Co-habiting.

Baba- Father.

Chigara vakwasha - A bench specially designed for men.

Chikomba – Boyfriend.

Chikwambo - Alien spirit.

Chipini-pini chinotadzisa mvura kunaya – Evil spirit that stops rain.

Gono redanga - Bull of the cattle herd.

Gota- Traditional hut used by boys as a bedroom.

Guri – A corn cob.

Haikona kutamba nevakomana - do not play with boys.

Hatidi vanhu vakadaro musvondo medu - We shall not have such people in our Church.

Kokorodzano- Class meeting

Kubika mapoto – The process of Co-habiting.

Kugara nhaka - levirate marriages.

Kumusha - The village.

Kupereka - handing over of the bride.

Kupindira or kusika rudzi - Raising seed on behalf of another in the case where a husband is impotent.

Makona - medical charms.

Mapoto – Co-habiting.

Mashura - Bad omen.

Mbuya- Grand mother.

Mhai – Mother.

Misikanzwa - Being naughty.

Muchemedza mbuya - Traditional medicine used as an aphrodisiac.

Mukwasha - One who marries your daughter.

Muringa - Traditional medicine used as an aphrodisiac.

Musengabere - The custom of legitimately ‘kidnapping’ girls for marriage.

Mushonga - Traditional medicine.

Mutimwi - A string of beads which is given at birth to both boys and girls and plays a role in female fertility rites at puberty, first pregnancy and at every birth.

Ndiyani angade kuroora zvakadaro - Who on earth would want to marry such a person.

Ngomwa - An infertile woman.

Nhanga - girls sleeping room.

Nhembe - A small piece of material made out of animal skin to cover the lower private parts of the body.

Nyaradzo - This is a memorial service that is done a few weeks after a burial.

Padare – A traditional meeting place for men.

Roora – This word refers Bride-wealth can also be used in reference to bride bride-price.

Rushambwa – Bad luck.

Sahwira - A friend.

Sekuru – Uncle refers also to grand-father.

Tsano - Brother in law.

Tsikombi – A woman who has passed marriageable age.

Tsvimborume - A man who has passed marriageable age.

Unomuziva here uyu? - Do you know him/her?

Unozosungirirwa guri kana wafa - you will carry a corn cob to your grave.

Vatete - Auntie.

Vanatete – Aunties.

Vhukavhuka - Traditional medicine used as an aphrodisiac.

Vatezvara -father-in-law, (singular).

Vana tezvara - father in-laws, (plural).

Vanatete vakanaka nevana amai vakanaka - Responsible, reliable auntie and mother.

Vanhu ava vahedeni chaivo - These people are real heathens.

Wakafuratirwa netsuro - The person is cursed.

Wakareruka – A loose person.

Zvitsinha - Bad luck.

ABBREVIATIONS

BCU – Boys Christian Union.

GALZ - Gay and Lesbians of Zimbabwe.

GCU - Christian Union.

LMS - London Missionary Society.

MCU – Men Christian Union.

NAZ - National Archives of Zimbabwe.

WCU – Woman Christian Fellowship, normally referred to as Ruwadzano.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 PREAMBLE

The challenges presented by homosexuality in different cultures of the world assume various degrees but generally speaking, so far, the phenomenon has raised issues that have proved to be a thorn in the flesh in many scholarly debates as well as in other aspects of life.¹ There is no consensus on most of the issues raised by the phenomenon of homosexuality, therefore this study contributes an African, specifically the Shona, perspective to the ongoing debate. Whereas in other countries the issues have prompted debate from different fields of thought for the Shona the debate is still on the preliminary stages of establishing the authenticity of homosexuality. While there are a great variety of opinions among the Shona regarding homosexuality, they can all be roughly grouped into one big group of people who are very sceptical, suspicious, conservative and even hostile to the homosexual community.

As for the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, homosexuality is said to be a sin and those who practice are called to repent. The Church follows a predetermined, fixed, and functional traditional pastoral approach to sexuality which is hetero-patriarchal in model, argued to be patterned by the people's culture and the Bible. This study offers a critique of what seem to

¹ The issues raised by the phenomenon of homosexuality run across many aspects of life and people from different walks of life. Psychologists, scientists, sociologists, academics and non academics, Muslims, Christians, religious conservatives and liberals, are all contributing to the ongoing debate. Commenting on gay marriages George Bush, the president of America, said that "A few judges and local authorities are presuming to change the most fundamental institution of civilisation. Their action has created confusion on an issue that requires clarity." Stephen Deal, "Bush backs ban on gay marriages," in *Metro*, Wednesday, February 25, 2004, 9. The debate has stretched even into the music industry. On the ITV live show, the X-Factor on 17 October 2009, one of the judges made a comment alluding to the fact that a bisexual contestant had made a gender change to the lyrics of a song. This comment aroused a lot of controversy and a lot of questions for debate with the media about whether we are supposed to confront people about their sexuality; in this case the contestant was put on the spot in front of millions of viewers, thus pressuring someone into coming out; It was as if the contestant was being judged for the gender change in the lyrics and not his music performance. Was the judge guiding against the 'transsexualisation of music'?

be archaic hetero-patriarchal sexual dogmas that I see as incompatible with the contemporary Shona.

I chose to use the phenomenon of homosexuality to demonstrate and offer a critique to the Church's pastoral theological approach because of its relevance to the subject of study which is pastoral theology; it is contemporary and also contextual.² By narrowing down and concentrating on one subject area in analysing the Church's pastoral approach it helps to give a more focussed and yet broad, in-depth analysis. By exploring the socio-political predicaments that have shaped Shona concepts of sexuality and consequently the Church's approach to homosexuality, I hope to show the developments of traditional sexual models up to this day. It is my hope that such an approach would highlight pastoral areas that seek serious consideration by the Church.

It is a fact that 'Christian ethics' means many things to many people, depending on their background. In addition, "Christian faith has affected and been affected by viewpoints which are not explicitly Christian."³ Hence, where homosexuality is concerned, the degree to which it is acceptable varies in different parts of the world. As Niebuhr points out, all our values are held in relation to a centre of values.⁴ Our religious faith is founded on this centre of values as people's attitudes are mostly shaped by their centre of values. It is imperative for this study

² Homosexuality was chosen for of a number of reasons. To start with I chose it because it raises issues that highlight and make clear the church's pastoral approach which is the main subject under study in this research, it is also the most contemporary sexual phenomenon. Secondly, homosexuality would demonstrate the aspects of the Church's pastoral approach that I am hoping to critique. A lot has been written about African marriages but very little on homosexuality therefore, a work of research into homosexuality is a significant contribution to the ongoing academic debate. The following are some of the prominent works on African marriages. Benerezi Kisebo, Laurenti Magesa and Alyward Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977); A.K.H. Weinrich, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982); P. R. Hatendi, "Shona Marriage and the Christian churches" in Anthony J. Dachs, ed., *Christianity South of the Zambezi* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973); Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, (London: SPCK, 1973).

³ Philip J. Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgement* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 3.

⁴ Richard H. Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960).

therefore, to identify that which is central for the Shona in regards to sexuality and examine it as it impacts on the Church's sexual theology, and consequently on homosexuality. The question of whether the indigenous people had any knowledge of homosexual orientation is not necessarily of primary concern for this work, but it aims to demonstrate that homosexual practice is as indigenous as heterosexuality.

This study offers a critical investigation of what appear to be the underlying issues in regards to the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's attitude to homosexuality. By using accepted tools of investigation one can unearth evidence of homosexual practice within the social and ecclesiastical fabrics of the Shona networks. To achieve this purpose, a systems analysis investigative methodology will be implemented. This is a methodology that involves a critical reflection on both the social and ecclesiastical structures that inform sexuality. The tools used in this method are interviews, questionnaires, and documents. The study will be carried out from one of the Church's circuits with predominantly Shona speaking people.⁵

The study shall concentrate on the Shona people mainly because the Shona constitute not only the majority of the Zimbabwean population but also the majority of members of the Conference, which is a decision making body of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. Therefore, because the Shona carry the majority votes, the implication to the Church is that majority decisions are primarily based on the Shona. The second reason is that even though the Methodist Church is also widespread among the Ndebele, it is more prominent among

⁵In Zimbabwe there are two main tribes, the Shona and the Ndebele, of which the Shona occupy the larger part of the country. The Shona consist of four large segments or sections: Mazezuru, Makorekore, Manyika, and Makaranga. Mazezuru live around Harare for a radius of about eighty miles, Harare is situated in the central part of Zimbabwe. The Makorekore live around Mount Darwin in the north-eastern part of Zimbabwe. The Manyika are around Mutare, in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe. The Karanga radiate from Masvingo. It can be argued that to a large extent, they are not a monolithic culture but a generic one with numerous clans each identified by a distinctive totem. No members of the same totem can get married since they are taken as belonging to the same family.

Shona people who are the majority in Zimbabwe and consequently most influential in decision making. From this point of view then it can be argued that the Shona perspective on sex and sexuality can be a true representation of the whole population of Zimbabwe.

My research will concentrate on one of the Methodist Church Districts where I spent almost ten years training and working as a minister of religion with the Methodist Church. It was easier for me to make contacts faster because it was not long since I had last been in the area and the people still recognised me. I am a Shona of the Karanga segment but I also lived among other Shona segments during different stages of my life. Most Shona have what they refer to as a home (*kumusha*, thus the rural area or the village) and a workplace (city). They tend to refer to their rural place as their home and even though they might have a house in the city, in most cases it is never a home, even up to this time. This was the case with me. As I grew up I was oscillating between my home, Makaranga, and the city, Manyika (Mutare). From the age of eight I travelled to the city where my father was working and during school holidays and breaks I would go home where my mother was staying looking after the homestead. Therefore, being a Shona, and my further interaction with other Shona segments, gave me a broad perspective of the Shona at large.

This introductory chapter discusses some of the key factors that this study seeks to address that point towards the inadequacy of the Church's pastoral approach in relation to sexuality. A statement of the significance of the study in relation to the problem and how it adds to the body of knowledge is presented and the methodology adopted for the study is discussed. Literature on the subject area is briefly reviewed, more specifically on homosexuality in relation to both the Church and contemporary cosmopolitan society; this will help to frame

the problem by setting the research within a body of related knowledge. The chapter will conclude with the outline of the thesis.

1.2 STATING THE PROBLEM

On its approach to issues of sex and sexuality, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe employs a fixed hetero-patriarchal theological model. The main ideas of this model are arguably drawn primarily from two traditions, the culture of the people and the Bible. That is, the Church's attitude to homosexuality largely stems from its interpretation of Shona culture and the Bible on matters of sex and sexuality. From this perspective the greater part of what homosexuality means lies in its socio-cultural connotations. This seems to be in line with Foucault's arguments that sexuality assumes social categories that may not be necessarily applicable to societies other than the one in which they arise.⁶ However, of great interest for this study are the ironies, paradoxes, contradictions and hypocrisy presented by such an approach. Even though the approach may help to shed light and aid understanding of where the Church is coming from, the approach seems to have a number of limitations. Firstly, the structure and systems put in place to maintain and perpetuate sexual norms are very conducive for homosexual practice. Secondly, the approach does not seem to take into consideration ongoing changes and developments both in the Shona culture and the Biblical tradition. It is an approach that presents itself as based on static and archaic, traditional ideologies that are far divorced from the contemporary social realities of which the contemporary manifestation of homosexual practice is a typical example. The argument here is that homosexuality is not a

⁶ Michael Foucault gives an elaborate scholarly hermeneutical work on the history of sexual experiences. His argument is that sexual categories are social constructs and homosexuality is a modern category that the Greeks did not have. Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 43.

new phenomenon but it is only a manifestation which has been exhumed by social processes from the trenches of cultural and ecclesiastical fabrics, and any attempt to brush it under the carpet is only wishful thinking. In addition, doing theology is a process that is continuous with every generation, not a reflection of a certain time in history or a constant past-continuous process.

The Shona generally assume that sexual relationships are for a man and a woman in the context of marriage for the main purpose of procreation. Thus already, there seems to be a huddle on same-sex relationships. There are three main dimensions to the challenge. Firstly, sexual relationships are deemed as acceptable when they are presented in the context of a man and a woman. Secondly, sexual practice is acceptable only in a marriage context. Thirdly, the main purpose for sexual relationships is for the building of a family. That is, sexuality is moulded within the context of family authority. Its regulation depends on systems of prohibitive rules governed by particular family members.⁷ It is mainly this traditional approach to sexuality that determines the place of homosexual relationships among the Shona and consequently the attitude towards such relationships. The commonly held assumption is that every one is not only born heterosexual but is also supposed to get married and raise a family. “The categories of homosexual and heterosexual... are themselves built on the assumption that everyone is either male or female and that gender identification is itself self-evident to all observers.”⁸ This study therefore, intends to investigate and explore the

⁷ Sexuality in the Shona context as we shall see later in this work is a communal. They have *vana tete* to take care of the girl child's sexual matters while for the boys it is the responsibility of *sekuru*. In other words sex is not for an individual but for the family group and the individual must account for its use. The family, not the individual, is the master of an unmarried man's body. This explains why a girl's *tete* who is a member of her own lineage, and not the girl's mother, teaches her about sex matters, like conducting regular checks of her virginity to ensure that it is intact until marriage. This issue will be discussed in detail in later chapters.

⁸ John Michael Clark and Robert E Goss, *A Rainbow of Religious Studies* (Las Colinas: Monument Press, 1996), 86.

implications of such traditional sexual ideologies on the Church's pastoral approach to issues related to sex and sexuality.

The thesis intends not only to identify the limitations of the church's approach but also to argue for a model that reflects the ethos of the contemporary context and also be true to Christian teaching. The question is: What sexual model should be adopted that will recognise the ethos of the contemporary context and also be true to Christian teachings on sex and sexuality?

Before we give this argument the close attention it deserves, we must anticipate at least one problem area that this study cannot underplay: How the Shona define homosexuality. In other words, when the Shona call a man or a woman a homosexual, what exactly do they mean?⁹ The Shona do not seem to have a word in their language for homosexuality. Instead they use a borrowed word *ngochana*. Epprecht, a historian who has produced significant works on the history of homosexuality in Zimbabwe, explains that the origin of this word is not certain but its use can be traced as far back as 1907, linked with the Chikunda or Tonga people who occupied the lower Zambezi valley.¹⁰ It can also be traced as far back as the 1840s, associated with the Zulu or Ndaue people.¹¹ Some would like to argue that since there is no word for homosexuality in Shona it is proof of its non-existence. Thus, indigenous people claim to be

⁹ This question has been dwelled upon by Marc Epprecht in his two articles. Epprecht, Marc. 'Good God Almighty, What is this!: Homosexual "Crime" in Early Colonial Zimbabwe', in Murray, O. and Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: studies of African Homosexualities*. Haddon Craftsmen, 1998): 197- 221. Marc Epprecht has written brilliant articles on homosexuality in Zimbabwe. He makes note that the Shona do not seem to have the concept of homosexuality as we know it today. Marc Epprecht, The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Special Issue on Masculinities in Southern Africa (Dec., 1998), 631-651.

¹⁰ Marc Epprecht, 'Good God Almighty, What is this!: Homosexual "Crime" in Early Colonial Zimbabwe', in Murray, O and Roscoe, ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*. Haddon Craftsmen, 1998): 201.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

predominantly heterosexual. Such an argument raises the need to explore the authenticity of these stereotypes before we can consider the most appropriate approaches to be employed by the Church in such a muddled situation.

The assumption that I am working on is that gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe are the subjects of stereotypes which are at times true. Homosexuals have been assumed to behave almost alike, and all alike condemned. It is assumed that anyone who is homosexual thinks of nothing but sex and aims to seduce and convert others. Homosexuality is seen as a violation of the sacred, a misfortune to society, a weakening of the social structures initially erected to protect behaviours and conditions that attack social foundations. Once it comes the public knowledge that an individual is gay, everyone around is alerted to be very cautious lest they fall prey to the homosexual! Stereotyping of homosexuals is carried to absurd lengths. And it is assumed that heterosexuality is the Divine sexuality. It will be argued that the approach implemented by the Church on issues of sex and sexuality, only helps to exacerbate the stereotypes. In brief, the Church abhors homosexuality and labels the practice as not consistent with Shona culture, Biblically condemned, sinful, and therefore cannot be an acceptable Christian practice. One wonders what the Church really is and who is it for? Is there anything like Christian sexual practice? Must everything be explained within the perspectives of those who control the power structures of society or the Church and its dogmas? These are some of the questions that would help to inform the researcher on her search for an understanding of the Church's approach.

The use of Shona marriages as a barometer for determining acceptable sexual relationships raises some questions pertinent for this study. It is in the contextual understanding of the concept of Shona marriage that the Church seems to draw its perception of homosexual

relationships. By doing so it assumes that all sexual relationships should be understood in relation to marriage. Advocating for such a rigid and monosexual model to sexual relationships is a definite cause for concern for the researcher. Furthermore, the assumption that sex and sexuality assume contextual definitions is also becoming problematic in a world that is fast becoming a global village. Thus, it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue for a cultural approach to sexuality at a time when people who have a different repertoire of concepts are living together. The impact of such mingling of cultures is hard to overlook and the Shona are no exception. Again, even though “culture and society rely heavily on what has gone before and often use references from the past to justify the present,”¹² it is also a reality that culture is not static, hence advocating for sexual models as if they are a true representation of all times causes problems that this work aims to tackle. Nevertheless, it is also a fact, as argued by Nicholas Walliman and Bousmaha Baiche, that we understand the world mainly through the concepts which are available to us: “It is through the concepts that we are able to impose some sort of coherent meaning on the world: it is through them that we make sense of reality, and perceive order and coherence. We use concepts to communicate our experience of the environment around us.”¹³

Analysed on a broader perspective of sexuality, the phenomenon of homosexuality in Zimbabwe is entangled in a complex, multi-layered social history . The history bears in itself complex and at times self-contradictory levels of personal, social, and cultural meaning. An awareness of historical dimensions as they relate to sexual issues is therefore crucial since the Church draws its theological understanding from these sources. Furthermore, it is complex in that it is surrounded by a vast array of taboos, fears, prejudices, assumptions and at times hypocrisy. It is a subject that most people are not comfortable to talk about because they are

¹² Nicholas Walliman with Bousmaha Baiche, *Your Project Research: A Step by Step guide for the First-Time Researcher* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

socialised not to talk about aspects of sexuality that are contrary to the prescribed norms on sexual matters lest one is labelled as 'loose' or not 'normal'. It seems the Shona are socialised to believe that sexual practice is something that happens behind closed doors and even then it should not be discussed. For the Shona, sex is a sacred act that takes place in a sacred space; as a result you do not openly talk about it because religious things tend to lose power or become profane if exposed to the public. This same concept was prevalent in the Church from its initial stages, "to many missionaries, talking about sex of any kind seems to have been considered equivalent to advocating it outside of marriage – a sin in all the Christian dogmas."¹⁴ This is the approach that the Church inherited and maintains up to this day. It is also complex in that there actually are many issues, not one, and like many such polarising issues of our day, it raises other issues along the way.

To a large extent homosexuality is presented as an economic issue. Apparently, there is an assumption that gays have loads of money. Hence, some people would like to claim that some people adopted the practice mainly for financial benefits. The economics of homosexuality is argued to manifest itself because an inferior is said to submit himself for the sexual gratification of an economically superior man for some benefit of some sort. It raises issues of human rights, issues about the relationship between Church and State. Furthermore, the issue of homosexuality in Zimbabwe is also about poverty, abuse of power, sexual abuse that involves both children and adults, and it is about AIDS. It is a phenomenon in which lots of prejudice masquerades as facts. It becomes imperative therefore for this study to investigate the history of Shona social engineering as an attempt to understand why people would adopt a particular set of discourses concerning homosexuality. I would argue that the colonising structures contributed significantly to the emergency of a dichotomising system,

¹⁴ . Marc Epprecht, The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity., in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Special Issue on Masculinities in Southern Africa (Dec., 1998), pp. 637.

and a number of current paradigmatic oppositions that developed with it. If we examine the process of colonisation, urbanisation and the post-independence development of urban areas in Zimbabwe, we see how these dichotomies emerge, inform and transform discourses on femininity and masculinity or sexuality in general.

One cause of concern lies in the difference between Africa and the West in the understanding of homosexuality as a sexual phenomenon.¹⁵ One wonders what the determinant factors for such a difference are. For instance, it can be argued that Western society seem to be more informed on issues relating to homosexual orientation. The basis for this observation is that it seems discussions have moved from the margins to the mainstream in most academic circles. Thus it has been discovered that lesbians and gay men do not differ from heterosexuals in any significant aspect except in their choice of sexual partners. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.¹⁶ Today the major professional psychological, sociological and health associations regard homosexuality as a normal sexual variation.¹⁷ In Zimbabwe however, homosexuality is not anywhere near normal; it is understood as abnormal. Homosexuality is still mainly at the peripheries of any academic discourse. The same applies in ecclesiological circles, it is a subject area that is only engaged in by people apparently with a base mind. It is attributed to sin, and as sinners

¹⁵ Debate on homosexuality in the West has reached significant levels in terms of its acceptance and knowledge about its orientation and a lot of books have been written from different fields of thought. Little is understood conclusively about the genesis of homosexuality or homosexual orientation. However there appears to be a general agreement on several ethically relevant factors.

¹⁶Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 167. See also, Charles W. Socarides, 'Sexual Politics and Scientific Logic: The Issue of Homosexuality,' *The Journal of Psychohistory* 10 (1992): 307-329; Stanton L. Jones and Don E. Workman, 'Homosexuality: The Behavioural Sciences and the Church,' *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 17 (1989): 214-215.

¹⁷ Even though there is no conclusive agreement on homosexual orientation yet from various schools of thought, there seem to be a general agreement from the biological and psychological explanations that it is not something an individual chooses to be. For the biologists it was decided at conception and for the psychologists it was decided in infancy. This understanding is significantly different from African theories as shall be demonstrated later. In Africa they seem to argue from a social constructionist perspective, such as that championed by David Greenberg. See, David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 635.

gays and lesbians are called to repent.¹⁸ Thus, while homosexuality in Zimbabwe assumes mainly socially constructed patterns of meanings, in the West, to large extent biological and psychological meanings take precedence. In the West it is less of a moral issue as argued by Marc Oraison.¹⁹ While in the West there seem to be relative understanding of the phenomenon, in Zimbabwe by being gay one is already in trouble. The price of being openly gay is very high. Everyone feels they have the right to call you all sorts of names. It ranges from being disowned by family members, friends, society to being disowned by the Church. Even members of the extended family would feel let down and embarrassed. Uncles and aunts are accused of not having carried out their duties properly. Fear is generated within the whole extended family that may be some evil spirit is avenging because a certain deceased family member has an issue that needs solving. It is alleged then that once that issue is identified and settled the homosexual should be able to lead a 'normal' life. If not, society has in place structures that are meant to force such individuals into marriage as shall be learned in later chapters of this work. An example of Mpofu as published in a local news paper sheds light on the situation:

After Mpofu was caught in a compromising position with another man at a city nightclub, history will record that the reputation of the man and his corporation collapsed like a deck of cards. In one fell swoop, Mpofu embarrassed not only himself but his surrogates in government who had ranted and raved about the ZBC being an

¹⁸ Evidence from the survey conducted during my research reflects that homosexuality is generally regarded as an individually chosen abnormal sexual act that is both not consistent with the people's culture and sinful, and therefore can not be an acceptable Christian practice.

¹⁹ Even though there is no consensus agreement on homosexuality in the West but generally speaking, people do talk freely about it with little fear if any, for public humiliation or homophobic remarks. Gay marriages are celebrated, there are television presenters and singers who are gay, gay communities go on openly with their business without fear for antagonism from the press or political leaders, some churches are ordaining gay ministers, Holy Communion has stopped being by qualification but by invitation, sexuality does not determine church membership, the list can go on and on. The basic understanding in the West is that no individual chooses sexual orientation while in Zimbabwe most people would criticise the individual concerned and the family would be accused for letting the individual down by not enforcing some discipline (*akajadzwa, kusarohwa uko!!*) meaning the family was not strict enough, all he needs is a good beating. In the West it is unjust to criticise anyone for being gay or lesbian. Marc Oraison, *The Homosexual Question: An Attempt to Understand an Issue of Increasing Urgency Within a Christian Perspective* (London: Search Press, 1977), 114.

epitome of our culture when its head was probably drooling at the sight of his male subordinates.²⁰

To this end then, the complexity in Zimbabwe is real and its impact on the church's attitude raises issues that are paramount for this study.

As a topic of study, homosexuality raises all sorts of negative suspicions and comments. This is a subject area associated with those society deems as undignified individuals who have no respect for themselves, their families or the society of which they are a part. The same applies to researchers in the subject area; people feel they have a right to say whatever they feel like saying to you because of your choice of study area. Assumptions are raised, conclusions are reached and verdicts given. A number of my colleagues would come up to me with all sorts of comments like "that is why you are not married, you are one of them"; "you should surely be ashamed of yourself"; "no one in their right mind would want to have a conversation with you of that nature"; "being a minister you should surely know better"; "you are wasting Methodist Church time"; "may God forgive you". A couple of questions here spring to mind. Firstly, if the researcher is homosexual would it make the Methodist Church any less of a Church? Secondly, what ministerial duties are at stake if carried out by a gay/lesbian minister?

The fact that homosexuality in Zimbabwe is generally regarded as a sensitive topic, if not a taboo, that must not be mentioned or discussed in public, highlights the problems of

²⁰ Luke Tamborinyoka, *The Daily News*, Monday, 15 April 2002. The issue of Alum Mpfu's alleged homosexual incident was described by local papers as a fall from grace, *The Standard*, 2 June 2002 reported ministers as calling against the employment of gays at the ZBC and demanding an explanation from the information and publicity minister "We want to know whether or not he knew about Alum Mpfu's sexual orientation before appointing him." P.2. This issue led to the resignation of Alum Mpfu and it went on to rock the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and the government since the ZBC is allegedly owned by the state. These issues go to show how media messages fit in with and reinforce values that are widespread in society; the effect of their reports is cumulative and powerful. The media also plays a part in the teaching process, in this case of a social construction of gender, and anything that does not seem to fall in line is bound to have catastrophic results.

embarking on a project related homosexuality. It is also a topic that poses difficult questions that the researcher must resolve or the very success of the project may be in jeopardy. Its sensitivity is evident in that the research requires extraordinary delicacy in eliciting information from respondents, and disseminating information that stems from research on homosexual practice is highly consequential. It raises a range of problems from methodological, ethical, political, and legal viewpoints as well as having potential effects on the personal life of both the researcher and the researched. The cost of being gay or lesbian is extremely high in Zimbabwe and research on related issues does not come easy either. However, as Sieber and Stanley rightly said, that the fact that sensitive topics pose complex issues and dilemmas for researchers does not imply that such topics should not be studied. “Sensitive research addresses some of society’s most pressing social issues and policy questions. Although ignoring the ethical issues in sensitive research is not a responsible approach to science, shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial, is also an avoidance of responsibility.”²¹ Consequently a Church that shuns away from speaking out when need arises in such circumstances falls short of its mission.

The Church’s approach to sex and sexuality presents a paradoxical situation in its attempt to ‘curb’ homosexuality in that the structures meant for the propagation of acceptable sexual practice can be argued to be promoting some sexual freedoms that can even be counter-normative. For instance, the emphasis on gender-centred organisations such as the Girls’ Christian Union (GCU); Boys’ Christian Union (BCU), Men’s Christian Union (MCU); and Woman’s Christian Union (*Ruwadzano* – WCU), can be argued to have a double impact on the adherents, such that, while they make it easy for those of the same sex to socialise, on the other hand the same groups can be seen to provide and create an easier environment for

²¹ Joan E. Sieber, and B. Stanley, *Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988), 55.

same-sex relationships, especially in a context where such relationships are not permitted. The ironic nature of the approaches employed by the Church is evident not only in Church structures but also in the Christian message. The Church regards homosexuality as a sin which one should repent from at the same time they promote a pastoral approach that encourages everyone to believe that God loves and accepts everybody as they are. So the Church declares that

The Methodist Church rejoices in the movement towards unity within the universal Church and seeks to play its part towards that end. The Doctrines of the Evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning, and still holds, are based upon the Devine Revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this Revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.²²

The obvious dissonance and acrimony between these approaches raises issues that this study hopes to analyse.

One of the problems that this study also seeks to address arises from the Church's interpretation of scriptures related to homosexuality. A few questions here come to mind that would help put the debate into perspective. Does the Bible provide a ready made solution to all our problems in relation to human sexuality? Is there anything Christian/unchristian about homosexuality? What should be the Christian attitude towards sexual relationships? A critical analysis of the Church's literal approach to Biblical presentation of homosexuality will be explored. It is the task of this study to argue for contemporary and contextual tools as necessary for the interpretation of the Bible. Context is very important in the understanding of any Biblical passage, culture, or a particular people. Advising on how to do theology, John Parratt suggest that we must devise a theological method that allows for the careful critical reading of a context so that theological work jumps to no abstract conclusions, but instead

²²The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. *Deed of the Church Order and Standing Orders* (Harare: Research and Publications Production, 2009), 2.

produces substantial, pertinent theology.²³ For this reason then, the political setting, surrounding culture and economic structures are all important factors of context, and therefore significant for any understanding of the original intention of the theology that is produced from it. However, questions are surely raised when there seem to be a cleavage between theological approaches and contemporary culture, that is, when theological approaches seem to be presented as fixed and to be unchallenged. Just as the Biblical context of the Old Testament is to a large extent different from the New Testament, the Zimbabwean context of today is also very different from that of thirty or twenty years ago. Therefore, it is the task of the church to critically analyse its theology continuously so that it makes sense to its people in every generation.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

This research follows a case study approach which, according to Yin, is “preferred when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomena within some real life context.”²⁴ The distinctive need for case study arises out of the desire to understand a complex social phenomenon; it is a construction of social reality in the phenomenon under study²⁵. Researching on homosexuality in a Shona context is definitely a challenge, because generally speaking anything having to do with sex causes a great many people to feel embarrassed, mostly because sexual practices always involve some degree of privacy. Therefore, the methodology employed was carried out with the consent of everyone involved and confidentiality was assured. There is also the challenge that “while a strict adherence to the code of ethics might protect one's research participants, who or what protects the

²³ John Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology* (London: SPCK, 2002), 17-21.

²⁴ R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, 1989), 1.

²⁵ Flick Uwe, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 29.

anthropologist in the field?”²⁶ In a context where political tensions are so unpredictable, as indicated earlier, carrying out research where homosexuality is concerned was a risky business. Nevertheless, to a large extent the fact that the researcher was doing research at ‘home’ and was aware of the relevant support networks proved to be of great help.²⁷ The researcher was also cautious that in the event of an unexpected occurrence raising serious ethical issues, she would get in touch with her supervisor or pastoral tutor for guidance, advice and support.

I chose to use qualitative research method because it is fit for the purpose, challenging and exciting. “Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, and ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate.”²⁸ McLeod notes that “The primary goal of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed.”²⁹ He argues that the world can be viewed from different perspectives. Thus qualitative research aims at knowing how particular individuals or groups understand the world. It may be argued that people already have an understanding of the world based on their norms and values. However such knowledge is far from being coherent and consistent. Qualitative research aims at providing formal statements and conceptual

²⁶ H. Becker, E. Boonzaier, and J. Owen, ‘Fieldwork in shared spaces: Positionality, power and ethics of citizen anthropologists in southern Africa’, In: *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 28, (2005): 126.

²⁷ My research topic is a very sensitive topic in Zimbabwe, especially after the leader of the country pronounced that gays and lesbian have no rights in Zimbabwe, and he went even further to order a witch-hunt in his own government in search of anyone who might be practicing. A number of government officials lost their jobs and Mugabe likened those who practice homosexuality as being worse than cats and dogs. Being aware of all the social political tensions that may be aroused by the topic prior to my field work prepared me to be cautious in my approach. In other words one can argue here that, given the circumstances, carrying out research on homosexuality in Zimbabwe as an insider (a Zimbabwean) was less threatening compared to it being done by an outsider.

²⁸ Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching: Second Edition*, (London: SAGA Publications, 2002), 1.

²⁹ John McLeod, *Qualitative research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (London: SAGA Publications, 2001), 2.

frameworks that provide new ways of understanding the world.³⁰ The qualitative research method then seems appropriate for the purposes of this study, aiming at developing a consistent and coherent knowledge of how sex and sexuality are understood among the Shona and how that understanding informs the Church on its approach to sexuality and consequently, homosexuality.

The data was collected mainly from one of the Methodist circuit where the researcher had worked before as a minister for three years. Even though there are notable advantages in doing research among your own people, like easy accessibility, the researcher was also confronted with notable obstacles. For example, as a minister of religion in Zimbabwe, people tend not treat you as an equal but as someone superior and that in itself is a disadvantage because the behavior that people tend to portray when they are aware that a minister is around is different from their real personality; in most cases they resort to ‘keeping up appearances’ for the minister’s sake. Very often you hear such comments as “how can you behave like this when a minister is around” or “you can’t talk like that to a minister”. In other words, a minister is approached in a specific way, wearing a specific dress code and communicated to in a specific language, everything is ‘dressed up’ to suit the supposedly ‘Divine standards’. In an attempt to overcome this disadvantage I put in place a research method that would enable me to meet the people acting in the natural course of their daily lives. Implementing a research method that requires me to participate in the people’s daily lives gave me the opportunity to capture information, learn firsthand and augment information gathered by other sources of enquiry.

³⁰ Ibid., 3.

This circuit is comprised of twenty two Churches; one is in the urban area, six in commercial farms, two in mission schools, one in a squatter camp, three in resettlement areas and nine in the village. The question that one might want to ask at this point is: What is it that makes this particular Circuit an appropriate setting for doing fieldwork in relation to the attitude of the Church to homosexuality in Zimbabwe? The choice of this circuit as a survey sample was intentional, appropriate and strategic. This was a circuit that includes everything from village life to city life, from white commercial farms to mission centres, from resettlement areas to squatter camps. The circuit was a representative sample of the general population in that it seemed to epitomise the upheaval which the researcher wanted to understand. Even though my choice of circuit does not include Harare, which is the citadel of power, the chosen circuit works well for the purpose of this research. My opinion is that Harare as a capital city has people from all over the country and including it as a research sample would mean that it was going to require more time than I could afford to spend in the field. It would also involve a lot of travelling which I tried to avoid because of limited time and finance. The chosen circuit was more compact, thus the town, the commercial farms, the resettlement areas, the mission centre and the village were very close to each other, such that in a day I could conduct interviews in the commercial farms, walk to the road nearby, get a bus to the city, conduct another interview, from there get another bus to the squatter camp then I can head off to the resettlement areas, just in one day. Again it was easier to trace the impact of urbanisation on family units at close contact because I could easily locate or follow-up a family from the village into the city or resettlement areas or the commercial farms. Again for the purposes of making follow-up studies and constructing a chronological understanding of my research questions this particular circuit has more to offer than Harare, the capital city. However, I should point out at this stage that a few interviews were conducted in Harare (as shall be

explained in chapter three) but that was specifically as a follow-up of one line of enquiry after conducting the interviews in the sample circuit.

Advising on the characteristics of a survey sample, Moore wrote, “The secret is to select a sample that will represent, or have the same characteristics as, the overall population. More precisely, the chance of a particular characteristic appearing in the whole population.”³¹ The chosen circuit had traditional villages with the indigenous people and all their traditional set-up, and there was a modern city with its industries and city life booming with people from all walks of life and different nationalities, there were white commercial farms vibrant with workers both foreign and indigenous, then there were also the resettlements and a squatter camp with the indigenous people who had travelled from the villages to the city to make a living but found it difficult and for one reason or another would not go back to the village. As a result they live in makeshift houses at the squatter camp. There was also the mission farm, with the mission school, mission village, and two mission churches, one for villagers and one for the school. Most important is the fact that the whole area from which the sample circuit is drawn is dominated by the Methodist church.³²

Doing research on homosexuality as a minister of religion in Zimbabwe had both negative and positive impacts. On the negative side, during my involvement in the field, there was an extent to which I felt as though I was doing more pastoral work than fieldwork itself. This was because even though I presented myself as a researcher, but because the people knew me as a minister of religion my methodology became primarily shaped by ministerial duties. That

³¹Nick Moore, *How to do Research*, Second Edition (London: The Library Association Publishing, 1983), 34. See also R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. (Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1989), 81.

³² Just as Africa was apportioned to different colonial governments during the scramble for Africa, different missionary boards were apportioned different areas to work, so the area where my study is based was allocated the Methodist church and it is still dominated by Methodists even up to this day.

is, at times during interviews I felt as if I was leading a class meeting or a Bible study group (*kokorodzano*), because the people expected some opening and closing devotions, be it with individuals or group interviews. At one point it was more of a praise and worship because the people were just so overwhelmed by my presence and the whole session was constantly being interrupted by spontaneous singing from those gathered. To make matters worse, the groups were mostly far larger than expected because even though they were informed about the purpose of my visit and how long the interviews were expected to last, because they do not get to see their own minister often because the circuit is too big, people saw it as an opportunity to have their other business sorted out by the researcher, for instance burials, *nyaradzo* (this is a form of memorial service that is done a few weeks after a burial), counseling sessions, prayer requests and those under palliative care requesting Holy Communion. Therefore, in many cases the research was overtaken by events. Another weakness of doing research as a minister, especially where one has worked before, is that the nature of data the interviewee gives is too polished, in the sense that they are some things that ministers are supposed to be told, and some things a minister is not supposed to know are happening. Ministers are assumed to belong to a certain discourse. For this reason one can argue that even though doing research as a minister can give one very easy access to informants, if care is not taken it also limits or affects the authenticity of data collected; it affects the conduct of enquiry and the essence of the enquiry.

On a positive note, since my time in the field was so limited primarily because of financial constraints, doing research in a familiar area worked to my advantage in a number of ways. First, I had an awareness of the risk factors from the perspective of the people being researched; this included the common assumptions the people have about homosexuality as

well as most aspects that are related to cultural sensitivity.³³ For instance, how I can overcome the temptation to override the legal, social and cultural values of the participants by making undue intrusions, especially with the knowledge that doing research on homosexuality in an African context is surrounded by a number of implications, some with far-reaching consequences.

Secondly, the human relations aspects of fieldwork were already established during my period of working in that area. That is, the process of gaining rapport and trust for establishing good relationships and reducing barriers for effective communication was already completed. Thirdly, I did not need to familiarise myself with the understandings of the people on whom I was conducting my study because of two basic reasons. One, I had stayed and worked with the same people before, my past experience with them was still very fresh and to a certain extent I was well aware of my points of reference in that particular circuit. Two, I am also from the Shona culture, born and brought up in a village setting, received the first half of my education from village schools, the last half in the city. I was brought up in a family where the parents lived a typical Zimbabwean life, which involves the mother staying in the village and the father spending most of the time in the city working. This kind of upbringing meant that most of the time we had to oscillate between the village and the city. I was born during the colonial period, and experienced colonial life both in the village and the city; even though as children we were in the village with our mother, occasionally we were sent to the city to get some shopping or money from our father who was working there. Those visits to the city during the colonial period are still very vivid. Therefore, my previous background helped to accelerate the research process. The where,

³³ Joan E. Seiber explain the need for taking heed of people's culture when doing research on sensitive issue and this involves understanding the kind of ethical issues that may arise. These issues include privacy and confidentiality, safety of individuals, respectful communication including consent and debriefing, equitable treatment of parties involved. Joan E. Sieber, and B. Stanley, *Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988), 19.

who, how and what questions, could be dealt with much faster. In other words, I used my background as a kind of springboard from which I could solicit information faster. Being a Shona myself who grew up in both ‘worlds’, the village and the city, the colonial period and after independence, and worked in a circuit that included all aspects of modern life as explained above. I had substantial knowledge of the preferred approaches and protocols to be employed when approaching different interviewees and how society expects certain individuals to be addressed, thus the order of precedence for each person.³⁴

For my research in the villages I sought approval from the chiefs. At the mission centre the chaplain approved it. In the town centre the town clerk, who was then a Methodist himself, approved. The commercial farmers also gave their blessings for interviews to be conducted on their premises. The same applied to ward coordinators of the resettlement areas. Even though individual authorities gave their blessings for me to conduct my research in their respective areas the degree to which individual consent was granted raised issues of concern to the researcher.³⁵

³⁴ My research topic raised a lot of suspicion among the community to be researched because of its sensitive nature among the Shona therefore it also called for a sensitive approach especially in the villages where the people are so protective of their tradition and they do not take very lightly to anyone who does not seem to show respect. The villagers do not open up to strangers very easily and had it not been for my previous working experience with them I would have needed more time in the field. Another advantage for me was that being a product of the village myself, I was aware of cultural expectations when investigating issues of a sexual nature. I had knowledge of whom among the village authorities to approach, where to find them, how and which approach to use that would not be deemed as offensive, and how to appropriately address individuals or groups in a socially acceptable manner. For instance, elderly people feel more comfortable being addressed by their surname but they feel happier and respected being addressed by their totem. During the initial greetings, the social expectation as a woman was for me to kneel down for the elders but because I was a minister of religion at most times I got away with avoiding some of these formalities; however whenever I did them it had a positive impact in soliciting information for my research. I recall one chief commenting when I knelt down and clapped my hands reciting his totem; he was so pleased and he went on to say: *Hamuchaonizve mufundisi, ndihwo hunonzi unhu kauhu, vana vemazuvano vave kurashika*. That is: “Thank you reverend for respecting our culture, that is what makes a man, the young ones are getting lost these days.” This approach made the whole interview proceedings very informative because I had acknowledged and approached him in the traditionally acceptable way.

³⁵ There was an extent to which participants seem to have been bullied or deceived into participation in my research. I got this impression especially with the group interviews when the turnout was more than expected and they looked so surprised on the introduction of my research topic. I had made prior arrangements with research assistants to make contact and organise key sources or references as well as groups following specific instructions. However it turned out that all they were told was that they should turn up because the minister is

I used three main sources to collect data: interviews, questionnaires and documents. I did this to address the potential problem of construct validity.³⁶ It is argued that in case study research there is often a failure to develop a sufficiently operational set of measures, therefore the collection of data is based on subjective judgements. A notable consequence of the subjective nature of information is that informants' views tend to be diverse and at times contradictory, reflecting differences not only in what individuals know but also how the nature of the response depends very much upon the circumstances in which one is asked to divulge information. This evidence is resolved by having multiple sources of evidence provide converging lines of inquiry that can then be taken as reliable. Adding on to the same point, Wax argues that strict and rigid adherence to a single method when doing fieldwork "become like confinement in a cage."³⁷ Therefore by implementing different methods of data collection I intend to increase the authenticity of facts gathered, since the different methods complement each other. Furthermore, any findings or conclusions are likely to be much more convincing and accurate if they are based on several sources of information.

1.3.1 Interviews

I generated data through semi-structured interviews which were conducted between January and March 2004. As an attempt to understand the developments in relation to a phenomenon about which very little has been written, interviews were the best method of generating data. Interviews were one way to capture people's knowledge and through interactive talking and

coming. The majority of the research assistants cited the reason for not giving full information to the participants as an oversight while the majority explained that they thought no one would turn up if they had mentioned to the participants the subject of homosexuality. Given the above scenario can one conclude then that giving participants too much information has destructive effects on the turnout?

³⁶ R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1989), 41-42; 97.

³⁷ Rosalie H. Wax, *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 10.

discussing to excavate facts from which to construct my arguments. Designing the interviews as semi-structured enabled the researcher to investigate not just how and why people present their stories but also to understand different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning. Tom Wengraf argues that semi-structured interviews may yield much more than those that are fully structured if conducted well.³⁸ For a researcher whose intention was to investigate and understand a challenge that seem to be presented by a society as a real problem, using semi-structured interviews seemed to be a good option to comprehend the expressions, opinions and attitudes of individual experiences, and to get the sense of what apparently seems to be straightforward in some societies and yet so complicated among the Shona.

These interviews were in three formats; group interviews, individual interviews and gossip.

As Yin rightly says,

These human affairs should be reported and interpreted through the eyes of specific interviewees, and well informed respondents can provide important insights into a situation. They also can provide shortcuts to the prior history of the situation, helping you to identify other relevant sources of evidence.³⁹

All the interviews were conducted in conversational form, in what has been referred to as the interactive–relational approach. Chirban points out the effectiveness of the interactive–relational approach in interviewing as compared with the purely fact finding approach which he regards as lifeless rather than effective because it ignores the dynamics between the interview and the interviewee.⁴⁰ His opinion is that, by developing an interactive and relational stance, it is possible to access information that would not emerge through formal and structured questioning alone. Such an approach is very necessary in interviews which

³⁸ Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 5.

³⁹ R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1989), 85.

⁴⁰ John T. Chirban, *Interviewing in Depth: The Interactive-Relational Approach* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), xii.

look at the very emotional issue of sexuality. In the interactive-relational approach the interviewer establishes a relationship with the interviewee and this facilitates the giving out of information that would otherwise not have been divulged. Interviews provide the opportunity to obtain and produce data through dialogue, argumentation and at times consensus. Information is immediately corrected or verified and qualified answers obtained. The interviews were all recorded on audiocassettes and constituted important primary sources of information for the study.

1.3.1.1 Group Interviews

I recorded the group interviews on the audio cassette, which all those involved consented to. Groups were divided according to gender and age, because of the sensitive nature of the topic, but most importantly because that is the culturally acceptable approach. One advantage of group discussion interviews as explained by Moore is that “they provide an opportunity for matters to be discussed in depth, with one person’s views sparking off feelings and attitudes among others in the group...they can produce a very detailed, in-depth understanding of particular issues and can provide a depth of analysis which is seldom possible in other ways”⁴¹ All my interviews were formal including those conducted with individuals. Another advantage was that because the interviews were semi-structured it gave the researcher a great deal of freedom to seek clarity where necessary, probe for additional information and to raise specific queries during the course of the interviews. However, because of the sensitive nature of the topic under study, some interviewees did not feel safe to contribute even though confidentiality was assured. There was also an element of discomfort caused not only by the

⁴¹ Nick Moore, *How to do Research*, Second Edition (London: Facet Publishing, 2006), 30.

sensitive nature of the topic but also because of the presence of relations within the group being interviewed.⁴²

1.3.1.2 Individual Interviews

For the individual interviews I also used the audio cassette to record the proceedings, with the consent of the interviewees. Thirty two adults, eighteen males and fourteen females, were interviewed with their informed consent. They were intentionally chosen for the position they hold either in the Church or in the community.⁴³ These individuals were key informants whose circumstances and perceptions are taken to be representative of the whole community. Therefore, their opinions were of paramount importance for this research. Interviews with them were designed as a quest for further explanation to throw light on key issues brought up by previous informants either from group interviews or gossip. It was also done to follow up and explore questions suggested by gaps or contradictions in both the group interviews and gossip. As a result richer answers and valuable insights were obtained which might have been missed by other methods. Apart from six, all interviews were conducted in Shona because even though those interviewed do understand English they could not express themselves very well in a foreign language. Furthermore, using English for interviewing my own people

⁴² In an attempt to be culturally sensitive the researcher had arranged the interviews to be conducted separately, thus for men and women. Nevertheless, still in those groups there are some relations who are not expected to talk against or directly to each other, for example, a son-in-law and his father-in-law. As for the daughter in law, her husband's sisters will not take lightly any criticism from her because according to custom all she is supposed to do is to listen and act upon whatever she is told. All the *varooras* (daughters-in-law) could do during the interviews was to use some gestures, like nodding their head in agreement or shaking their head in disagreement, or pulling a face. But still these gestures could only be made if they were sitting in a position where they could see that they could not be noticed. Therefore, even though I could not afford to make any further divisions to address this problem, I was able to overcome it by making appropriate sitting arrangements for those in such relationships prior to the interview and taking note of the gestures as the interview proceeded.

⁴³ The criteria for choosing those to be interviewed individually was primarily based on picking those in positions of authority, be it in the Church or society. These are the people, whose approval, to a large extent acts as legitimate moral acts in the society and the Church. They range from the Bishop of the Methodist Church, the circuit superintendent, circuit evangelist, circuit Stewards, mission school chaplain, mission school headmaster, village chiefs, traditional healers, ward-co-ordinators and town clerk. This was done to obtain a wide range of viewpoints from different perspectives in order to generate explanations to account for what informants have said and to pursue further information and clarification on what seemed to be the major issues at stake.

would send very wrong signals about one who has now assumed a superior status, one who is no longer capable of speaking her own mother tongue, who is now one of ‘them’⁴⁴.

1.3.1.3 Gossip

Gossip as a research method can be very informative but not without controversies. The Oxford dictionary defines gossip as casual conversation or unsubstantiated reports about other people, whispers, hearsay, and informal chit-chat.⁴⁵ Scholars such as Patricia Meyer Sparks refer to gossip as ‘idle talk’ and argues that “it derives from unconsidered desire to say something without having to ponder too deeply. Without purposeful intent, gossipers bandy words and anecdotes about other people, thus protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another.”⁴⁶ I would like to suggest that there can be ‘situational gossip’. This happens when people find themselves in a situation where they do not feel safe or are most likely to be misconstrued for talking about a particular subject area, then by using available socially approved contexts they vent out their deeply considered and purposeful intents without implicating anyone. It is situational in a context where there is social disapproval on most discourses on sex and sexuality, more so where women are concerned. “Don’t you have better things to talk about?’ Or What kind of a person are you? Why do you

⁴⁴ It is a very common assumption among the Shona that English speaking people are economically sound, that if someone whom they used to communicate with in their local language starts communicating with them in English somehow that person has acquired some money and now belongs to a different class which is superior. This approach seems to have its roots in the colonial period where there was an obvious economic division between the colonisers who happen to be English and the indigenous Shona. The cleavage between the two shaped the society into two distinct camps of ‘us’ the Shona and ‘them’, the English. One of the distinct marks of being educated was to be able at least not only to speak English but to pass it at ‘O’ Level – (this is an equivalent of GCSE in England - up until today, for one to proceed into any further education or be accepted in most professional qualifications one needs at least five O Level subjects including English). There is a certain superiority that comes with speaking in English as opposed to speaking in the mother tongue and people would not take it lightly if someone whom they used to communicate with in mother tongue now prefers to use English. People would feel detached, abandoned, betrayed, excluded and at times offended, just because you are now communicating with your own people in a foreign language. Therefore, to overcome that limitation I used Shona for the majority of the interviews conducted; in that way it enabled me to eliminate the risk of having an ‘us’ (the interviewees) and ‘them’ (myself), and connect better with the interviewees.

⁴⁵ Catherine Soanes, Maurice Waite and Sara Hawker, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Word Power Guide* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 552.

⁴⁶ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5.

allow yourself to be so loose?’ These are but some of the questions colleagues will ask”.⁴⁷ Gossip is ironic in nature in that those who discourage it in society find themselves immersed in it once they meet with their fellow mates and the topics they tend to chat most about are sexual in nature. The irony of gossip is also seen in its ability to reinforce social values by the way it invokes fear in its adherents so that they conform to society’s expectation or else people will gossip. To this end then gossip can be understood as an instrument of moral control.⁴⁸

Whilst it may seem controversial to use gossip for academic research purposes, I chose it for the main reason that gossip seems to play a significant role in controlling many aspects of social life especially in relation to sexual matters. The nature of my research topic prompted me to utilise gossip as a way of gathering information on homosexuality because people seemed to distance themselves from the subject in question. A significant number of people also referred to talk about homosexuality as gossip, one of those stories that people make up but has no element of truth in it. At the same time ‘in private’ the topic aroused a lot of interest. I also thought since some people were referring to the subject of discussion as something people only gossip about but does not really exist in this community it might be a good idea to immerse myself into this gossip, follow its leads and see what I could come up with.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ On learning about my reach topic one colleague said to me “I do not trust you now, what gave you the guts to embark on such a research topic. Have they now turned you into one of them? Who is going to read about all the nonsense you are writing? You have stooped so low and should be ashamed of yourself. *Uchiri mufundisi here iwe?* That is ‘Are you still a minister of religion?’” Harsh though it may sound but knowing my people, such comments did not come as a surprise. Because as a minister I am supposed to talk a certain talk and homosexuality is definitely not one of them.

⁴⁸ The Control implied here is that which is expected by the society, where fear is induced in those who find themselves at the peripheries of social expectation because they become the talk of the village, “What will people say”.

⁴⁹ It was a really fascinating method of data collection that revealed some interesting insights into the research, for instance the converging of contradictions gathered from gossip when merged with those from other methods of data collection.

This method was used mainly in the village where gossip seems to be at the top of conversations that take place when either women or men meet during the course of the day in their gender segregated groupings. The researcher was aware that in the village setting people talk more about sexual issues in their gender centred groupings during the course of the day. The job allocation of each family is mainly done according to one's gender, that is, men and women are allocated different jobs and then they seem to follow a certain routine daily. For example, first thing in the morning women will get up and go and fetch water for their household from the well, some time in the afternoon they will go and do some laundry by the river, from there they will go and fetch some firewood from a nearby forest, and just before sunset they will go back and fetch more water from the well for evening and night use. Meals are also served in gender segregated groupings and the same applies to sleeping arrangements where boys sleep in the boys' house called *gota*⁵⁰ and girls sleep in the girls' house referred as *nhanga*.⁵¹ The general routine for men and boys is alike; in the morning they will go and milk the cows, from midday to the early hours of the evening is spent herding the livestock, when they come back they relax at the *padare*⁵² until it is time to depart for bed. *Padare* is a men's gathering place where they traditionally meet nearly every evening to gossip about the

⁵⁰ *Gota* was a traditional hut where growing up boys would sleep. In most cases when boys are sleeping in the *gota* they share blankets for a number of reasons. One of the reasons was that blankets were so expensive and scarce so the best way was just to share. Another related reason was that during the winter, the only logical thing to do was to share blankets to keep warm. When a boy reaches a marriageable age he was advised by the elders from *padare* to get out of the *gota* and join the man at *dare*. In the *gota* boys talk mostly about their girl-friends and if they notice anyone who seem not to be interested in girls elders at *padare* where notified so that they can sit down with the boy and find a solution to the problem before it is too late.

⁵¹ *Nhanga* was a hut where all girls would sleep. Just like the boys in the *gota* girls would also share blankets for the same reasons. Because advice given to girls on their sexuality started at a much earlier stage than boys, *vanatete* (aunties) would often visit the girls in the evening to give them advice on matters relating to sexuality. Such matters range from preparing oneself physically for your future husband, how to be presentable as a lady, what to look for in a husband, which families not to get married to, etc. *Vatete* would take a lot of interest in knowing the girls' love life and give appropriate advice to the girls. For those who showed no interest in having relationships with boys, there was always room for arranged marriages because every girl had to get married and have children.

⁵² The women of the village were only allowed at *padare* when they were bringing food, thus at meal times. Women would not even eat together with their husbands since the husbands had to have their meals with other men. Whatever was discussed at *dare* was not supposed to be shared with wives back home unless it was agreed. All mature boys, thus those expecting to get married, were also expected to be at *dare* most of the time to listen to the elders' wisdom on married life. If the *dare* spotted anyone among the mature boys who seem not to show any interest in choosing a life partner, advice was quickly given to the respective family to 'take note of their son' since it was always assumed that something was wrong with him.

day's events and any topic that they may so wish. There is no agenda, leader or age limit. The amount of gossip that goes on in these groups is unbelievable and it is amazing to notice how it works as an instrument of social control. In these groups everybody seems to be interested in everybody's business. Individual activities of neighbours are discussed. In these groups they forestall as well as criticise what they assume to be impermissible deviation. It is also in these groups where most issues about sexuality are talked about. Therefore, even though discussion on homosexuality carried such negative overtones I used the socially acceptable gossip fuelled groups to solicit information around that subject. The subject elicited mixed responses.

The social complexities in a village setting called for a mode of investigation that fitted in well with the people's social activities of the time. The field work was conducted during the rainy season, a time when the Shona are busy in the fields tending to their crops, so it seemed only reasonable to come up with a research method that would not interrupt their routine. Therefore, gossip seemed to be an appropriate option as a research method since it falls well with their own day to day routine in the sense that I was following the people as they were going on with their day to day activities. Whilst truth may not necessarily be the most relevant aspect of gossip, gossip is a particularly rich source of information.⁵³ Gossip provides pointers to possible informants. Gossip creates ties of intimacy between the researcher and informants, reveals social bonds, constitute and maintains sociality, shows contradictions of behaviour and also sanctions behaviour.⁵⁴

The questions for gossip were not structured for the simple reason that the researcher was trying to avoid formalising this particular research method because gossip itself is

⁵³ N. Besnier, 'The Truth and Other Irrelevant Aspects of Nukulaelae Gossip', *Pacific Studies*, 17, 3, (1994): 79.

⁵⁴ L. White, 'Between Gluckman and Foucault: Historicising Rumour and Gossip', *Social Dynamics*, 20, 1 (1994): 1-39.

spontaneous, it takes place where people assume that they are by themselves and whoever the gossip is about is not among them, it is a talk about other people, about 'them'. Since homosexuality as a sexual practice is associated with the 'other', something that the Shona do not do, so I assumed it was a talk about 'them', it was an opportune time for me to utilise gossip to find out what the people really think in a context where no one is implicated. Gossip is a safe 'chat show'! Gossip provides detail that may otherwise go unnoticed by other research methods and enables the researcher to gain access to as many people's accounts and understanding as possible. It fills in the blank spots. It introduced the researcher to some of the potential informants that I might have not seriously considered.⁵⁵ However, I will be using gossip as a research method with full awareness of both the negative and positive effects it may assume.

My interest focuses on gossip as it unfolds in the gender centred social groupings. A total of 16 gossiping groups were attended. Prior appointments were not made, assuming everyone in the village knew about my presence in the village and the purpose of my visit. Since it was also a busy time of the year for the villagers (this was the rainy season, the busiest time of the year for all villagers planting crops in their fields) I worked around their own schedules for the day so that I was not so much of an obstacle. Questions were randomly asked as a way of prompting the gossip but at the same time informative to the research purpose. All the conversations were recorded onto an audio tape with the consent of the participants and confidentiality was assured. Recording was important in the sense that it captured the kind of subtle details invariably missed by note taking and would reveal how stories were developed and expressed. The findings were used to test cultural assumptions on homosexuality

⁵⁵ By following some of the leads suggested during the gossiping enquiry, the researcher was able to meet a number of community leaders which included chiefs and traditional healers. Even though they were not hierarchically related to the church, their role in the community is pivotal in the sense that as the chiefs and traditional healers in the village they stand to approve or legitimate moral acts within their villages. They are the primary sources or the custodians of Shona culture from which the Church draws its moral guidance.

specifically among the Shona because there is an extent to which the Church's attitude to homosexuality is informed by and based on gossip. It is an examination of a people's perspective of homosexuality through the lens of gossip.

1.3.2 Questionnaires

In an attempt to capture qualified, focused and specific attitudes on homosexuality, I used a simple questionnaire. This method was incorporated after a supervision session with my supervisor in which he suggested the use of research assistants to help in gathering the information that I needed.⁵⁶ These questionnaires were targeted at specific individuals who were representative Church authorities for different stations within the study circuit and the gay and lesbian organisation (GALZ). Most of them had also participated in both the group and individual interviews, for which the questions were the same. Using the same source to ask the same question three times may sound monotonous and ridiculous but it was done intentionally to verify and seek the authenticity of information given by respondents from either gossip, or group interviews. Because the researcher was aware that some people might find it very uncomfortable to discuss sexually related issues in interviews, questionnaires were provided to fill in the gap so that such people may have the opportunity to put down their views without fear of being recognised by others. If the information provided by a respondent proves to be consistent and coherent in both interviews and questionnaires it was taken to be convincing.

⁵⁶ When I came back from my field research I explained to my supervisor that there is still need for me to do further investigations and to verify some aspects that featured in other research methods. because of lack of resources and the sensitive nature which the subject seemed to generate, I failed to have enough time with some of the key informants. My time in the field was only one month and even though I had worked in the area before I still needed more time to negotiate my way into some of the systems and also with some of the informants. Another reason was basically the time factor. According to the culture of the people it is considered arrogant and disrespectful if someone just ploughs into the purpose of their visit without taking some time to ask after not only the interviewee's wellbeing but also that of his/her immediate and extended family and the whole village at large, more so if you are a minister; a prayer is not asked for but expected. By the time all the formalities are done, time is gone and the interview rushed or not done at all. So time with the interviewees was just not enough considering that I had only one month in the field, hence the use of research assistants for the distribution of questionnaires.

The questionnaire was designed only to reflect the thoughts, concerns and attitude of Church members in the circuit under study. A mixture of open-ended and closed questions was used. While open-ended questions allowed the participants to elaborate on their views, closed questions provided precise attitudes to the subject of study. The use of both open-ended and closed questions was intentionally put in place to maximise the outcome of this research method because the questions seem to be complementary.⁵⁷

The distribution of questionnaires was carried out by research assistants at various periods between August 2004 and December 2006. In August 2004 twenty-two research assistants were asked to distribute questionnaires in selected Churches throughout the sample circuit. Those sent to members of GALZ were mainly attachments sent to their individual email addresses.⁵⁸ The research assistants were local Methodist ministers and teachers. 62% of the distributed questionnaires were returned. This was an impressive return considering the distance between the researcher and the research area, the conservative approach that the people have on sexual issues in general, plus the geographical setting where people live far apart from each other making access difficult. For those that were not returned there is a chance that some chose not to respond because they were opposed to the subject being

⁵⁷ Peter Marshall explains that open ended questions do not limit the answer to a yes and a no, participants answer in any way hence limiting the bias to findings by imposing a frame of reference. However the disadvantage is on the analysis where the researcher in the end might find it easier to impose a certain frame of reference for classification purposes. On the other hand closed questions impose a direct threat to the validity of the findings because they force the participant to choose from given alternatives; there is no original input of the participant. Therefore, the use of both types of questions provides the specifics and the elaboration to a given question thereby further authenticating the findings. Peter Marshall, *Research Methods: How to Design and Conduct a Successful Project* (Plymouth: How to Books Ltd, 1997), 38-40.

⁵⁸ I failed to find research assistants who agreed to distribute questionnaires to selected GALZ members. All sort of excuses were given; that is why I decided to use an alternative method to send the questionnaire, i.e. email attachment. The response to this method was very poor. The reason may be that it was too direct in the sense that it was easy to identify the respondent of each questionnaire and considering the situation in the country may be they felt it was not safe to do so and too intrusive. The other reason may be that responding to this questionnaire was just not a priority since there were a lot of economic problems going on in the country at this period in time. Other reason may be cited but the bottom line is that the response was poor, even when follow-ups were made.

surveyed; others did not respond maybe because they did not feel safe to do so; some questionnaires may have been lost along the way especially with a postal system that was so unreliable during the period of research.⁵⁹

1.3.3 Documents

With respect to documents I collected material from the national archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), the Methodist Church archives, The Methodist Standing Orders, Methodist Conference Minutes, Circuit documents (Quarterly Minutes), the GALZ organisation, local news papers and the internet. These sources of evidence were used to corroborate, augment and complement information from other sources. I sought to investigate whether the understanding of homosexuality as reflected in the documents was consistent with the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon as reflected in the interviews and responses from the questionnaire.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Study on homosexuality from an African perspective is an almost virgin area because very little extensive academic work has yet been carried out. Up to this date only few books and articles have been written by scholars from different fields of thought. In this respect therefore, the first contribution this study shall make is to attempt to offer an African flavour to the ongoing academic debates on homosexuality and related issues by breaking the silence and provoke informed debate especially in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. By penetrating and invading their sacred hymeneal structures the study will arouse some much needed debate. At the moment the Church, just like many African writers, has braved through

⁵⁹ A number of reasons can here be cited for questionnaires that were not returned: Lack of time, no pen, research assistants not chasing up some late respondents, communication breakdown, or maybe some could just not be bothered, they had more important things to deal with.

the collusion to keep the dynamics of homosexuality under the carpet and to present heterosexuality as the exclusive path using three main sources of culture, tradition and the Bible as support systems for its position.

The place of homosexuality within the wider Shona social sexual context will be identified. In order to achieve this goal this study will analyse the prescribed African concept of sexuality and follow up on how it has been impacted by urbanisation up to the present day. The assumption of this study is that homosexuality in Zimbabwe is a latent sexual phenomenon that for ages has lain hidden within the rubrics of social networks and been only gradually revealed as social structures change. It is a historical phenomenon that has always been prevalent among the Shona, but embedded within the socially and ecclesiastically historically acceptable systems of sexuality. However, the systems did change. Even up to this day changes are still taking place in all spheres of life, thereby scaling off the encrustations that once concealed this practice. It is hoped that the investigation will show how gays and lesbians have negotiated and adapted to the changing environments. My argument is that, even though there seem to be very little information written on homosexuality from an African perspective, and vehement denial of the existence of gays and lesbians among these people, a critical analysis of the prescribed social and ecclesiastical systems gives pointers to the prevalent of same-sex practices among the Shona even before foreign invasion. By tracing and analysing the African social context in relation to sexuality before and after the colonial period this study hopes to establish the historicity of homosexuality in Africa and specifically among the Shona. A meticulous presentation of the Shona social structure, the dynamics of the gender divide presented by the development of urbanisation, the housing set-up in urban areas, the Church with its structures such as mission schools and their dormitories, Church organisations such as the *Ruwadzano*, GCU MCU,

BCU, will be argued as providing conducive environment for homosexual practice. The study is significant in the way it locates homosexual practice within African models of sexual practices and offers a critique on the paradoxical nature presented by the systems employed by both the Church and society in an attempt to enforce and maintain prescribed sexual practices.

The approach used to comprehend the attitude of the Church to homosexuality is in itself unique, that is, the approach of integrating homosexuality within the broader Shona concept of sexuality. The reason for engaging in such an elaborate approach is that, by placing homosexuality within the broad understanding of African sexuality, one can comprehend the breadth and length of the complexities involved, and it also provides clarity to some of the issues involved. Again, taking into consideration the limitedness of written sources coupled with the closeness of the people under study, the initial thought of the researcher was to use readily available and acceptable options, thus asking questions about marriage, and both the Church and society's expectation of it. In other words, I integrated my research on homosexual practice with the basic concept of Shona sexuality, thus, I started out from the known, moving to the 'unknown', more precisely, the unspoken. There were compelling intellectual reasons to integrate research on gays and lesbians with the basic and broadly understood concept of African sexuality. Firstly, most discourse or advocacy work on the subject of sexuality in Africa has been centred more on prescribed sexual practices such as marriages, and not on subversive alternatives that may be envisaged as encouraging or opening up possibilities for resistance and change from the prescribed norm. Secondly, sexuality in this context is structured within a wider network of social relationships, starting from the family. That is, men and women think of their sexuality inside the context of family authority. Sexuality is constructed in such a way that its regulation depends on a system of

prohibitive rules. Thirdly, this approach enables us to develop a rational analysis of the general arguments, understandings and dilemmas involved and also create a background from which we can construct an approach that is relevant today.

The study will attempt to construct a theology of sexuality drawn from the empirical evidence present in people's lived experiences today. The experience is that the traditional ideologies are fast disappearing; the Shona have now become more mobile than ever before, mixing with people of other cultures; that Zimbabwe itself is far from being a nation comprised of indigenous people but those from other countries are living in this country; the effects of such mixing and mingling of cultures cannot be overlooked. The cities are increasingly becoming melting pots of different knowledge, approaches and concepts. Therefore, claims such as "the Shona do not behave this way"⁶⁰, raise concerns that this study hopes to explore and in this way make its contribution to knowledge.

The research also hopes to bring out challenges that are unique to the Shona in terms of homosexual practice. For instance, homosexuality as a sexual practice presents a challenge to the status quo. Because of the religious significance sexuality is believed to serve, many Shona tend to conform to society's expectations in terms of sexual partners to avoid upsetting ancestors and also cause misfortune to their descendants. The outcomes of sexual relationships are believed to reflect the past generations' behaviour and has consequences for the future generations. For instance, it is considered a misfortune for someone to die before marriage. As an attempt to ward off the misfortune a corncob is tied on to his or her back. This corncob is said to symbolise the children that would have been expected if the person had done their duty of getting married and having children. If the duty is not performed a

⁶⁰ These are some of the most popular sentiments expressed by people during the interviews and also on the questionnaires.

void is created which will create problems not only for the present generation but also for future generations.⁶¹ Furthermore, it is only the spirit of someone who has been married that can assume the position of an ancestral spirit. Those who die unmarried are not to be remembered. Thus, they are dead, buried and forgotten. In other words marriage becomes a duty one is expected and feels obliged to fulfil in life or else *unozosungirirwa guri kana wafa* - you will carry a corn cob to your grave! This approach induces fear in its adherents because no one in their right mind would like to upset their late parents or uncles and aunties or cause misfortune to befall their descendants; sexual duties become a communal obligation. To be good means to get married and have children who will carry on the family name. In this sense then, sexual activity or practice is functional; it is for the past, present and future generations. Any practice that does not serve this purpose becomes an obstacle. Homosexual practice therefore, seems to be at loggerheads with this attribute of sexual practice according to the Shona perspective. Because homosexual practice does not seem to contribute to the preservation of their status quo it is seen as interference in the Shona cosmological world. It is hoped that this study will demonstrate how homosexual practice seems to upset the Shona cosmos and consequently the Church's approach to issues of sex and sexuality, makes it unique for this context.

⁶¹ Among the Shona there is a clear division of duties between sexes and also one has a clear position within the family which makes them feel obliged to do their part. Even up to this date when families are no longer living in a traditional village set up, when it comes to making major decisions be it for one's immediate family or the extended family, it all boils down to whether your position in the family allows you to carry out that decision. When you are not married you are almost totally insignificant, even if you are the eldest; by rights you are supposed to be the major decision maker, but if you are not married that authority is nullified, it is almost as if you do not exist. If you are a man, there are duties the family expect you to carry out like an uncle, giving out instructions on sexual matters to the boys in the family; however if one is not married, that advice is not welcome. If there is a function, such as a wedding or a funeral or a ritual sacrifice, it is the son-in-law who is given the honour to kill the beast and organise the function. For a married first son, one of his significant duties is to succeed his father as head of the family, thus carrying on the name of the family, and his own children are expected to act likewise. As for the woman, she has her duty as auntie to instruct her nephews and nieces on sexual matters such as guidance when a girl starts menstruating, inspection of virginity, marriage responsibilities and many others. It is understood as a role, a duty, a responsibility and a privilege for one to facilitate these family values. The duty of being a recognised auntie gives pressure to the girl child to get married so as to maintain the respect and dignity that comes with it. An unmarried woman only gets respect if she is a spirit medium (a spirit medium carries significant messages for the family or the society at large so people constantly consult her for guidance in cases of crisis.)

As there does not seem to be universal agreement on most of the issues raised by the phenomenon of homosexuality this study will enrich the academic world with distinct African perspectives to the ongoing debate by identifying, highlighting and exploring the different arguments from this context, searching for the intelligibility and coherence of the claims presented. It is hoped that this work will stimulate the much needed further research around this area of study.

In the process of attempting to elaborate, clarify, criticise and explain, the study hopes to come up with an African ideology of sexuality, of which homosexual relationships are a part. In a way, the study is different in that it attempts to offer a different way of understanding African sexuality, which, for a long time has been explained in terms of prescribed traditional sexual norms. In so doing, the study hopes to broaden the way in which Shona sexuality can be understood. Using homosexuality as an exploratory tool or a barometer to gauge the Church's pastoral theology makes the study a socio-sexological theologically significant contemporary investigation. It is my hope to make the study full of extraordinary insights into the differences, as well as the continuities, between traditional and contemporary socio-cultural sexual perspectives of the Shona.

1.5 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Even though there is not much written on homosexuality from an African perspective, Western scholars have produced significant works. On the basis that homosexuality is a historical human sexual phenomenon that knows no culture, religion or gender, I shall mainly be using relevant Western scholarship literature to augment and substantiate my arguments.

Consequently, since I am going to use a significant number of works from authoritative and prominent Western scholars in chapter five on my review of some of the major themes that emanate from my research, I have decided in this section, to give a very brief literature review. I have decided to use this approach to limit the problem of repetition and over emphasising issues under discussion.

Although the specific subject matter can be argued to be universal, some of the theological and methodological issues may differ depending on issues raised in specific contexts, as shall be highlighted in this work. To date, no major works have yet been produced from an African perspective except a few articles such as that of Esther Mombi from Kenya⁶² who was trying to establish the place of gays/lesbians in Africa, Kawuki Mukasa⁶³ of Uganda who was responding to concerns from that context and Rowland Jide Macaulay⁶⁴ who wrote from Nigeria. In Zimbabwe Marc Epprecht can be argued to be the pioneer in regards to research work on same sex relationships.⁶⁵ The above works from an African context are all very informative studies attempting to prove the authenticity of homosexuality within the African region. In other words the debate is still in its infancy; no significant academic work has yet been done. A few reasons can be cited: First, studies on African sexuality have over the years been presented in the form of the prescribed sexual norms. Those that were deemed as incompatible with the established norms were swept under the carpet, and so was homosexuality. Among the renowned African scholars the subject seems to be at the

⁶² Ester Mbambo “Kenya Reflections” in Terry Brown ed., *The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality: Other Voices Other Worlds*. New York: Church Publishing, 2006. 142-153.

⁶³ Kawuki Mukasi, “The Church of Uganda and the Problem of Human Sexuality: Responding to Concerns from the Ugandan Context” in Terry Brown ed., *The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality: Other Voices Other Worlds*. New York: Church Publishing, 2006. 168-178.

⁶⁴ Rowland Jide Macaulay “Homosexuality and the Church in Nigeria” in Terry Brown ed., *The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality: Other Voices Other Worlds*. New York: Church Publishing, 2006. 154-167.

⁶⁵ Marc Epprecht, The ‘Unsayings’ of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity., in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Special Issue on Masculinities in Southern Africa (Dec., 1998), 631- 651.

peripheries of their concern. For instance, on his discussion of sexuality Mbiti's work reveals a consistency with the African reticence on the subject of homosexuality and an overall neglect of the subject of homosexual expression. Even though he did mention homosexuality it was in passing and was included among others as a sexual offence.

Fornication, incest, rape, homosexual relations, bestiality...All constitute sexual offences...African people are very sensitive to any departure from the accepted norm concerning all aspects of sex. This is a fundamental religious attitude, since any offense upsets the smooth relationships of the community. Which include those who already departed? For that reason many of the offences must be followed by a ritual cleansing after physical punishment otherwise misfortune may ensue.⁶⁶

This leads us to the second reason why we have very little academic studies on the subject area: That homosexuality is presented as a problem. As shown above, Mbiti's problematisation of homosexuality and emphasising of the importance of marriage and bearing of children seemed to be reflected also in a number of the writings by other African writers such as Hastings, Bourdillon, Weinrich, Gelfand and Holleman.⁶⁷ Such approaches, if care is not taken, may only serve to reinforce misconceptions and narrow the understanding of African sexual expression.

Thirdly, to complicate the study of homosexuality even further, renowned ethnographers such as Gelfand presented the Shona as 'well mannered' people who 'do not do such things.' Michael Gelfand wrote further that "In the traditional society of the Shona exemplary manners take a high place. If there is justification for the saying 'Manners maketh man', it

⁶⁶ John S. Mbiti, *Love and Marriage* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973), 218.

⁶⁷ A lot of material has been written on matters relating to African marriage and the following are among the most prominent scholars to have produced significant work. Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1978); M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona People: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982), 33-59. A.K.H. Weinrich, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982); C. M. Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973); J. F. Holleman, *Shona Customary Law: With Reference to Kinship, Marriage, the Family and the Estate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

certainly applies to this society.”⁶⁸ Such remarks seem not only to imply that gays and lesbians are people of no moral values but also the remarks are patronising and hypocritical especially when the President of the country has made comments about gays and lesbians as having no rights and even went further to refer to them as being worse than pigs and dogs.⁶⁹ I do not mean to object to Gelfand’s conclusions that the Shona have good manners but such sweeping statements seem to make the Shona a unique species, different from other human beings. Are the Shona not also a people of like nature to any other human beings in terms of sexological cosmology? A perfect presentation of the Shona such as Gelfand’s seems to be an intentional deviation of attention.⁷⁰ Furthermore, one can argue here that the implication of Gelfand’s conclusions suggests that gays and lesbians have no good manners. What has one’s sexuality got to do with manners? What exactly is meant by good manners? Is heterosexuality then a virtue? For me, I would refer to Gelfand’s comments as ‘remarks of terror’; that only serve to instil fear not only into the gay/lesbian community but into the whole Shona community.

As mentioned above, in Western society a lot of research has been written and the debates have since moved on to analysing major themes, with gays and lesbians playing a central part. The debate has moved from gay/lesbian theology, from liberation and redemption theologies to queer theology with its emphasis on the ecclesiology of humanity irrespective

⁶⁸ Michael Gelfand, *African Background: The Traditional Culture of the Shona-Speaking People* (Cape Town: Juta, 1965), 6.

⁶⁹ Such remarks bring to mind the difference between the West and the African continent in terms of animal rights. The West seem to place so much value on their animals for instance where dogs live inside the house, travel in cars; and there are shops selling accessories and food for dogs. To the African a dog’s place is outside the house, mainly for guarding in the night and its food is leftovers, if there are no leftovers then the dog goes walkabout in search of its own food; someone is considered insane if they start pampering their dog not to mention opening up a pet accessory shop. In the Shona society if any one is referred to as a dog (*uri imbwa yemunhu iwe*) it is the most dehumanising kind of swearing and in most instances it incites, instigates and provokes anger worse still when some one is said to be worse than a dog.

⁷⁰ Epprecht attributed Gelfand’s conclusions to his method of data collection to his political agenda. Marc Epprecht, The ‘Unsayings’ of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity., in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Special Issue on Masculinities in Southern Africa (Dec., 1998), 631- 651.

of their sexuality or gender. Theological arguments raised by different scholars spring from their varied backgrounds and there is no unanimous approach to any of the issues raised. Even in the West where related issues have been debated for such a long time, (mainly from the twentieth century because from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century according to Michael Foucault, sexual discourse was confined within the family structure, he refers to this period as the repression period because sex in general was characterised by silence and prohibitions⁷¹) there seem to be no consensus on any single issue. For instance, the Biblical interpretation of the passages pertaining to homosexuality. Some scholars write from a traditionalist perspective arguing that the Bible advocates only heterosexuality. A few examples of such scholars are Gagnon who views all homosexual behaviour as wilful and sinful⁷², Donald Wold, who also echoes the same sentiments by touting heterosexuality as the God ordained definite sexuality and Turner, who examines some of the central issues around sexuality.⁷³ However scholars such as Bailey⁷⁴ Scroggs⁷⁵ and Helminiak dismiss these same texts that are popularly used against homosexuality (Gen. 19; Lev. 18.22; 20.13; Rom. 1.25–27; 1 Cor. 6.9; 1 Tim. 1.10). One of the comments forwarded by Helminiak is that “The words might suggest one thing to us in the 21st Century but have meant something very different to the people who wrote them long ago.”⁷⁶ On the other hand Alpert, Comstock⁷⁷

⁷¹ Michael Foucault. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 3-13.

⁷² Robert A G. Gagnon, *The Bible and the Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 138-139.

⁷³ Philip Turner. *Sex, Money, and Power: An Essay in Christian Social Ethics* (Cambridge: Cowley Publishers, 1985)

⁷⁴ Derrick Sherwin Bailey. *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longman, 1955).

⁷⁵ Scroggs gives a thorough and careful study of the Biblical mind set on homosexuality. He concludes that the standard model of homosexuality was pederastic, involving a relationship between an older man and a young boy and that this is what the New Testament condemned. Accordingly those condemnations do not refer to mutual love between peers. Robin Scroggs, *Homosexuality in the New Testament: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

⁷⁶ Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994), 30.

⁷⁷ Comstock argues that “We have not been sufficiently sceptical of the patriarchal framework within which these passages occur. I would suggest that our approach to the Bible become less apologetic and more critical – that we approach it not as an authority from which we want approval, but as a document whose shortcomings

and Carden referred to these texts as texts of terror used to pacify gays and lesbians, therefore these scholars present a challenge to their readers to boldly face the texts and criticise the traditions that condemn gays/lesbians. Advocates for this school of thought encourage ‘coming out’ as a value that gives peace of mind.⁷⁸ Some of the Biblical stories that are used to advocate for such themes are: Jesus calling to Lazarus ‘Come Out!’ from the tomb, or the Hebrews coming out from their enslavement in Egypt, or Micah’s call for people to walk right with God. These scholars testify to the liberating effects of coming out.

However, as presented by some gay/lesbians ‘coming out’ may not be the best option for all concerned because situations differ and for some, the consequences are much too hard to bear.⁷⁹ While some authors encourage their readers to ‘come out’, some even go further to say that in the face of ecclesiastical authorities that do not accept them, people should take even a further step to come out of that Church! Numerous reasons are cited by Peter Sweeney in his book *From Queer to Eternity*, why some gays, lesbians or bi-sexual persons might wish to abandon the Church altogether.⁸⁰ The same sentiments are echoed by John J. McNeill, in *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers*,

must be sighted.” Garry David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology*. (Cleveland : The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 39.

⁷⁸ A significant number of works have been written from a gay and lesbian perspective such as: Mel White. *Stranger at the Gate: to be Gay and Christian in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Press, 1994); Malcolm Boyd, *Gay Priest: An Inner Journey* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1968); Brain Boulderly, ed., *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Eyes of Gay Men* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Reverend Perry the founder of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches recounts his journey from a preacher to a later life as an outcast and finally to ministering to those who like himself had been alienated. He held his first worship service for gays in his home in 1968. Perry D. Troy, *The Lord is my Shepherd and He Knows I am Gay* (Los Angeles CA: Nash Publishing, 1972); see also Perry D. Troy, *Don’t be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990).

⁷⁹ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Reading the Bible from the Low and Outside: Lesbians and Gay People as God’s Tricksters’, in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds, *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000),

⁸⁰ Peter Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, gay, and Bisexual People* (London: Cassell, 1997).

Families, and Friends.⁸¹ He explains that even though some may be strong enough to withstand the waves within the Church as supported by Goss in *Jesus Acted Up*, there are those who might find it a bit thwarting hence his encouragement for his readers to take some time out of the Church and find solace in God.⁸² Other authors with the same views are Gary Comstock and Peter Sweasey.⁸³ However, where Comstock argues for a complete disassociation with the main Church, McNeill advocates taking some time out then returning to the main Church so as to fight from within.⁸⁴ The questions that one might want to ask at this stage are: Is it any better to take some time out in a context where outside the attitude is just as cold, like going from a frying pan into the fire? In relation to the context under study, to what extent is the theme of coming out applicable? If the Bible was to be canonised today, which passages are most likely to be left out in light of various hermeneutical issues at stake, Choon-Leong Seow points out that homosexuality is “a question of how we understand the texts and appropriate them for our specific contexts. It is further a theological-ethical issue, a question of how we as Christians think about ourselves and our conduct in relation to God.”⁸⁵ It is also a question of how people associate sex and God. To this end then, it is hoped that an attempt to identify themes emanating from an African context would not only give us a response to such questions but also set the African context within the universal academic debate. A more extensive review of these themes will be dealt with later as the work progresses through its different chapters, especially in chapter five.

⁸¹ John McNeill, *Taking a Chance in God: Liberating Theology for Gays Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families and Friends* (Boston: beacon Press, 1996), 37-38

⁸² Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

⁸³ Gary Comstock. David, *Gay Theology Without Apology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993); Peter Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People* (London: Cassell, 1997).

⁸⁴ John McNeill, *Taking a chance in God: Liberating Theology for Gays Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families and Friends* (Boston: beacon Press, 1996).

⁸⁵ C. L. Seow, (1996) *Homosexuality And Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), x.

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Chapter one is an introductory chapter and it giving a synopsis of my thesis. As culture is one of the Church's formative factors in doing sexual theology it is imperative that from the onset we have a clear understanding of the African concept of sexuality and chapter two is aimed at achieving this goal. Chapter three is a historical overview of the impact of social developments on sexual networks, thus it explores the factors and effects of urbanisation on traditional socio-sexual networks. The assumption of engaging such an approach is that knowledge and understanding of these factors are essential in analysing crucial research questions. In a way chapter two and three are pre-theological attempts to provide an understanding of the complexities involved in the development of most sexual networks of which homosexual practice is part. In short, while chapter two provides the parameters from which African sexuality is assumed to operate, chapter three is an attempt to demonstrate how those parameters have been disrupted. Chapter four analyses the Church structures and approach to issues of sexuality. Chapter five discusses and highlights some of the challenges on the Church's use of the Bible as a primary formative factor in theology, analysing the popular slate that 'God forbids' often echoed by Church members. Chapter six offers a theological appraisal and the thesis concludes with chapter seven which gives a summery of findings and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICAN CONCEPT OF SEXUALITY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

For an appropriate discussion and understanding of human sexual behaviour from a contemporary Shona perspective, it is necessary to understand the traditional sexual concepts and the religio-cultural beliefs and values that underpin them. The premise of my argument here is that unless one is clear of the Shona concept of sexuality, or at least have some pre-understanding, it is difficult to comprehend what the issues are in relation to homosexuality in Zimbabwe. The basic objective of this chapter, therefore, is to delineate the Shona traditional sexual concept that underlies the people's attitudes to sexuality. I aim to examine briefly the history and concept of sexuality from the African perspective. In order for me to adequately do this, I will firstly discuss the African world-view which is a philosophy under which the indigenous people seem to operate. To know how people view the world around them, "is to understand how they evaluate life. A people's evaluation of life, both temporal and non-temporal, provides them with a charter for action, and a guide to behaviour."⁸⁶ However, one would admit that a people's world-view encompasses not only the multiplicity of concepts, beliefs and attitudes which they share, but also the underlying thought-link or logic which holds them together. So, an appropriate understanding of a people's world-view can primarily be obtained by an analysis of their life especially in its social context. Knowledge of a people's world-view is a key to the understanding of their social, ethical and religio-cultural values. Therefore, for us to make sense of the Shona concept of sexuality it is necessary in this chapter to understand, first, the African world-view. Secondly I will present

⁸⁶ Victor Chikezie Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southern Nigeria* (London: Halt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 11.

the Shona concept of sexuality. In so doing the study is set firmly into the context of an African sexual worldview from which to comprehend and analyse the people's attitudes to homosexuality. An attempt will be made to show the complex and varied nature of African sexuality and the multi-faceted challenges that come with it. The premise of my assumption is that, among the Shona, there seems to be a distinct and internally coherent system of sexuality to which everyone is assumed to adhere.

2.2 HISTORY OF SHONA SEXUALITY

2.2.1 Shona Sexuality and The African Worldview

Generally African world-views recognise a Supreme Being, God, who is seen as the creator and source of all life-forces. He brought human beings and all things into being and he sustains order and harmony in the universe by his creative activity. The deities, spirit forces and ancestral spirits have superior powers, which they can use to benefit or punish human beings. They are seen as God's representatives and agents. In the hierarchy of beings men stand in the centre. Emefie Ikenga-Metuh explains that, "Both the beings above men and those below him are appreciated to the degree that they help men not only to achieve his self fulfilment, but also police men so that the integration and harmony of the ontological order might be maintained."⁸⁷

All beings known to African worldviews can be said to belong to either of two worlds, the visible and the invisible world. The visible world is populated by humans and all the material surroundings familiar to men, that includes the sky, earth, rivers, forests and mountains, to name but a few. The invisible world consist of (a) the heavenly realm, said to be the

⁸⁷ Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1987), 80.

homeplace of the creators and deities, which is thought to be located somewhere in the sky and (b) the spirit land, said to be the homeplace of the ancestors, disembodied spirits, located somewhere underground or in thick forests and mountains. It is instructive to note that the African world-view is actually divided into three cosmic regions. One is the upper world which is a sacred world where sacred things exist. The second is the earth which is the world of the profane such as human beings. The third is the underworld which is sacred and in this world are the graves and spirits. However it must be noted that this classification is only made for the convenience of analysis, because generally African beliefs see no wall of demarcation between the three worlds. The three realms shade into each other. There is no clear-cut distinction or opposition between the visible and invisible, the material and the spiritual, the temporal and non-temporal, the sacred and the profane.⁸⁸ An example of the relationship between the material and spiritual realms “is seen in the belief that the deities inhabit the natural phenomena with which they are associated, like rivers, forests, sky, or the sun. The ancestors among many African groups are believed to be around their homes and hearts, and take part in all important family affairs which include births, marriages and deaths. There is a continuous exchange and interaction between beings in the universe irrespective of the realm (visible and invisible) to which they belong.”⁸⁹ It is believed that men can influence the deities and spirits through sacrifices, prayers and spells. In other words, there is commerce between the seen and the unseen, and in this sense the mediums are the spirit mediums which are able to cross from one cosmic region to the other. Consequently, deities can intervene in human affairs to bring blessings (children, for example) or curses (childlessness, for example).

⁸⁸ Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative studies of African traditional religions* (Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1987), 62.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-3.

In addition, as Kisembo and his colleagues further explain, “Because the generation of life was a matter of concern for the whole community, there were strong sanctions, for example, against people who indulged in sex for selfish reasons. Sexuality and its powers were understood as permeating every level of human existence, interpersonal relationships and matters of ritual. Sexuality was looked upon as mysterious and sacred. If it were misused, evil surely resulted. Therefore, initiation rites prepared the adolescent for the right use of his or her sexuality, to get married and raise a family.”⁹⁰ Hence getting married and having children would be something that most young people would aspire to in life.

Benezeri Kisembo and his colleagues’ explanation of what they refer to as the proper expression of sexuality within the African context seems to be true when compared to the Shona culture. They explained that for Africans, remaining single, infertility and sterility block the channel through which the stream of life flows, they plunge the person concerned into misery, they sever him or her from personal immortality, and threaten the perpetuation of lineage.⁹¹ It is precisely because of this that sexuality and sexual expression are sacred and must in no circumstances be ‘abused’. Because sexuality contains and constitutes so much of life, it is liable, by the same token, to be extremely destructive of life if mishandled. Hence, the most central aspects of the initiation process were to impress upon the initiates acceptance of the dignity of their own sexuality and the need to be both very responsible and very proud of it. Every rite of passage in traditional African life is to be ritually enacted.⁹² The enactment of each rite of passage symbolises the progressive transition of a person from one phase of being to another. The rites of passage are communal ceremonies that are performed as an

⁹⁰ Benerezi Kisembo, Laurenti Magesa and Alyward Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 105-106.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁹² Arnold van Gennep gives a detailed and elaborate work on rites of passage in which he explores through the classification of rites and their purpose, explaining them as they are related from birth to death. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1995).

individual passes from one stage to another: at birth, adolescence, adulthood and death. They are expressions of the understanding and expectations of communities regarding the role of the individual in society. Birth symbolises the entry of the child from the generation of unborn individuals into the generation of those who are born. At the same time, it symbolises the transition of the parents from one stage of elderhood to parenthood. Initiation symbolises the transition from childhood to adulthood, while marriage symbolises the entry from adulthood to elderhood. Death symbolises the transition from the physical mode to the spiritual mode of existence. “Such changes of condition do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual.”⁹³ Through these rites of passage, the sense of corporate identity would be repeatedly affirmed.

From initiation on, people are expected to recognise the basic role of sexuality and sexual relations in the life of the family and the clan. No young person who has gone through initiation takes kindly to being considered a child any longer, and is even less happy to be seen as incapable of accomplishing sexual relations according to the customs.

Furthermore, like many African people, the Shona are mainly a patriarchal society with its emphasis on sexual pleasure as something only men should experience. This is revealed in the Shona traditions, injunctions and interpretations on issues relating to sex and sexuality. Sex seems to be only for male gratification and women’s sexual pleasure is regulated. The emphasis for females is only on procreation, for which a woman is simply a depository. While facial attractiveness is a general desideratum for beauty, plumpness or roundness as well as a jutting backside is highly considered in traditional Shona construction of female beauty. The quest to increase the man’s sexual pleasure is also evidenced by the custom of

⁹³ Ibid., 13.

increasing the labium majora, virginity testing before marriage, the wearing of beads and reducing the size of the vagina after birth. The Shona value tight vaginas to the extent that women, particularly soon after birth, are said to insert substances into their vagina prior to intercourse in order to tighten it. This practice allegedly produces a 'hot, tight, and dry' environment, which their men find more pleasurable. This simply restates and reinforces the perspective and practice of male power over female sexuality.

2.2.2 Shona Sexuality and Culture of Silence

Among the Shona sex is generally not a topic for open discussion. The culture places a strong taboo upon the open discussion of sexual matters. Heald rightly noted that, not only is sex emphatically not a topic for open discussion, but even in the marital situation the act of coitus may never be referred to directly. Husband and wife indicate a desire for intercourse only indirectly.⁹⁴ This is done in various ways, for example a woman offering food or a man asking for it. Apart from this, sexual intercourse could be asked for only in the politest and vaguest of phrases and in most cases marital sex takes place only in the dark as it is immodest for couples to see each other naked.⁹⁵ H. Aschwanden notes that, in terms of sexual education, symbols such as “the pot” and “the pestle” were used for the sexual organs.⁹⁶ These symbols for sexual organs that were taught to children such as the pot and the pestle apparently highlighted the complementarity of sexual organs in the process of procreation. Sexual practices such as cuddling or kissing can also cause embarrassment if performed in public.

⁹⁴ Suzette Heald, 'The power of sex: some reflections on the Cadwells African sexuality Thesis,' *Journal of the International Institute* 65, (1995): 491.

⁹⁵ Suzette Heald, 'The power of sex: some reflections on the Cadwells African sexuality Thesis,' *Journal of the International Institute* 65, (1995): 491.

⁹⁶ Sexual organs are taboo, they must not be looked at or named in public. H. Aschwanden. *Karanga Mythology* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 49.

In her book *Under the tongue*, Vera sheds light on the extent to which the culture of silence is observed around sexuality.⁹⁷ She explains it as a social problem that society likes to pretend does not exist, where even perpetrators of incest or rape seem to have been protected by society through its silence. On the same note, on studying the Shona people Bourdillon discovered that incest is regarded as a taboo and an offence against the spirit guardians of the chiefdom. It concerns people with a blood relationship as well as those from sub-clans. It is regarded as a grave crime, which is a violation of the ritual power and sometimes the fertility of the soil. The crime attracts a fine, which is a form of punishment for the perpetrator who through his actions would have embarrassed his family and clan as a whole. However because of the shame and disgrace that incest is believed to bring upon the whole extended family, it is very rare for families to reveal the perpetrators of such offences. Purification rituals would be conducted in secrecy. In this culture of silence victims suffer a calamitous dehumanising effect but are trapped in silence because they are afraid of disturbing the social fabric. This silent approach on some sexual matters has more often than not made it even difficult for researchers to penetrate the Shona sexual worldview.

Many Shona seem to associate casual sexual discourse with lack of morals (*unhu*). For example if a boy makes a love proposal, a girl is not supposed to accept his proposal quickly but she has to be seen to be reluctant and when she finally accepts the love proposal it is not usually by word of mouth but by giving the boy a token. This token is not expected to be anything special but anything ranging from a stub from a tree to a piece of cloth. There is not much verbal communication from the girl but on receiving the token the boy would be over the moon and is expected to keep safe whatever that token is. It is like a riddle that the boy has to work out for himself. After all it is well expected that having been brought up in a

⁹⁷ Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1997), 60.

context with all the social setup intact for sexual education, all boys would be well aware of most of the riddles and the art of love from a Shona perspective. There is not much talking done especially from the girl, as talking would give the proposing boy the impression that she is loose. The reluctance on the girl's part is just a social expectation. Girls are expected not to tolerate advances from boys, the longer the time a girl keeps her lover in suspense is said to be a reflection of her high moral standards. Thus girls have been taught not only to give the impression that they are difficult to get but to 'fear' boys (*haikona kutamba nevakomana* which means do not play with boys). The concept of the strict gender divide runs across all age groups with parents emphasising to the girl child not to play with boys. This seems so ironic for a society that highly regards procreation but at the same time it also shows the underlying ideology of secretiveness where sex is concerned.

The sexual secrecy motif also manifests itself in girls' reluctance not only to accept a love proposal, but even to continue resistance after marriage. The men must be seen to 'fight' for sex. This resistance, crying and fighting is all culturally motivated and it is meant to give the impression that she is not easy to get while at the same time ironically helping the men to make their authority more established. A girl, soon after marriage ceremonies is still expected to show some reluctance to be given away even though secretly she may be craving for her husband. After the marriage ceremonies the bride is accompanied to her husband's home by her aunties (her father's sisters) and she is supposed to show some reluctance to go with her husband. Begrudgingly, the bride is expected to make several stops on her way to the bridegroom's home, it is the duty of the bride's aunts, those who addressed her father as brother, to bring her to a halt (*kutsiga*) from time to time when the in-laws would pay them something (*kushonongora*). The more the bride halts the more credit she gets. In addition it is really not acceptable for a bride to show enthusiasm for sex, women are just not expected to

such things because apparently such thoughts belong only to those with dirty minds (*kufumuka*). A woman is expected to fight and resist her husband's advances, especially on the eve of the marriage. Thus the marriage is sealed not really with joy, as some people might expect, but with great resistance, 'fighting' and crying. I suppose it is joy in a unique way, hence the secrecy motif.

It is significant to note however, that this secrecy seem to be a human construct that resonates mainly with the religious side of sex that shall be discussed later in this chapter. In this regard sex is a sacred phenomenon and it is not to be talked about but acted. If talked about, it loses its power. This is why sex will be preferred in darkness. Thus the whole concept of sex and sexuality is best articulated by critically analysing the socio-cultural entities from which it emanates and paying attention to what may seem to be meagre irrelevant detail, for underneath these intricate social fabrics lies the crucible of the Church's approach to most sexual issues as shall be discussed in later chapters.

2.3 KNOWN SEXUAL PRACTICES AMONG THE SHONA

2.3.1 Shona Heterosexual Monogamous Marriages

The acceptable Shona system of sexuality evolves around marriage with its emphases on reproduction and descent. Marriage as a traditional social institution epitomises the setting of acceptable sexual relationships. In the traditional Shona society, social pressure on those who delay marriage takes various forms, such as the ridicule of men, who are called *tsvimborume* (persons without a future whom nobody will remember after death and will be buried with a

dead rat or a hoe handle).⁹⁸ Unmarried women are called *tsikombi* (vagrants who have no home of their own).⁹⁹ The social pressure on men could be in the form of the withdrawal of domestic services. In this case such withdrawal usually becomes more painful to men because the sexual division of labour makes it disgraceful for a man to cook for himself or wash his own clothes.¹⁰⁰ The same social pressure to get married is often put on a woman. A woman who remains single loses her self-respect. A social stigma is attached to such a woman and there is a Shona adage to describe such a person that says *wakafuratirwa netsuro* (which means the person is cursed). Apart from these, the traditional Shona society finds it difficult to tolerate spinsters because they not only prevent other families from increasing in size but also make it difficult for their own brothers to marry, (traditionally brothers are expected to marry with the bride-wealth paid for their sisters, *kamombenda kamombe dzoka*).

There are several aspects that make Shona marriages unique and at the same time complex to the extent that makes it incomprehensible to think of other sexual relationships in the same manner. In the following section these unique features will be discussed. These are its process, purpose and its communal aspects. It is partly on the understanding of these fundamental characteristics that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe could be said to have partly based their theology on sexuality.

⁹⁸ A.K.H. Weinrich, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982), 34-35. The purpose and importance of marriage in traditional society is also underlined by Hatendi when he writes that “an unmarried person is regarded as ungrateful to his parents and family group who have brought him up and trained him for life. To continue the family lineage is an obligation.” P. R. Hatendi, “Shona Marriage and the Christian churches” in Anthony J. Dachs, ed., *Christianity South of the Zambezi* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), 40.

⁹⁹ Aschwanden says a man or woman who cannot marry is truly poor. The unmarried man or woman is despised and called *tsvimborume*. Aschwanden, *Symbols of life: An Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982), 161. However *tsvimborume* only refers to men, not women. This Shona word is derived from two words; *tsvimbo*, which means a man’s hunting club, and *murume*, which means man. *Tsvimborume* is therefore a senior bachelor who only has his *tsvimbo* as his partner. A senior single woman is called *tsvingudzi*.

¹⁰⁰ A.K.H. Weinrich, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982), 34-35.

2.3.1.1 Marriage perceived as a process

For the Shona, marriage is not an event but a long drawn out process that does not take place at one single moment of time, but is a culmination of a series of instructions, meetings, negotiations, and ceremonies.¹⁰¹ The process starts off with the love proposal. The love proposal in traditional society takes two forms. The young man either makes the choice and seeks the approval of his elders or the elders make the initial choice and seek the approval of their son.¹⁰² Among the Shona it is usually the *vanatete* (aunties) and *vana sekuru* (uncles) who scout around for a suitable young woman for their nephew when he is ready to marry.

Aqina explains the rationale of this practice:

Initially there was no question of you (prospective groom) making choice because who are you in this marriage? You are not just marrying for yourself and you could not make the right choice on your own. It was a family decision. Our culture did not agree with an individual's choice if it excluded the family because you married the person for life and the person was married into the family.¹⁰³

Thus, the family plays a key role in deciding the person to be married into their family. Alternatively the young man could initiate a love affair as already stated. However he still has to seek the guidance of his elders before making a move. Chigwedere explains the traditional procedure in clear terms:

The traditional way of doing it was that, if a young man spotted a girl who attracted him, he went back to his elders such as the aunt, the uncle, the grandfather or even an older brother to hint he had feelings for a particular girl. Much of what happened thereafter did not depend on him, but on the elders.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Adrian Hastings, *Christian marriage in Africa*, (London: SPCK, 1973), 30; Kileff also observed that the traditional marriage system reveals an intricate system of rules. Relatives must be informed of the marriage in a specific order, family consultations and the selection of a mediator (*munyai*) must follow certain procedures and the prospective in-laws have to be approached according to a strict etiquette. Clive Kileff, ed., *Shona Folk Tales* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987), 4.

¹⁰² According to Chigwedere "occasions when a young man initiated a love affair in our traditional society were far fewer than occasions when it was started for him from another corner." A. S Chigwedere, *The Karanga Empire* (Harare: Books for Africa 1985), 24.

¹⁰³ Aqina, op cit, p. 24.

¹⁰⁴ A. S Chigwedere, *The Karanga Empire* (Harare: Books for Africa 1985), 25.

One of the reasons why the elders played such a key role at this proposal stage was that they were the ones who had more knowledge about the woman's or man's family (young people were encouraged to marry from those of their own community, *kuroorana vematongo*). The reputation of the family was a key consideration – hence the dependence on the wisdom of the elders. Chigwedere elaborates this point further:

Because the boy was young and inexperienced, he did not know the 'good' families to marry into. He had to depend on the knowledge and advice of his elders and relatives before formal approaches were made... To these traditional Africans, to marry into an unknown family was a serious and dangerous adventure, which no elders could sanction lightly.¹⁰⁵

The family of the woman were equally concerned to know the boy's family background history.

After a proposal the young woman informs her paternal aunt before making any response to the suitor. The aunt then carries out a thorough investigation of the suitor and his background. When the investigation has been done the paternal aunt then mentions the news to the woman's mother, who would in turn inform the father. It is only after this stage of approval by the family through the aunt (since parents never speak directly to their children about their love affairs) that the young woman could really break the good news to the man, who would have waited for months. Such a protracted process of proposing demands patience and persistence from the suitor.

The second stage in the process of marriage is the exchange of love tokens. The love token acts as an indication of mutual love and betrothal of the girl and boy. There is also agreement that the girl's paternal aunt is a key witness to this proceeding. From that stage on the two

¹⁰⁵ A. S Chigwedere, *The Karanga Empire* (Harare: Books for Africa 1985), 25.

lovers fall into the background of the marriage drama. Should either of them break the engagement promise for no valid reason, the other could sue for damages at the *dare*.¹⁰⁶

The third stage in the marriage process is *kuroora* (*roora* payment), which is marriage negotiations. There is need here to give a brief explanation of what *roora* really is. The noun *roora* stems from the infinite verb *kuroora* (to marry). *Muroora*, (daughter-in-law) is a derivative from the same verb. *Roora* denotes the material settlement agreed upon to legalise a marriage. It confers rights to the man as well as the woman to claim that his or her partner is his or hers. *Roora* is paid by the man to the woman's family. Hitherto, the concept of *roora* has been applied only in the context where woman are concerned, basically because it is the women about whom the settlement is reached. The payment is made to authenticate the relationship itself, as well as an approbation of the relationship, by the two marrying families. However, for the man and his clan, the importance lies in the fruit of the womb rather than just in the marriage union. Without this fruit the union would plunge into a serious predicament. This then emphasises the fact that a gay or lesbian relationship would be viewed as an abomination as it is not procreative. Consequently, in the case where a woman fails to bear children for her husband her paternal family is responsible for making arrangements either to have their daughter treated if possible or provide someone who can bear children for their son-in-law; in most cases a niece is provided. *Roora* means much more than a love token, *roora* relates to a specific gender – it is feminine, it is for the woman; it is not just a woman but a woman whose womb is fertile.

Now, going back to explain how *roora* is paid. The consent of both the man's and the woman's families is crucial before the marriage negotiations begin. When the father is

¹⁰⁶ Bourdillon noted that breaking the engagement because one had a new lover is not considered a good or valid reason. Bernard Bourdillon, *The Future of the Colonial Empire* (London: SCM Press, 1945), 56

informed the marriage negotiations begin. When the man's father is informed of the planned marriage then "a family council is called, in which the merits and demerits of an alliance with the young woman's family are discussed. The father's sister has the final word to say, and if she is against the proposed marriage it is unlikely that negotiations will be initiated."¹⁰⁷ The opinion of *vatete* is seriously considered not just because of her status in the family but because she would have carried out thorough investigations about the woman and her family. On the same note the woman's aunt, would have undertaken the same exercise about the man's family. If the family agrees to the proposed marriage then *munyai* – a go-between (a family friend of the girl's parents) will be chosen to win the consent of the woman's family.

On the other hand the whole family council of the woman's relatives, which includes her father's brothers and sisters, and the woman's own brothers and sisters and her mother, is called soon after the *munyai*'s first visit to announce the news. "All must give their consent to the marriage, because the alliance binds not only the future husband and wife but all the members of their family."¹⁰⁸ It is only after such consent had been granted that the marriage process moves to the next stage, which is the actual payment of the *roora*. The groom's relatives will collectively contribute to the settlement of *roora*. This joint approach is well expressed in the Shona adage *roora rinoitwa pamwe*, which means contracting marriage is group collaboration. Chigwedere's words express this collective approach when he said "lobola payments for the bride came from his parents and close relatives."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Aquina, (1963) p. 29

¹⁰⁸ Aquina, (1963) p. 30

¹⁰⁹ Chigwedere further remarks that this practice made the young man fear to embark on relationships that were not sanctioned by the elders who were going to pay the lobola for him. A. S Chigwedere, *The Karanga Empire* (Harare: Books for Africa 1985), 25. Quite often the lobola, especially cattle, procured from the marriage of the woman was used to pay for the marriage of her own brothers or her brother's sons. The other source of bride wealth is the groom's father or elder brothers. This collective approach in payment of *roora* meant the bride was married into the family and not just by an individual.

Bride-wealth is given not to purchase the woman to be married; its social and religious implications are much more significant. *Rooru* is regarded as a form of thanksgiving to the wife's people for the care they have taken of their daughter. It fosters and solidifies bonds of relationship that are difficult to sever. In terms of kinship, therefore, bride-wealth both cements and expresses kinship ties. It also fosters solidarity among and between the two clans concerned in that the roora is given communally, it makes the marriage difficult to break on account of its social psychological and ritual significance, and it gives the children of the union legitimacy and identity.

It is also important to note that the bride-wealth is settled over a long time after the initial token of cattle has been given. The rest comes with the birth of children to the husband. The Zande system of marriage can be likened to that of the Shona people where bride-wealth cannot be given all at once because at the beginning the marriage is only an 'embryo'. But "as it matures the payment of the bride-wealth and all other customary observances between members of a marriage group become more pronounced"¹¹⁰ After the birth of a child, the woman is truly incorporated among her husband's people, so much so that in the event of her death she must be replaced. Conversely, if she survives her husband, one of his brothers or relatives must take her on in the name of the deceased.

Kupereka (handing over of the bride) is the last stage in the process of marriage among the Shona people. This is a stage when the bride will be escorted by the aunts, sisters and other close female relatives. Although the bride's family has given her away in marriage, she remains their daughter, and they have to be consulted if there are any issues of concern that affect her life. What is important to note is that any subsequent problems or difficulties that

¹¹⁰ Evans Pritchard, *The Position of Woman in Primitive Societies* (London: Faber, 1965), 241 – 2.

may have arisen later like childlessness are dealt with in this context and with respect to this established marriage relationship. It was not a tentative marriage arrangement but a fully valid and sanctioned marriage by the two families. Therefore, having enumerated the process, one can conclude that the process seems to present problems for any sexual relationship that do not have procreation as its ultimate goal, in this case homosexuality.

2.3.1.2 Marriage perceived as having religious significance

An important aspect of African traditional marriage which has drawn much attention from researchers is its religious dimension. Musharhamina asserts that African marriage “is essentially in the realm of the sacred and of religion. There isn’t such a thing as profane or lay marriage. African marriage is indeed essentially religious”¹¹¹ This religious dimension is centred on the ancestors who are believed to be particularly concerned with lineage continuity. They are regarded as guardians of the fertility of their descendants, hence they are involved whenever a new marriage is contemplated. This involvement of ancestors is expressed at the handing over of *roora* cattle. Weinrich noted that in the past, Shona paid bride wealth in cattle, and when the cattle herd of a son-in-law was driven into the father-in-law’s cattle byre the old man called on his ancestors to announce to them solemnly that cattle had been handed over to him for his daughter, that his daughter would go to another village and bear children for that lineage, and that ancestors should bless her and make her fruitful.

¹¹² This religious significance of *roora* is not just a thing of the past because even today,

¹¹¹Mulago Gua Cikala Musharmina, *Traditional African Christian Marriage* (Kampala: St. Pauls Publications, 1985), 42. See also John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), 133. African marriage is marked by many rituals and traditionally involved the whole community, for it marked a new status within the community and involved not only the living but also the departed and those yet unborn. Cicil McGarry, ed., *What Happened At The African Synod* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1995), 68.

¹¹² Weinrich also says *mombe yeumai* is still given by Karanga people. “It is not part of the bride wealth proper, but a special gift from a son-in-law, to his mother-in-law, and through her to her ancestral spirits. It is believed that if the cow were not given, the wife would become barren or mad or children born of the union would die. The mother-in-law remains the sole owner of this cow and its offspring.” A.K.H. Weinrich, *African Marriage in Zimbabwe and the Impact of Christianity* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982); see also M. F. C. Bourdillon, *The*

when money is often paid instead of cattle, many Shona take the cash they receive into the cattle byre to tell their ancestors: “Here are the cattle which will continue our line.”

Where African religion is concerned, bride-wealth is not so much an economic transaction as it is a social and ritual symbol; in many cases the amount of the bride-wealth is so insignificant that it would be ridiculous to perceive it as wife buying. Furthermore, the idea of purchase is contradicted by the fact that the woman always belongs to her own parents, clan, and lineage, even after marriage. Magesa gives a twofold religious purpose of bride-wealth payment. “First, it establishes the right of exclusive sexual access to the woman by the husband and for the power to bequeath status and property to the children of the union as to the descendants of the husband’s group. Second, it legitimates the children within the father’s lineage. It is this legitimation that stabilizes the vital force of the clan and that makes the giving and receiving of bride-wealth so crucial from a religious point of view.”¹¹³

The status of the woman in a relationship where bride-wealth has not been exchanged is even more ambiguous. It brings to mind the question of whether her children are able to confer on her the full status of motherhood, and consequently, ancestorship, since she technically has no husband? Will she be loved and valued as a wife or otherwise, by the man with whom she has children? Will the relationship last? What about her duty to her ancestors and her need to placate them with the portion of bride-wealth that is usually offered them? What about her responsibility to avail her brothers and other members of her own clan of the wherewithal to offer bride-wealth for their own wives? Will she be able to assure members of her man’s clan that the children born of her are really full members of their clan, that they are their own

Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona with Special Reference to their Religion (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1976), 42.

¹¹³ Laurenti. Magesa. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 131.

blood? These are but some of the serious questions that the Shona women face in irregular unions, that is, without bride-wealth, *roora*. A man who chooses to stay with someone's daughter without settling even a part of the *roora* has no traditional approbation or customary claim over the children resulting from such a union. Often the children of such unions, if the union breaks down, become matrilineal and grow up at the maternal grandparents' home as part of that family. There is then a perpetual embarrassment, as they cannot be considered for any inheritance that may arise unless a benefactor chips in. So, by and large, no woman would want a union that has no *roora* payment. In other words, the concept of *roora* completely militates against same-sex marital unions. So, if *roora* gives enough problems to heterosexual marriages, it is a real challenge to implement a gay/lesbian relationship as a marriage within the Shona socio-cultural context because the concept, as explained, is culturally multifaceted. It seems the value-system encapsulated in gay/lesbian relationships is incongruent with that of the *roora* concept.

It is clear then that any marital arrangement without bride-wealth is seen as highly irregular and offensive, and that a woman who accepts living with a man without bride-wealth does an injustice to the two clans concerned as well as to any children that may be born out of such a relationship. Because bride-wealth forms part of the process of the covenant that breaks down barriers between clans and peoples and establishes unions of life, love, harmony, peace and security beyond certain frontiers, the woman in question is acutely aware that her situation is shameful¹¹⁴. She is in fact a mistress and as far as her own spiritual future is concerned, practically dead. In normal circumstances, even though she might at first elope without the usual formalities, she is not content until some form of bride-wealth is sooner or later given by her husband, or in the case of his death, by the deceased man's relatives. Magesa argues

¹¹⁴ Peter Rigby, *Cattle and Kinship Among the Gogo: A Semi-Pastoral Society of Central Tanzania* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 222.

that this posthumous giving of bride-wealth is not rare in such situations. Otherwise it is not uncommon that she would threaten to return to her parents' home, and in many cases, actually does so. There are no strong ties to her husband or his clan to prevent her from taking this step.¹¹⁵

Marriage solemnised with bride-wealth becomes a profoundly sacred reality. Solemn prayers, sacrifices, and blessings are always offered over the marriage by the clan. Dissolution of the marriage bond becomes extremely rare after a marriage has resulted in offspring. In other words, it is serving the purpose of life. One of the prayers said by the father (or any other designated elder) of the bride-to-be at the reception of the bride-wealth is to implore the ancestors to take care of their daughter and bless her with children. This is done to make sure that the ancestors have a hand in the event and that the bride-wealth has a greater significance than is apparent.

Holleman explains that no *roora* payment is complete without the inclusion of a bull or bull-calf known as *gono redanga* (bull of the herd) "so that the *vatezvara* (father-in-law) can dedicate the animal to a particular family spirit, if they so wish."¹¹⁶ Holleman explains the function of *gono redanga* as that of a medium between the family and ancestral spirits. When anything of importance happens to the family "especially when cattle are added to or taken from the family head, the head of the family reports (*kudira*) the matter to the bull (that is, the spirit) pouring beer sediment (*masese*) or water over the bull's head, and addressing the animal as *tateguru* [ancestor]. The bull fulfils this function until it is sacrificed (*kupira or*

¹¹⁵ Laurenti. Magesa. *African religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 133.

¹¹⁶ J. F. Holleman, *Accommodating the Spirit Amongst Some Northern-Eastern Shona Tribes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 168.

kuteura) to the spirit, which usually happens when it is old, or when the spirit directs it.”¹¹⁷

The ancestors however are not seen as an end in themselves. They are a means to communicating with *mudzimumukuru* (greater ancestor), also known as *musikavanhu* (the creator) who could only be approached through intermediary roles. Children are seen as a gift from Mwari (God) and *vadzimu* (ancestors). In this regard therefore the Shona concept of sexuality may be regarded as intrinsically religious. Any divergence from the norm is seen as a curse and it is believed there is always a way to purify someone who is cursed.

2.3.1.3 Procreation as the primary purpose in marriage

By far the most fundamental meaning of marriage for the Shona is that of parent-hood. As emphasised above, the aspect of father-mother is more important than the aspect of husband-wife. The husband-wife status, although chronologically prior, is actually qualitatively secondary to the father-mother status.¹¹⁸ The husband is seen first of all as father (or future father) while the wife is seen first of all as mother (future mother). “Marriage is essentially a source of life. It is fertility that makes them truly married, because it is by fertility that they project into the future the life of their predecessors and prolong their own lives through their descendants.”¹¹⁹ In traditional Shona culture procreation is highly regarded and a childless marriage creates disappointments. Thus, the ultimate goal in traditional Shona marriages is procreation. To Mbiti, “marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity: without procreation marriage is incomplete.”¹²⁰ Bourdillon explains the extent to which the Shona go

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 169.

¹¹⁸ Laurenti. Magesa. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 134 – 135.

¹¹⁹ M.G.C.Musharmina, *Traditional African Marriage and Christian Marriage* (Kampala: St. Pauls Publications, 1981), 58. In Mair’s view traditional marriage was conceived as binding two lineages as well as the spouses and “had procreation of children as its essential aim,” L.P.Mair, ‘African marriage and social change’ in Arthur Philips, ed., *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life* (London: Oxford University press, 1953), 14.

¹²⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 133.

in preparing their children from a very tender age: “Boys undergo a traditional test for fertility in which he is made to masturbate and his semen is dropped into water, if the semen sinks it is thought to be strong and fertile, but if it floats it is considered weak and infertile and the boy may be given traditional medicines to improve his fertility.”¹²¹

Traditional Shona society has involved many customs enshrining the value of fertility. The Shona have even created a ritual object which symbolises fertility. This is *mutimwi* (a string of beads) which is given at birth to both boys and girls and plays a role in female fertility rites at puberty, first pregnancy and at every birth; no woman would go into labour without wearing their *mutimwi*. Boys stop wearing their *mutimwi* as they grow up, but women wear it throughout their lives. It is believed that if children do not wear these beads, their sex organs will not develop properly and this can jeopardise their chances of having children. The beads of a *mutimwi* represent the male seeds. At puberty a girl takes her *mutimwi* to her *vatete* (her father’s sister). She accepts the *mutimwi* and takes it to the girl’s mother to inform her that her daughter has become mature. Tradition strictly forbids any conversation between parents and children which even remotely refers to sexuality.

After this ceremonial announcement, the girl may find a lover, and once marriage negotiations have been opened, her *vatete* takes some of the money brought by the groom’s marriage negotiator and buys with it new beads to make a new *mutimwi* for her niece. On giving her the new *mutimwi*, the *vatete* also gives the young woman full instructions concerning her future duties as a wife. As soon as the young woman becomes aware of her first pregnancy the *masungiro* ritual is held. During this ritual both mother and daughter take off their *mutimwi* and place them across the threshold of the parents’ hut, and both the father

¹²¹ M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982), 64.

and the mother of the young woman then step over these two strings of beads. In doing so they acknowledge that the daughter has become like her mother.

This pregnancy ritual removes the taboo on discussing sexual matters between mother and daughter. The daughter may now remain in her mother's hut where she receives from her the final instructions leading up to the birth of her first child. In fact, the first birth should always take place in her mother's house so that her mother's ancestors can watch over her.

It bears repeating that the marriage is sealed by the birth of a surviving offspring, because then the purpose of marriage, which is understood as transmitting and therefore preserving life, has been achieved. Magesa noted four important features in African marriages that can be argued to be at loggerheads with homosexual relationships: (1) Marriage has to represent the life force of departed ancestors. (2) It has to give the parents the assurance of life with the ancestors in that they will in their turn be remembered by being named after. (3) It has to ensure the continuation of the life of the clan in this world by increasing its vital force through the new members. (4) It has to tie the bond of communion between the living, the living-dead, and yet-to-be-born.¹²² Hence, any sexual relationship that does not achieve the above objectives is more often than not frowned at by society.

The centrality of procreation in marriage among the Shona is also reflected from one of the purposes of *roora*, which was that *roora* was not given for the wife, but for the children. Failure to have children was perceived as wasted bride-wealth and a great curse. A marriage

¹²²Bourdillon explains that sterility on the part of the husband is shameful. If this is suspected, the husband may make secret arrangements with a close kinsman to impregnate his wife in his name. M. F. C. Bourdillon; *The Shona People: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*. Gweru: Mambo Press. 1976), 64. L. Magesa . *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 35.

without children had very slim chances of surviving even today.¹²³ Traditional society always had arrangements for the wife or husband who was infertile or impotent, for example, polygamy in the case of women, and for men, procreation by proxy.

Chigwedere gives a very good example of one of the methods that was used in the case of a man who was impotent. According to him arrangements were secretly made with a close relative of the bridegroom, normally a brother. The elders of the family concerned then suggested to the bridegroom that an effective traditional doctor was known in a distant region of the country. The groom was encouraged to visit the traditional healer accompanied by relatives to keep him there for a reasonable time. In the meantime, arrangements were made to enable his brother to visit his wife at night. This was top secret, and known to very few. At the distant place, the doctor pretended to do his best to make the bridegroom potent. At the same time he gave him assurances that he was going to have a child.¹²⁴ The resulting pregnancy was well received by the husband in good faith. According to Chigwedere the trick was repeated several times until this man had three or four children.¹²⁵ Thus, among the Shona people, the defining relationship in the community is a man and a woman. That relationship often is manifest in the establishment of a commitment between a man and a woman that endures and is fruitful in every respect.

With procreation as the main focus of marriage, childlessness becomes a very serious problem. Childlessness thus became one of the important grounds for divorce and polygamy. Childlessness is looked upon with scorn, and it is often blamed on the woman. The childless woman is blamed for refusing to play her role in the maintenance of her lineage and also for

¹²³ Author Chigwedere, *Lobola-The Pros and Cons* (Harare: Books for Africa, 1982), 12.

¹²⁴ M.Gelford, *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), 175.

¹²⁵ Chigwedere adds "the children born to him by his wife were his because in our traditional society, your brother's children were as much yours as your own real children." Author Chigwedere, *Lobola-The Pros and Cons* (Harare: Books for Africa, 1982), 12.

preventing the husband's spirit from living on. This aspect of the need to continue one's lineage is respected even when a woman's husband dies before they could have any children. Arrangement is made that a brother of the deceased, or any close relative, takes on the widow of a deceased brother to permit the birth of children for the dead man. The children belong to the dead brother rather than the living one and are entitled to inherit from his estate. The woman does not have to consider herself as being married for the second time but rather the dead man remains her husband and the living man with whom she cohabits is simply her caretaker.¹²⁶ In this context the Shona view such sexual relationships as ethical because of the purpose they serve.

2.3.1.4 Procreation: Religious, socio-economic and political aspects

The Shona people are divided into clans and lineage groups. The lineage serves as a religious and economic, as well as a political group. The prosperity, security, and even survival of everyone depends on the wellbeing of the lineage. Procreation is thus a religious obligation by means of which the individual contributes the seeds of life towards humans' struggle against the loss of their original immortality.¹²⁷ It is thus humans' answer to death because, through it, the losses inflicted on society by death are made good. Through procreation, the spirit of humans continue to live even after death.¹²⁸ Therefore, it is indeed a religious duty for a man to produce an offspring so that the existence of humanity can be prolonged. Bourdillon explains that the final funeral ceremony of bringing home the spirit of a dead

¹²⁶ This system is similar to that demonstrated by Michael Kirwen in a survey of four societies in Tanzania. Although there are some differing emphases, the widow has the right to be taken care of by the relatives of her late husband, and these relatives clearly have the responsibility to do so, including the responsibility to co-habit with her in the name of the deceased. M. C. Kirwen, *African Widows: An Empirical Study of the Problems of Adapting Western Christian Teachings on Marriage to the Leviratic Custom for the Care of Widows in Four Rural African Societies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 9.

¹²⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 133

¹²⁸ One of the request made to the ancestors is for them to send children. In fact, no libation is brought to an end without a request to the ancestors to let the people bear more children. Ancestors become more angry at the living when they fail to procreate.

person and installing it among the spiritual elders of the community, only takes place if the deceased begot or bore children.¹²⁹ This ceremony is normally performed in conjunction with the inheritance ceremony for a man who has obtained full adult status by becoming the father of a family.

Economic life in traditional Shona society was centred mainly on farming. With simple technology, human labour was very important. Harvest yield from the farm was directly proportional to the labour force. The economic unit used to be the household, which normally consisted of a man, his wife or wives and children. Procreation thus became very important in ensuring that there were enough people available to work on the farm. The lineage was also the basic political unit. Through procreation, a woman contributes members to their lineage. Her children become automatic members of her lineage and a woman's worth is recognised in terms of this contribution, which enhances the political status of the group, such status being determined by numerical strength. For this reason, Arthur Philips raises a very contestable point, that the majority of the population in Africa is monogamous because of certain constraints. The social and religious preference is polygamy.¹³⁰ Unless there are clear restrictions imposed on an individual such as the husband of a female chief who cannot by law marry a second wife, or an economic, psycho-sexual, physical or other inability to take care of more than one wife, Rigby says, having "a number of wives is normally a mark of both importance and success in life, and for this among other reasons, is something which the African man would gladly achieve if he could."¹³¹ Since one's power and influence in the clan and lineage and in society in traditional African society, depends to some significant

¹²⁹ M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1976), 71.

¹³⁰ Arthur. Philips, An Introductory Essay, in A. Philips, ed., *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. xiv.

¹³¹ Peter Rigby, *Cattle and Kinship Among the Gogo: A Semi-Pastoral Society of Central Tanzania*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 180.

degree on the size of one's family, a man will be drawn into acquiring many wives because of the potential to have a greater number of children.

An important aspect of marriage as it is related to procreation that we must discuss briefly is hospitality. Eugene Hillman has pointed out that "While both polygamist and monogamists subscribe to the hospitality patterns dictated by their culture, the larger family more easily acquires the prestige associated with generous hospitality."¹³² Generous hospitality though is only possible in part because one has the material means to afford it. As Monica Wilson explains, the many working hands of the polygamist make this more likely than the few hands of the monogamist.¹³³ And generosity and hospitality are not only admired as moral qualities, they are taken as clear qualities of leadership. Therefore in this context, it was of the utmost importance for a man to be known to have the socially accepted moral qualities, because of the respect and glory he would get from the community.

2.3.1.5 Marriage is a communal affair

An individual cannot act alone without the approval of the extended and immediate family. If he does, he is cut off from his roots, his security and his life become meaningless. Hence, proposing love is not an individual affair because marriage itself is far more than an individual affair but involves the whole community. The aunt has a particularly important role and she is the first to be consulted in marriage matters. She is perceived as having the skills to bring about consensus in such matters, and it is through her that the young man works in order to appraise their own father and uncle of their marriage plans.

¹³² J. Njenga, 'Customary African Marriage', in AFER, XVI: 1 & 2, (1974): 117.

¹³³ Harold Hillman *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975), 119.

Marriage among the Shona entails mutual obligations by the *munyai*¹³⁴, (who continues to be involved as long as the marriage lasts) and both families to see the marriage work. Bourdillon argues that “for the traditional Shona marriage is essentially a contract between two families.”¹³⁵ It is not only the nuclear families of both families that are involved but also all members of both extended families. Magesa opines that *roora* “is given and received communally, it makes the marriage difficult to break on account of its social psychological, and ritual significance, and it gives the children of the union legitimacy and identity.”¹³⁶ The traditional view of marriage is a coming together of extended families or clans, and the bride and groom are essentially representatives of their families in that process. It is not a matter of spouses alone but rather a covenant between two families which creates new links and tends to ensure stability of the new family. Therefore, the spouses are not free to decide about the date and arrangement of their religious marriage. It is the joining together of two families rather than of two individuals and in this way the bonds of the whole community are strengthened. Marriage is a celebration of the life of the community as such. What concerns marriage falls under the supervision and decision of the parents and elders of both sides who reach agreement after much consultation.

The family as a social institution therefore, provides intimate and enduring interaction and acts as a mediator between a person and the larger society from birth until death. The family transmits the traditional ways of a culture to each new generation. It is the primary socialising agent as well as a continuous force in shaping the course of life for its members. It is through

¹³⁴ A *munyai* is a family friend, chosen by the groom’s family to mediate between the two extended families. He is mainly responsible for negotiating the bride price and he continues as advisor to the married couple.

¹³⁵ C. Bourdillon; *The Shona People: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press. 1976), 52. Marriage preparation was a prerogative of the elders of both sides, who were recognised in the communities as true formators. The elders enjoyed great respect in traditional societies because of their experience and wisdom in all affairs of life. Marriage itself involved the whole clan, tribe or society and was never a private affair but a communitarian responsibility. Cicil McGarry ed, *What Happened At The African Synod?* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa), 68.

¹³⁶ Laurenti Magesa . *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 131.

the family that men and women satisfy most of their sexual, emotional, and affiliational needs. For the society, the family provides the necessary link between it and the individual; the family motivates the individual to serve the needs of the society and its members. It is through the family that the society determines the everyday interactional patterns of the individual. Individual decisions would only be implemented after being confirmed by family members.

2.3.2 Heterosexual Relationships Outside Monogamous Marriages

Among the Shona there are other sexual relationships practiced outside the norm and I shall briefly explain some of them. The first example of such relationships is *mapoto*. This is where a man and a woman live together for primarily sexual gratification. At times such relationships involve married man and woman, the relationship is not meant to last and it is discreet. However, if a child happens to be born out of such a relationship, the mother's name is given, not that of the father, since there was never a marriage. When such a situation happens there is a popular saying that *gomba harina mwana* which literary means a boyfriend cannot be a father. Such relationships are in most cases extra-marital relationships.

The second example is *barika*, which is polygamy. This is a relationship where a man has more than one wife. These type of relationships are not so much frowned upon by society but they are no longer as prestigious as they used to be, mainly because the focus of the economy has changed from agriculture to money. Before, the productive unit for agricultural work was the nuclear family, therefore if a man had many wives that would mean many children and an increased agricultural labour force. That means a polygamous man would reap more compared to a monogamous man and lots of people would envy him. Polygamy was not only an advantage for productive work force but descendants as well. Thus the more children you

have the higher the probability of having many male children to carry your name to the next generation, something central to the Shona approach to sexuality in most families even up to today.

The third and last example that I want to discuss is *kugara nhaka*, these are levirate marriages. This happens in the case of a husband's death; the brother comes and takes over the responsibilities of his deceased brother. These relationships are also acceptable by society but today the wife has to be in agreement to enter into such a relationship, that is, the family cannot impose it on her, it is her choice. The same applies to the deceased husband's brother. Many aspects have now changed in the people's perspective of such relationships today to the extent that the brother is not obliged to take responsibility at the traditional level of becoming sexually intimate with his brother's wife, but he does have a moral obligation to any surviving children. Levirate marriages, though no longer as popular as they were, are not frowned upon as such by society; it is mainly the economic responsibility that comes with them that makes them unpopular. Whereas before an additional family would mean additional labour force in the fields, the situation has completely changed, it now means more mouths to feed as well as all the economic responsibilities that might be involved.

2.3.3 Same-Sex Practices

The problem concerning the historicity of homosexuality in Zimbabwe raises concerns that this study seeks to analyse.¹³⁷ No explicit terms for homosexuality or discrete homosexual

¹³⁷ March Epprecht, 'Good God Almighty, What is this!: Homosexual "Crime" in Early Colonial Zimbabwe,' in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Haddon Craftsmen 1998), 197. See also another of his articles in which he traces the history of homosexuality in Zimbabwe. Marc Epprecht, 'The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity', in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, No. 4 (December, 1998): 631-651.

acts are available in Shona language. Rather, the possibility of same-sex sexual attraction among the Shona was subsumed within (or covered up by) words like *tsvimborume* (meaning one who does not marry), and *sahwira* (meaning a very close friend). For most people these words did not really imply anything untoward. The people did not seem to have the concept of homosexual orientation but in most cases aunts and uncles were blamed for letting the 'boy' down since everyone was expected to get married with aunts and uncles supporting and advising them to achieve this goal.

Epprecht, commenting on homosexuality in Zimbabwe observes that "The appearance of conformity to fecund heterosexual norm has historically been protected by a deeply embedded culture of discretion – don't ask, don't tell."¹³⁸ Were it to become known, for example, that family members were having 'incestuous' relations, a curtain of silence would descend to prevent the shame from becoming public. In this case then one can argue that the patriarchy seems to have successfully created a culture of silence to protect family names by avoiding washing 'dirty linen' in public.

Words that made homosexual behaviour explicit were only adopted in the late nineteenth century from other languages. *Ngotshana* (or *ngochani* in contemporary usage), for example, appears to derive from Zulu or Shangaan...¹³⁹

The fact that there appears to be no word in Shona that names this phenomenon it is used by many people as an excuse to denounce and label homosexuality as unAfrican.

Among the Shona there is an extent to which same-sex relationships are associated with spirit possession or witchcraft. In the traditional context spirit possession was not necessarily

¹³⁸Ibid., 635-636.

¹³⁹ Epprecht gave a very elaborate history of homosexuality in his article. Marc Epprecht, 'The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity', in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, No. 4(December, 1998): 637.

regarded as evil, but in any case, what the person did sexually was not talked about even though other people knew about it. That was like a family public 'secret'. Revelation or discourse about it was believed to render the spirit medium powerless. Nevertheless, in private, the family would seek help from the *n'ngas* or *sekuru* (witch-doctors). The intention of getting help was to get the individual into marriage and all the expectations that come with it. Therefore, one can say that traditionally, homosexuality as a sexual practice was known, but people were socialised not to talk about it. There is no evidence to suggest that people had knowledge about homosexuality as a sexual orientation but there is evidence of homosexual practice. The traditional healer portrayed homosexuality as an abnormality that can be corrected or treated, a spirit possession that can be exorcised. For the majority it was a chosen deviant behaviour that one can decide to stop, an unacceptable sexual practice that everyone should strive to thwart.

2.4 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that there is a distinct and internally coherent Shona system embracing sexuality. The system evolves around marriage with its complex process and emphasises on reproduction and descent. The desire of men to have descendants is so dominant that any sexual relationship that does not achieve this purpose is frowned upon. Hence sexuality seems to be primarily understood in the context of marriage between a man and woman with the ultimate goal of procreation. To Mbiti, "marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity: without procreation marriage is incomplete."¹⁴⁰ To the modern Shona man it remains important to have sons to support him in his old age and to carry his name in perpetuity. The significance of parenthood is necessary to establish status, dead or alive.

¹⁴⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 133.

It can be argued then that for the Shona, sexual relations are functional, they are a means to an end, and that end is procreation. Barrenness is universally abhorred and it constitutes the greatest fear and shame. Impotence has similar psychological and moral effects among men. In both cases, everything possible is done to try to reverse the situation. Therefore, all aberrations in sexual life seen as impinging negatively on the life of the society are deemed as morally reprehensible.

Having said that, it is significant here to note that, as suggested by Stuart, human beings see selectively, not imperially, they see what the conceptual structure of their culture permits them to see, and they only see new things when their existing cultural model is broken.¹⁴¹ As noted above issues of sex and sexuality among Shona people are engulfed with much secrecy, rituals and symbols. Rituals and symbols tend to influence people emotionally and incline them to adhere to traditional values. However, in situations of social development, where the traditional social network is disrupted and kinsmen are dispersed it is often difficult for relations to come together to perform these rituals. Consequently, many rituals have fallen into abeyance and slowly but surely they are being abandoned even be forgotten. It is the purpose of the next chapter to explore the impact of social developments on some of the key traditional Shona sexual models, thereby creating a more conducive environment for restricted sexual practices, in this case homosexuality.

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards A Lesbian And Gay Theology Of Relationships*, (London: Mowbray (1995), 4.

CHAPTER THREE

TOPIC: THE NATURE, CHARACTERISTICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE AMONG THE SHONA

3.1 INTRODUCTION

There are two notable perspectives on the existence of homosexual practice in traditional Shona society. On the one hand, it is maintained among most traditionalist circles that homosexual practices are alien to the Shona.¹⁴² Supporters of this view mainly argue that the traditional Shona society put in place structures that allowed all its members to get married and have children so there was no way such practices could have prevailed. On the other hand, especially following gossip and individual interviews some people maintained that homosexuality was in existence among the Shona well before the beginning of colonialism.¹⁴³ This chapter therefore, intends to establish the historicity of homosexual practice among the Shona. “It is also necessary to understand in some degree the sources of widespread contemporary challenge to traditional sexual ethics.”¹⁴⁴ For that reason the chapter will identify and examine the nature, characteristics and progress or development of same-sex relationships from the nineteenth century to the present day. In addition, attention

¹⁴² J. M. Zulu, a traditional healer, holds that “Homosexuality was not there when we grew up, I am over 70 years of age and my own father died at a very mature age but he never mentioned any of those things.” Similarly Chief Mangwende states that “In Shona we do not have a clear history of people who had these homosexual relationships. Homosexuality was a borrowed phenomenon, *zvakauya nemaNyasaland*, those people are bad, too much *mushonga*” – he was claiming that the practice was brought by immigrants from Malawi. When the custodians of tradition refer to homosexuality’s historical absence in the country they are basing their argument on their experience as well as on the content of oral history that has been passed down to them.

¹⁴³ This position has exponents from the traditional sphere. For example, chief E.T. Musikavanhu has this to say: “Homosexuality is not really a borrowed phenomenon. Homosexuality was known to exist among some boys reaching puberty, however the acts were only done to release sexual tensions without any future plans for heterosexual relations in the context of marriage”. E. T. Musikavanhu. Interview. January 2003.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret A Farley, “Sexual Ethics” in James B Nelson and Sandra P Longfellow, *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, (London: John Knox Press, 1994), 54.

will also be given to the effects of socio-political developments on both traditional social structures and sexual perceptions among the Shona.

In doing this, the chapter aims at bringing out a further understanding of the denseness and complexity of the underlining issues involved in analysing the practice of homosexuality among the Shona. Furthermore, it is hoped that this will help us to develop our own insights into the meanings practices have for the peoples involved and to draw some theological arguments and realities for discussion in later chapters of this work.

In order to achieve its purpose the chapter will first discuss the socio-cultural factors that seem to point to the existence of same-sex practices among the Shona and also the context in which they are manifested. Secondly, the chapter will discuss the effects of urbanisation in providing an enabling environment for homosexual practices; the effects of urbanisation on traditional social networks. Thirdly, there will be an assessment of the nature and implications of homosexual practice in contemporary Shona society.

3.2 HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE AMONG THE SHONA: SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Most Shona would like to portray homosexuality as a foreign phenomenon. For instance, Mr Gwarada, a Chivero traditional healer, who was now based mainly in Harare openly rejected and denounced homosexuality. Mr Gwarada explained, “When we were growing up we never

heard of these things. I am sure they came in with these *vauyi* (foreigners).”¹⁴⁵ *Sekuru* Chifungo, another elder, was vehement in his rejection of homosexuality and called it a malady that has caused drought (*chipini-pini chinotadzisa mvura kunaya*).¹⁴⁶ *Mbuya* Chatima, also saw homosexuality as a cause of drought and other catastrophes (*rushambwa*).¹⁴⁷ These apparent attitudes among traditional healers corroborate popular arguments that there were no homosexuals in the Shona indigenous culture.

However, I would like to argue here that homosexual practice was in existence among the traditional Shona even before the colonial period. There are several social facts that can be identified and described as situations that simultaneously camouflaged as well as accommodated same sex practice. Among them are oral tradition, sexual taboos, spirit possession, language, even marriage and patriarchy. These will be discussed as cultural currents that not only must have provided a milieu which in retrospect acted as a control measure against the manifestation of homosexual practice, but also helped to suppress the practice without anyone either speaking strongly for its acceptance or making a public call for its proscription under the rubrics of the traditional system of justice. In other words, it is conceivable that in most cases unless one was homosexually inclined, they would not be able to know that same sex affection and practice existed at all, hence the denial of the existence of the phenomenon.

The assumption here is that there is an inbuilt mechanism in the indigenous Shona culture that maintains proper outward appearances. Unpleasant realities or divergences from ideals are hidden by certain customs and social fictions. To offset this, this culture provided a way

¹⁴⁵ Interview with C Gwarada, Harare, December, 2003

¹⁴⁶ Interview with S. Chifungo, Harare, December, 2003

¹⁴⁷ Interview with M. Chatima, Harare, December, 2003

to keep up appearances. Against this background, then, homosexuality will be explored, with particular reference to six contemporary social features, which are oral tradition, sex taboos, spirit possession, marriage, language and patriarchy.

3.2.1 Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is not very elaborate on homosexuality. It portrays the culture of silence that seems to prevail among the Shona. It is characterised by a selective and secretive hermeneutic, which conceals rather than expresses culturally contested phenomena, like homosexuality. However, a careful scrutiny of it may unearth implicit indicators of homosexuality among the Shona, for example, traditions about customary cures and punishment of homosexuals. According to chief Makoni, “We have found very deterrent punishment in our society and the punishments which used to stop the evil (homosexuality) was to send culprits to a place where they cannot do it anymore...”¹⁴⁸ *Sekuru Tonderai*, also a traditional healer, explained homosexuality as a very minor illness that can be easily treated. Some of the traditional medicines he prescribed to his patients include mixing certain traditional herbs with cow-trotters (legs of a cow) and raw eggs. He said that these are most common and even men who have no ‘problems’ are encouraged to eat any one of them regularly because they are a wonderful aphrodisiac!¹⁴⁹ *Sekuru Tonderai* went on to explain some of the traditional herbs that he was still using in the ‘treatment’ of homosexuality, as *vhukavhuka*, *muringa* and *muchemedza mbuya*. He claimed that these medicines did work for those who used them.

¹⁴⁸ Chief Makoni, *Parliamentary debate*, vol 22/38. November 8 1995): 2520.

¹⁴⁹ Tonderai explained that according to his own understanding homosexuals were men who had infertility problems so by claiming to be homosexuals they were running away from their problem instead of being bold enough to go and find medical help especially from traditional healers. He went on to claim that he had healed a lot of gays who are now married and have children. Even though he showed me what he claimed to be the medicines for treating homosexuals, he would not explain how he makes them, because he said that would spoil the power of the medicine - *unozofumuka!*

Dr. P. M. Sibanda, of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers' Association (ZINATA), argues that homosexuality was always regarded as an illness curable by traditional healers. Sibanda and Makoni's arguments come from two people who are very important figures in the Shona social structures, as practitioners and functionaries of traditional religion. Their opinions are of great importance and influence in society. If chiefs know about the punishment, and some traditional healers acknowledge knowing about the treatment, then homosexuality must have always existed in traditional Shona culture.

3.2.2 Sexual Taboos

A search for a traditional perspective on homosexual practice must relate to society's attitude to the general realm of human sexuality. According to E.P. Antonio, African traditional culture in Zimbabwe subscribes to a view of sex which silences any discourse relating to it.¹⁵⁰ As briefly noted in chapter two, either because it was considered too sacred or simply as a subject area above people's comprehension, sex was not talked about in public; sexual discourse was and still is, to a large extent a taboo and it is a virtue for people to not engage in such discourse. It was considered sacred because sex is believed to have a religious function as explained in the previous chapter, as it enables the continuation of life through procreation. Sexuality is considered evil in the case of vices like incest, homosexuality and adultery. The fact that homosexuality was categorised as a vice in the traditional society does demonstrate that there were people practising it, thus refuting any claims of the phenomenon being unAfrican.

As has been pointed out earlier, sex could not be discussed openly because most issues in regards to sexuality were protected by "deeply imbedded culture of discretion – Don't ask,

¹⁵⁰ E. P. Antonio, 'Homosexuality and African Culture', in Germond and S. de Gruchy (eds.) *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1997), 310.

don't tell"¹⁵¹ If any homoeroticism became known, the standard response to it was 'don't ask, don't tell.' However, there were acceptable circumstances when sexual matters called for open discussion, for example in separate gender centred groupings. In these exceptional places where sex was discussed openly, I would like to argue that that is where not only practice but also discussions about homosexuality took place. From the gossip interviews I gathered intriguing information on the so called unAfrican sexual phenomenon. People opened up more when interviewed in a non-implicating environment where they were certain that no one would point a finger or accuse them for whatever they might have said. Being Shona myself I had an idea of how the system works; even though some subject matters may be deemed as unacceptable topics for public discussion, when people are in their gender groups anything goes. So using gossip as a method of collecting data I went from one group to the other gathering as much information as I possibly could by recording the conversations. Questions for this method were very random but relevant to my subject area. They were mainly meant just to prompt the discussion and some very intriguing information was gathered. For instance these are some of the responses I got when I asked a prompt question: "Why does talking about homosexuality seem to be a taboo, would you say it is not part of our culture or we just do not have such people among us?" To pick on just a few of the numerous comments that came up from different groups that are related to this section: "It is not really good manners is it? Lets face it, you will lose all your dignity. Your family will be dead embarrassed and you become the talk of the village, I am a lesbian though, we do lots of things together with my *sahwira* and it is easy to make excuses to go and spent the night at her place, we know we are safe as long as we do not brag about it, anywhere we know that

¹⁵¹ The dominant culture of the Shona places a strong taboo on sexual matters, especially unusual ones. Incest for example is treated with the utmost secrecy. It is shameful to discuss the mechanics of sex between men and women. Hence, the euphemistic allusions to sex in myths and in praise poetry. In a traditional Shona culture a woman was not supposed to look at her husband's genitals, nor was a man supposed to be curious about his wife's. *Zvainzi ukatarisa unoita showera*, (if you look at your husband/wife genitals you develop a blindness disease).

will only cause humiliation; Homosexuality is not a taboo if you know when and where to do it, you just don't make it a public affair; These things do happen and most of us know about it but it is a disgrace to expose things like that to outsiders; As for me I can stand on any public platform defending and protecting my family if anyone dares to expose anyone of them. Of course I have a relative whom I know for sure he is gay because he explained it to most of us, but because we have a responsibility as a family to protect our own we found a wife for him here in the village. He is in the city working most of the time but at least he can say he has got a wife back home. Of course he has got children, we just do not give the public something to talk about; Most of these teenagers want to experiment before they get into the real thing. As long as they get married people do not mind; Men need too much sex because they eat too much *mushonga* (traditional medicine understood to be aphrodisiac) so it is better that way, just to give the wife a break. Well to be honest, I am happy if my husband do not bother me with sex so often because after working so hard in the fields, you come back from the fields and do all the house chores including cooking whilst he is just relaxing drinking beer and chatting to his mates, the last thing on my mind would be sex; If you are born like that then sekuru Kaguvi can always sort you out; My uncles took me to one n'anga to have me sorted out. I was given all sorts of traditional herbs *akanditemera nyora* (showing me the scars on his face and arms that he sustained during the 'healing' process, thus *akanditemera nyora* refers to the process of administering traditional medicine by making incisions on skin and rubbing in the medicine), but I can tell you now I do not feel any different. I am married though as you might well know, with two kids. My wife knows but I do not think she understands as she does not even take it serious when I am explaining to her. Anywhere, I also have a partner, whom I have never asked much about his own situation but we see each other quite often and will continue to see him if he still loves me. We have been seeing each other now for about seven years he is also married with four children. Every one in my family

knows that he is my friend (*sahwira*), he comes to my place and I visit his place and we go places together. My family do know the extent of our friendship but they do not seem to comprehend what we are going through, they refer to our closeness as *misikanzwa* thus being naughty; I am not worried if that is what my wife is doing because I know she will not get pregnant; I do invite my girlfriend to come and spend the night with me a lot. She lives local and both our parents seem to think we are just good friends. We know we have to get married at some point but at the moment we are making the most of it, you know like what they say, make hay while the sun shines. At the moment no one seems to suspect anything untoward because about six of us sleep in that *nhanga* thus (a girls' sleeping house).”¹⁵²

The strict approach of maintaining silence on sexual matters, especially those that the society regard as appalling combined with the approach cited above by Marc Epprecht ‘don’t ask don’t tell’, made it very possible for gays and lesbians to have relationships while people pretended not to know, because society would rather have it that way. Apart from the fact that sex per se was a taboo subject, it is clear that homosexuality suffered a double fate. Thus there is evidence that the people are aware of homosexual practice among the Shona but would rather sweep it under the carpet. The silence on homosexuality then does not demonstrate its absence but its suppression as it was held as not compatible with the Shona culture. Traditionally since sexuality was generally presumed to be not a topic for public discussion except only in designated times and places, it was not out of the ordinary for people not to be talking about it because that was the norm. However, it is unfounded to dispute the historicity of homosexuality given the above facts.

¹⁵² These are a few collections from the gossip interviews. Most of the participants showed a knowledge of homosexual person as someone who sleeps with another man or woman as a passing phase of growing up or just as a sexual outlet. It was also portrayed as a curable illness or evil spirit that could be cast out. No one seemed to demonstrate any knowledge further than that. However the demonstrated knowledge was enough for the purposes of this work. It serves to place homosexuality within the Shona context and refutes all the public claims of the non-existence of the phenomenon.

3.2.3 Spirit possession and Witchcraft

Among the Shona same-sex relationships are associated with spirit possession or witchcraft. According to Bourdillon, when a spirit medium is possessed he or she assumes the specific gender mannerisms of the spirit: “What happens when a person is possessed is that, while still possessed, the medium speaks and acts the part of the spirit and behaves in a way that is markedly in contrast to his/her normal behaviour”¹⁵³ What sekuru Chifungo explained to me corresponds to what is elaborated by Mutema who cites homosexuality as one of the conditions that a *shave* (alien spirit) can impose on its host or hostess.¹⁵⁴ John Makoni claims that another alien spirit called *chikwambo* can inflict abnormal sexual behaviour on its victim and or demand the same of its host or hostess.¹⁵⁵ Spirit possession, in the Shona traditional religion, has the possibility of providing homosexual behaviour with a religious meaning and a cover from the ban placed on it.

Mr Mazhambe, a traditional healer, related to me how certain *makona* (medical charms) were made potent by the inclusion of a same-sex ritual in the preparation process.¹⁵⁶ He said that, since the *makona* are hereditary, the original family or clan head is usually the only one to undertake this procedure. The potency of the *makona* would be passed down the clan line with no further need to strengthen them by that same-sex ritual. Of the five main *makona* that he mentioned, *rekutonga* (for ruling), *rekurwa* (for fighting), *rekuvhima* (for hunting), *rekurapa* (for healing), *rekuroya* (for witchcraft), only *rekutonga* and *rekurwa* could be prepared using a same sex rite.

¹⁵³ Sekuru Chifungo, Interview December 2003.

¹⁵⁴ G. Mutema, *African Traditional Religion and GALZ* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996), 26.

¹⁵⁵ J. Makoni, *Chikwambo: A Cause for Division in Descended Families* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999), 24.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with T. Mazhambe, Harare, December 2003.

The rationale for the same-sex rite, according to Mazhambe, is that, *kutonga nekurwa makare kare kwaida hurume hwakapetwa kaviri* (ruling and fighting in the old days called for a ‘doubly-reinforced’ manhood). Therefore, anyone who aspired to be a ruler or a fighter would acquire for oneself a *gona* (singular for *makona*) that made him ‘twice a man.’ Mazhambe maintained that in traditional culture the same sex rite was only limited to this purpose and was therefore privy to very few individuals. He stressed that this is absolutely not a premise for homosexual behaviour, as we know it today. He attributes homosexuality among Shona people today to the rampant neglect and abuse (*kufumura*) of traditional cultural values.

Epprecht, writing on homosexuality in Zimbabwe, argues that the only possibility for women to avoid heterosexual marriage among the Shona was to become a healer or prophetess.¹⁵⁷ Moss, emphasising this point, wrote “Women thus gained status through their association with spirits. Spiritual possession was an affirmation that they controlled their greatest resource, themselves. Spirituality was not magic, it was a tool; they had to work with it. With spirits as their allies, they could overturn social and economic misfortune, but success depended upon their efforts”¹⁵⁸

Generally traditional healers do not regard homosexuality as part of indigenous culture and religion. They refute the tendency to deduce homosexuality from same-sex activities that occur only in specific therapeutic contexts. However, it can also be argued that it is possible that any self-affirmed homosexual can go through the same rite so that he/she can safely

¹⁵⁷ March Epprecht, “Good God Almighty, What is this!”: Homosexual “Crime” in Early Colonial Zimbabwe’, in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 202.

¹⁵⁸ Barbara A. Moss “And the Bones come Together”: Women’s Religious Expectations in Southern Africa, c 1900-1945. in *Journal of Religious History*, vol 23 (Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 111.

continue with same-sex practice without any suspicions from the community. Thus, one can argue that, among the Shona, homosexuality manifests itself through the very structures that have kept it out of the public sphere.

3.2.4 Marriage

The purpose and process of marriage has been discussed in detail in chapter two. However, in this section we are going to analyse how marriage as a traditional institution simultaneously camouflages as well as accommodates same sex relationships.

3.2.4.1 Children Socialised for Marriage

Traditional culture dictated that getting married and raising a family was an imperative vocation for all. At an early age, children are groomed to become committed partners in marriage.¹⁵⁹ As a part of their social formation, children adopt various sex roles that incidentally identify with the traditional gender divide. It was not a matter of choice but it came as a package. That is, as soon as a child is born into a Shona family, the society took it upon itself to instil its expectations into him/her. For those who would not abide by the society's norms and values, the elders always had ways of enforcing such values. In other words, from childhood, children were socialised into becoming *vanatete vakanaka nevana amai vakanaka* (responsible, reliable auntie and mother for girl) or *vana sekuru kana baba vakanaka* (responsible, reliable uncles and fathers). Therefore even though homosexual relationships could have existed, the child nurturing structures of the society suppressed it.

¹⁵⁹ Even though the children at reaching a marriageable age could choose whom they want to marry, they had to seek approval of their sekuru and vanatete first. There was no way a sexual relationship could go ahead without the blessings of these family elders. Therefore, a sexual relationship in this context could be described as 'an individual designation followed by vanatete or vana sekuru acclamation'.

When they attained sexual maturity, these youths become exposed to the nature of marital life with its duties and responsibilities such as nurturing children. The initiation ceremonies were tailored towards bringing to light the significance of personhood in regard to the continuity of humanity through procreation. At these initiation ceremonies special emphasis was placed on teaching the importance of a marital union in providing a home and a family to the offspring as well as for the smooth organisation of society. Young boys were taught to masturbate, for example - they were taken to a river by an adult experienced man. The motive was to test for virility by inducing the boys to ejaculate on water. When the sperm floated on the water it was an indication of subsequent impotency, while fertility was indicated by the semen's downward fall into the stream of water.

One can argue that mutual masturbation between boys could camouflage personal feelings of intimacy. Ultimately this could lead to a relationship, which would however be clandestine and not readily interpreted by society. By the same token, adult homosexual paedophiles would be protected from the public gaze since their molestation of young boys would be viewed within the perspective of the boys' developmental training.

In addition one can argue further that, normal development of genuine homosexuality could have been thwarted by an adaptation to heterosexually oriented initiation ceremony. However, homosexual practices could easily have been practiced within the initiation camps but dismissed as a transitory phase. Also, because boys always slept in their huts called *gota* and girls slept in their huts called *nhanga*, same sex practice could have started at a very early age of a child's development but be kept as a secret between the sexes.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, fear

¹⁶⁰ Attraction for man was not simply a question of accommodation conditions as is often alleged. An element of premeditation is perceptible. Van Onselen describes that in cramped huts, boys' naked bodies were often pressed together in intimate contact. And the common defence proffered if accidents did happen in such a situation was, *ndanga ndichirota*, 'I was dreaming.'

of the consequences of admitting were far too hard to deal with, it can be argued therefore that there was no choice for those initiates who might have been homosexually oriented except to abide by the rules.

The above socio-cultural facts may be argued to prove that same-sex practice among the Shona could have been going on but the authority patterns, structures and institutions made it absolutely clear what they expected any sexual relationship to be. However, that does not rule out the fact that homosexual practices were prevalent but not accepted as a model for sexual relationships, hence, they were suppressed.

3.2.4.2 The custom of *kupindira* or *kusika rudzi* and *musengabere*

The custom of *kupindira* shows the power of the (extended) family over the individual to induce conformity to social norms, particularly heterosexual norms. The custom of *kupindira* or *kusika rudzi* (raising seed on behalf of another) allowed an impotent husband to make an arrangement with a trusted relation to impregnate his wife for him. Thus a homosexual man could lead a culturally appropriate life with a wife and children.

The custom of legitimately kidnapping girls for marriage, “*musengabere*”, is a case in point. Recalcitrant girls could be subjected to forced and violent sexual intercourse, which was condoned by the family and community.¹⁶¹ It was the responsibility of the family to watch young men and women closely, and if they suspected anomalies in conforming to the heterosexual norm, measures such as *kupindira* or *musengabere* were taken. The fact that society had in place such marriage arrangements suggests that there were individuals who

¹⁶¹ Terence Mubaiwa, *My Coming Out Story*, GALZ Archives, Unpublished Document, 1997.

were not disposed to heterosexual relationships, therefore, a homosexual relationship could have been an alternative for them, but society suppressed, and never allowed this to happen.

3.2.5 Language

The problem of discussing homosexuality is compounded by the word homosexuality itself. Many Shona people deny the phenomenon of homosexuality to be indigenous on the basis that the word currently used to denote homosexuality in Shona (ngochani) seems to have a foreign origin. According to Marc Epprecht, documentary evidence for this word can be established as early as 1907.¹⁶² Epprecht also cites a connection to the Taberer Report of 1907 in South Africa, which posits that the word *izinkotshane* came from Shangaan. He argues that if the word *ngochani* derives from Ndebele or Ndau, then it could date back to the 1840s, when these languages were introduced into what is now Zimbabwe.¹⁶³ It is because of this word's foreign identity that many Shona reject the phenomenon as indigenous. However it can also be argued that in such a context where the culture tries by all means to conceal whatever they consider as against their cultural practice, other words could have been used which have no direct or obvious implications.

Thus, Epprecht argues that it is a possibility that of same-sex sexual attraction was covered up by using socially respectable words such as *sahwira* (an intimate friend), *tsvimborume* or *tsikombi* to refer to unmarried men and women respectively. Such words have been co-opted by the gay and lesbian community in Zimbabwe today. Given the taboos placed on sexuality by traditional religion and culture, the above information shows that it is inevitable that homosexuality became hidden behind respectable language.

¹⁶² M. Epprecht, 'Good God Almighty, What is this!: Homosexual Crime in Early Colonial Zimbabwe', in S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe, *Boys Wives and Female Husbands: Studies In African Homosexualities* (New York: Palgrave, 1998), 201.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

However, Chigweshe also notes that a Shona religious perspective identified men who would not marry as *zvitsinha*, which means, people with bad luck caused by alien spirits. Chigweshe further notes that such a spirit could be exorcised through the intermediary role of a traditional healer. The fact here is that the society had people who would rather not be married, the society explained it in the only terms that were available to them, but the explanations do not rule out the fact that that which the society could not explain could have been homosexuality. People had no knowledge of homosexual orientation as it is known today, especially in the West, where the awareness seems to be readily available.

3.2.6 Patriarchy

A prominent feature in traditional Shona culture was the distinguished role that men played in society. They were the leaders and decision-makers whilst women and children were viewed as minors. Thus the Shona can be argued to be a very patriarchal society where women are perpetual legal minors always subject to the guardianship of their husbands, fathers, uncles or brothers.

Notably, women and children's issues were not immediately recognised and articulated in society. As a result, occurrences such as same sex relations among women could go without being noticed by the males. Women's same sex relationships were inconspicuous to men because the former were considered to be sexually inferior. Their sexuality was a matter of relative insignificance to men, since their main role was to produce children and their need for sexual pleasure and gratification was evidently neglected in a state of polygamy. Apparently the men were at an advantage owing to the large number of offspring that

necessarily supported the family's needs in the subsistence economy. Also, the sexual appetite was taken care of through the cooperative work of his various wives.

However, the consequence of polygamy upon the sexuality of the groups of wives could be very bad. The women would undergo stress owing to unfulfilled sexual needs because the husband has to effect the roll call to each of his wives. Thus a situation can be conceived when out of sexual frustration the wives could turn to one another as they sought to support one another emotionally as well as physically. The emotional aspect of the relationship means that even within a heterosexual marriage union, a woman could still have affection from someone of the same sex. However because of the patriarchal system, men would not have paid attention. As a result, one can argue that the society propagated and nurtured homosexual relationships.

It can also be argued that among males at their *padare*, it seems the occurrence of homosexual practice seemed to have been recognised. The *padare* was a men's meeting point where issues were discussed, and whatever the deliberations of *padare* they were never to be discussed elsewhere; they were kept as a secret. Homosexual relationships between men however, were viewed with a stigma because it challenged the ideology of male supremacy within the patriarchal setting. What seems to be the assumption from an African perspective here is that in a gay relationship it is assumed that that at some point a male partner takes upon himself the role of a female, thereby undermining the superiority of men in a traditional setting. It was humiliating for a man to be seen to assume the position of a woman because of women's inferior position in society.

In retrospect, it can be asserted that homosexuality existed among the Shona. An examination of the facts has shown that sex taboos, marriage, language and patriarchy camouflaged phenomenal homosexual practices both directly as well as indirectly. The question that one might want to ask at this point is: How did the Shona almost successfully manage to keep the practice of homosexuality swept under the carpet for so long? The secret seems to lie in the fundamental nature of their traditional families as will be explored in detail in the next section of this chapter.

3.3 ESSENCE OF SHONA TRADITIONAL FAMILY: A PRELIMINARY GLIMPSE

3.3.1 The Nature of Shona Families

Traditionally, in the Shona society, the family finds its origin in marriage, which is an institutional sanction between man and woman who are both expected to perform and conform to societal norms. The primary function of the family is the production of legitimate offspring, their care and socialisation into the traditions and norms of society. The family also acquires a set of socially sanctioned statuses and roles through marriage.

From what has been explained in chapter two one can argue that to a certain extent, for most Shona people, the family is the most important group to which they belong. No individual decision can be carried out without the approval or blessings of the family. It provides intimate and enduring interaction and acts as a mediator between the individual family unit and the larger society from birth to death. The family transmits the traditional ways of the culture to each new generation. It is the primary socialising agent as well as a continuous force in shaping the course of one's life and offers unconditional protection. As long as one keeps close ties with the family, there is a guarantee for protection when things go wrong. It

is through the family that men and woman satisfy most of their sexual, emotional and affiliational needs. In Shona families, there are issues that are never discussed outside the family or divulged to those who are not family members. For example, a family member who is gay or lesbian was never to be exposed to the outsiders. The reasons for this protection were not only to protect the family name but it was also to protect their own from outside forces.

Children were raised in a very strict manner.¹⁶⁴ The duties assigned to them were meant to instil gender sensitivity in each of them as they grew. For example, boys would do chores like chopping firewood, thatching, herding cattle and girls assisted with domestic work. Thus, in a nutshell, boys were brought up to understand that they are the providers and protectors, not only for their families, but also for the society at large. On the other hand the girl-child's duties were meant to prepare her to become a good housewife. This idea of encouraging children to participate only in activities prescribed for their gender was even portrayed in their games and pastimes. Ellert demonstrates an example of such games in his book *The Material Culture of Zimbabwe*¹⁶⁵. This is a game called housekeeping (*mahumbwe*) where boys and girls, on reaching puberty, often gathered, under the supervision of adults, *kuti vatambe mahumbwe* (to play house). This game, *mahumbwe*, plays an essential part in preparing adolescents for their future roles in life. Makeshift huts were constructed by the boys who paired off with chosen girl friends. During the game, the girls stayed at home

¹⁶⁴ Mugambi explains the main goal of moral education in traditional African society as being responsible maturity. Moral education in traditional African society has three main objectives: Growth towards social responsibility; complete self-discipline; and understanding the inherited wisdom of the community as a whole so that a person does not unwillingly betray the secrets of his people but at the same time projects a positive image of his community to outsiders. Therefore in order for such objectives to be achieved concrete situations were provided, either by reference to actual individuals or fiction, which serve as cases for ethical analysis. Every evening children would gather with their parents and grandparents to discuss such stories. During the day they would apply the lessons learned at night. In that way the children would learn what life is about at a very early stage. J. K. Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman Kenya Ltd, 1989), 157.

¹⁶⁵ H. Ellert, *The Material Culture of Zimbabwe* (Harare: Longman Press, 1984), 128-129.

preparing food and carrying out household chores whilst the boys went hunting with their little spears, bows and arrows. The month-long *mahumbwe* ended with a special beer being brewed by the girls. Villagers and parents of the participants attended this final ceremony at the end of the game. Not only did the *mahumbwe* serve as an amusing pastime but it also marked an important coming of age and step towards marriage. Every child was expected to participate in this game, and those who showed no signs of interest, raised concern among the elders and were labelled as being possessed by an alien spirit, (*ane chivanhu, ane shave, ane mweya, haana kukwana, idzenga*).

Thus, in Shona society, the family provided the necessary link between society and the individual the family motivated the individual to serve the needs of the society and its members.¹⁶⁶ It is also important to note that because families lived in close proximity, families were able to monitor and determine the everyday interactional patterns of individual members. Thus, families could regulate and define social relationships. Division of labour between husband and wife served to enhance their dependency on one another, just as marriage of man to woman serves the development of reciprocal ties between family groups. Continued accumulation of reciprocal obligations linking man to woman, family to family and kinship groups to the wider social system is seen as the very basis for the social structure of Shona society.

But as we shall note later in this chapter, urbanisation stripped off some of the authority patterns of the traditional Shona family and society thereby weakening the family's authority structures, and consequently paved the way for the more open practice of homosexuality.

¹⁶⁶ Moral education in traditional Shona society is the concern of the whole community. The family is involved as a whole, but its teaching is reinforced by the community as a whole.

3.3.2 Authority Patterns Within The Traditional Family

The family had a great deal of power over the individual. The family, with its generations and relatives, controls and dominates the behaviour of individual family members. Thus, individual decisions were only acceptable if they had blessings from the extended family particularly the elders. This included such issues as deciding whom to marry and from which family.

As the young people approached puberty they would undergo systematic instruction to prepare them socially and psychologically for the forthcoming biological changes. They would know well in advance that soon they would be fertile and that fertility must be regulated by the moral consensus of the entire community. They would know who they were permitted to marry; they would also know what was expected of them as able bodied adults. Mugambi adds that this stage would culminate in the initiation ceremony, which was the graduation ceremony from childhood to adulthood.¹⁶⁷ The initiation ritual would be a corporate affair not a private ceremony. By the time the individual graduated into adulthood through initiation, he or she would know most of what there is to know about what society expected of him or her as far as moral standards were concerned. Before an individual, male or female, could be considered as having completed his or her moral education, he was expected to get successfully married and bring up their first child through all stages up to initiation. The initiation of someone's firstborn child was a great occasion.¹⁶⁸

Thus, elders held influential positions relating to all aspects of life. They were treated with respect and deference. The elders were the embodiment of customs and traditions. They

¹⁶⁷ J. N. K. Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman Kenya Ltd, 1989), 158.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

controlled the extended family system not only economically but also morally. Socially, they had authority not only over their children but over their grandchildren as well. The elders were looked upon as wise, pious and serene beings. The Shona have a saying “Old people do not tell lies.” The old women/men are much respected when they have no teeth left; they are thought to be filled with intelligence. Old people were highly revered because they played a significant role in defining and regulating social integration, moral and ritual activities. They were integrally connected to all facets of communal life. They were consulted before any major social or moral decision could be made, including the choice of sexual partners.

Young couples remained subordinate to the parental generation even after marriage. Each marriage had a tremendous influence on every member of both families of an engaged couple, causing significant ties between the personal relations of the families concerned.

3.3.3 The Nature of Residence

The traditional Shona family resides in a family compound based on lineage that traces its descents from the same male ancestor. The characteristic pattern of residence consisted of a group of sons and grandsons with their wives, children and descendants of the man who established the compound.

In cases where the man had more than one wife, each wife and their respective children would form a subsidiary household within the larger one, with the mother as the focal point of the children’s ties, loyalties, and affections. This then was the smallest family unit in the Shona pattern of kinship. The mother and her children formed part of the husband’s household, which in turn, was incorporated within several that resided within the same compound under the dominance of a single senior male. Individuals born in a village, were

raised there, were married there and worked on the land there, died and were buried there. Thus most of the people grew up together, living out their whole lives in one place and hence strong bonds were formed. The family influenced every aspect of an individual's life including sexuality.

It is also important to note that the relevance of the traditional family is still revered by most Shona people today. It is a past full of affectively close and stable families, a past in which the people lived in large and complex households, surrounded by large numbers of close and more distant relatives. With the advent of urbanisation, it seems, change within the traditional family was inevitable. The unavoidable question in relation to the subject of study at this point is: What aspects of urban life have had significant effects on Shona sexual life?

3.4 THE CHANGING SCENE: NATURE AND IMPACT OF URBANISATION ON TRADITIONAL SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

The discussion here revolves around the changes within Shona society that were precipitated by urbanisation and the impact of those changes on Shona traditional sexual relationships. Colonisation brought with it a new phenomenon of urbanisation with its monetary economy that sharply raised the need for most able-bodied men to move into towns to seek employment, leaving mostly women and children in the village, thereby creating a distinct new social set-up where initially gender became the determinant factor especially when it comes to living in the city. This influx, especially of men into towns significantly changed the dynamics of traditional social patterns. Thus men in cities were initially faced with a challenge of living in an almost all male environment while back in the village women were left also almost in the same situation. I would like to argue that this imbalance of sexes gave

way for a better setting for homosexual practice in the villages as well as the cities. My argument is that urbanisation did not bring about homosexual practice because it was already in existence; instead, unknowingly or knowingly, it created a scenario more conducive towards the practice.

3.4.1 Homosexual Practice: A Result of the Weakening Contacts Between Kin

Formerly, village society and family communities were not just simply the individual's point of integration with the world at large; they were the individual's world. Now with the advent of urbanisation it seems that traditional institutions appear to have been robbed of their moral obligation to the individual.¹⁶⁹

One of the consequences of urbanisation was the strain that was put on kinship ties. As explained earlier, initially the family lived in a closeknit setting, close to kith and kin who monitored the comings and goings of every individual member. However, in the cities, although the bonds of kinship were still emphasised, migrant labourers were free to choose the kinsmen with whom to associate and they were not constricted to maintain close contact with the immediate extended family. The absence of social 'cameras' gave leeway for individuals to get on with their life with less fear of being the talk of the village. Thus there was a lax in what Foucault refers to as sexual austerity. Sexual austerity "can be practiced through a long effort of learning, memorization, and assimilation of a systematic ensemble of precepts, and through a regular checking of conduct aimed at measuring the exactness with which one is applying rules."¹⁷⁰ The same applies back in the village where the women were now dominating, being in control and in charge.

¹⁶⁹ Men started to leave their homes to seek wage employment in the cities and mines. M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1982), 103.

¹⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality vol 2.*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 27.

The second example is noted by Bourdillon commenting on the effect of urbanisation on traditional Shona marriages. He noted some of the changing dynamics of marriages:

Marriages now are usually arranged by the couple concerned, their relatives having very little say in the choice of spouses. The bride price payments are made by the prospective husband to his bride's father and very few kin get involved. Often two families are completely unknown to each other, and may even be from different tribes: neither family has the traditional vested interest in bride-price cattle.¹⁷¹

As a result this was the dawn of a new era with completely new challenges for the whole community. These challenges had far reaching effects on most aspects of Shona life including sexual ethics.

3.4.2 Homosexual Practice: A Quest for Independence

As discussed above, the family plays a very central role in the sexual morals and development of its individuals. Hence, changes in the family precipitated either by internal factors or influenced by external processes of social change have serious ramifications for a society and its people. Traditionally, the nuclear family was incorporated into the all-embracing extended family. However, with urbanisation, a new ideology seems to have arisen that, to some extent, emphasises the independence of the individual as opposed to the extended family role.

To a certain extent, urbanisation seems to have brought with it some factors that gave rise to power for individuals. Consequently, the family experienced massive changes, to the extent that in recent years traditional marriage, family, and kinship systems in Shona societies have

¹⁷¹ M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press 1982), 335-336.

been the subject of intensive scrutiny and analysis. Bourdillon in his book, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* explains that the introduction of money into Shona marriage payments reduced the group aspect of marriage and made young men more independent of their families.¹⁷² I would like to argue here that urbanisation did not bring about the practice of homosexuality but the relaxed social grip on individual members paved the way for some degree of independence for people to go on with their business and be answerable to themselves.

Because of urbanisation, the complexity of attitudes and practices which made up the institution of Shona marriages still existed but was a little relaxed. Some practices were abandoned altogether. Others, though still regarded as essential, were made more difficult to carry out by modern conditions.¹⁷³ Besides, in modern conditions their consequences are sometimes very different from those they had in the traditional environment. Thus, certain effects follow wherever a money economy is substituted for a subsistence economy.

So with urbanisation, money took the place of goods in all kinds of exchange, thus in the case of marriage up until now, money has now replaced cows in payment for *roora*. Furthermore, the payment of *roora* is less community based or paid by joint effort; it is now mainly an individual effort. The transactions which money entered took on a more and more commercial character. Since there was no limit to the amount of desirable goods which could be obtained by money, persons whose position entitles them to demand gifts (*vana tezvara* / father in-law) tend to raise their demands higher and higher. The range of possessions regarded as necessities constantly increased to include things like shopping for suits for all of

¹⁷² Ibid., 335-336.

¹⁷³ The idea of maintaining kinship ties, though it seems to be very appealing, became very difficult because of distance and the travelling expenses involved if one has to get in touch with relatives. As a result people were forced to make do with what they could afford. This same approach is still maintained even up to this day.

the in-laws!¹⁷⁴ On this note then one can argue that a scenario had presented itself that provides some degree of refuge for gays using the ever-increasing cost of bride-prices as an excuse for not marrying. So, in other words, increased bride-prices have provided an extra protective cushion or a refuge for homosexuals. While it is a realistic situation that bride prices have rocketed, it also gives an authentic reason for a man to stay well clear out of marriage with not so much push from the family, because the families can no longer afford to assist in bride-wealth payments. Such a scenario provides a good excuse for remaining single. My argument here is not that someone chooses to be homosexual because they are running away from an expensive bride-price, but I am suggesting that the increase in bride-price must have been received as a blessing in disguise by homosexuals because to a certain extent it provides a reason for not getting married traditionally given the attitude of the people in this context to homosexuality. Even though the family may still mount pressure, they can no longer arrange a marriage if they are not paying. Thus, the family's authority over the individual has been relaxed.

Commenting in his book, *The Death of the Family*, David Cooper presents an impassioned denunciation of the family institution.¹⁷⁵ He maintains that this institution is stultifying and sometimes lethal for its members, because families tend to glue people together too much. He also claims that families instil social controls, which are too stringent and perpetuate an outmoded and elaborate set of taboos, which in reality are chains that prevent one from reaching one's true potential. If Cooper's argument is right, one could say that, the aspect of

¹⁷⁴ It is startling how the money economy has brought a whole new meaning to *roora* payment. Every now and then you hear families asking for items that were never part of the traditional *roora* payments. There are some cases of the families of educated daughters demanding *roora* to be paid in foreign currency and demanding exorbitant items ranging from 'shopping' to quality head to toe wardrobes which include suits, hats and shoes for the in-laws,. Some would go to the extent of demanding the receipt for the shopping, and if it cost less than what they expected then a top-up fee would be charged.

¹⁷⁵ David Cooper, *The Death of the Family* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972).

weakened family authority and increased bride-price due to the money economy come in handy for homosexuals.

3.4.3 Homosexual Practice: Urban Living Arrangements

The colonial administration initially viewed African workers in the towns as temporary residents; it did not have sufficient resources to comfortably accommodate them.¹⁷⁶ Thus, only men had to move to the city for job opportunities in the mines, farms and industries leaving women and children in the villages. In the cities it was not only the living accommodation that was problematic but the whole city environment. For example, men lived in shared accommodation where no women were allowed and to make sure that the policy was adhered to, the colonial government used to carry out random inspections.¹⁷⁷ At the workplaces it was an all male environment; the same applied to their social places like pubs and football pitches. As a result, in mostly same-sex environments like farms, mines, and townships, homosexual practice become overt. Epprecht notes that migrant workers who came to Zimbabwe in the early period of colonial rule also sometimes invoked ancient custom to defend their behaviour.¹⁷⁸ It seems apparent then that the colonial system provided a more enabling environment for the manifestation of an already existing homosexual practice.

¹⁷⁶ Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Keeping Houses in Lusaka* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 11.

¹⁷⁷ Chisamba singles were some of the houses constructed by the colonial government and were initially meant for men only. The nature of the houses were single roomed and to be shared between two males. That single room served not only as a bedroom but also a kitchen, dining and sitting room for the sharing men. As for bathing area and toilet, not a single house had a toilet for itself but at least eight or ten houses had a toilet area and open shower area. On an interview Munhongwa explained, "Because there used to be only four showers in our own area to be shared between almost twenty men, myself and three of my friends used to take shower late at night just to avoid congestion in the morning. It was not much of a great deal because back home we all used to wash ourselves by the river. It was only that the shower area was a bit confined, and we had to have your shower quick to give space to others."

¹⁷⁸ Epprecht M, 'Pre-Modern and Early Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa' in G. E. Maggerty, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality* (New York: Garland Press, 1988), 4.

3.4.4 Homosexual Practice: Unbalanced Sex Ratios

As noted above, initially married men were not welcome as tenants, so wives were left in the villages while the men and boys spent most of the time living and working in the city. Thus, consequently, an unbalanced age and sex structure were created both in the villages and the cities. The periods men stayed in the city tended to grow longer and longer thereby creating a possibility of sexual frustration not only for men in the city but also the women who were left back in the village. It is in such state of affairs that one can argue that homosexual practice was a survival strategy to cope with the sexual frustration of living in separation from their wives or husbands for a long time. The court case of Mushamba here gives a good example. When explaining his situation in court, Mushamba had this to say: “It was the need I was in through not being able to get a woman that tempted my heart and I made the boy Njebe to agree to become a woman for me”¹⁷⁹ Another case refers to a Malawian worker who, as his defence said “I do not deny the charge. In my country it is the custom to commit sodomy when we are unable to get a woman.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, one can say lack of ‘normal’ family life and convenient accommodation meant that the city dwellers had to create survival strategies, of which homosexual practice could have been one. However, for some it might have been a blessing in disguise because the distance between them meant, for once, they could ‘freely’ have homosexual relationships. It is in such a state of affairs that urbanisation is argued as facilitating or promoting homosexual practice among the Shona.

Nevertheless, because the colonial administrators initially viewed African workers in the towns as temporary residents whose purpose of being in the city was just for working, most of them became migrant workers, who oscillated from their village to the city every now and then. Thus, the majority of workers were short stay urban dwellers. Most of them continued

¹⁷⁹ Rex vs Mashamba, case 311 of 1.11.1923, Zimbabwe National Archives D3/37/8.

¹⁸⁰ Mbata, Testifying in Rex vs Jemwa, case 149 of 1921 (D3/10/2).

to participate in rural social and family events such as marriage and burial ceremonies, (both marriage and burial are treated with the uttermost respect and dignity if done in one's homeland, *kumusha*, not in the city). The rural family community remained as the urban migrant's last insurance when he or she encountered economic failure in town. Commenting on Africans in general, Aylward Shorter note, "African townspeople are still attached to their homeland in the rural area. When employment ceases they can return there. The old can go back there for a position of influence and esteem."¹⁸¹ All in all, net in-migration continues to grow rapidly and massively, although natural increase is beginning to take a larger share in the total growth of the urban population. The question one might ask at this point is what consequences this phenomenon has for the Shona people especially in relation to sexual life.

The motives that draw the migrant to the city are primarily economic. Those that draw him back to the rural homeland are primarily social and cultural. That is, because the migrant is an opportunist in a situation of intense job competition and often the job is casual, he can lose the job or be laid off hence the need to maintain links with the homeland. Again, migrants move from job to job, and from town to town, in order to improve their income. In this situation of transience and uncertainty the focus of interest remains the rural homeland.

Again, a Shona tribesman could build a house in Harare (the capital city), but never a 'home'; no genuine Shona would prefer to be married or buried outside his homeland. If this custom is flouted it is believed that the spirit of the deceased would haunt the living. The questions that one may now ask are: Why should a modern, educated urban dweller be subjected to the customs and beliefs of a rural village? Why should he not escape the structures of tribal tradition? Firstly, in the midst of the changes the rural village maintained its significance as

¹⁸¹ Aylward Shorter, *The Church in the African City* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 18.

the Shona's spiritual homeland – his ancestral land. Even up to this day the village and its kings and chiefs are still highly revered as the custodians of Shona culture; whatever they say is respected.¹⁸² However poverty stricken and depopulated it may be, it stands as a symbol of ultimate security where the Shona can be genuine, authentic and one hundred percent African without shame or apology, where they feel they really belong. Herein lies the reason why even the most urbanised Shona still maintain vital contacts with their villages and for the same reason one is compelled to obey the socially expected norms in sexual relationships. This is the reason why some, even with their newly found independence, both in the villages and the cities, still feel compelled to get married and raise a family just to avoid the disappointments of being labelled as a social misfit.

3.4.5 The attitude of the Colonial Government Towards Homosexuality

It is apparent that the systems of the colonial era (1890-1980) provided an enabling environment for homosexual practice. Court records and related material demonstrate a shift from a culture of concealment to one of publicising by making homosexual practice a criminal offence.¹⁸³ Initially an open court system was introduced, in opposition to the traditional concealed approach.¹⁸⁴ To this end then one can argue that the colonial approach initiated an awareness of the phenomenon of homosexuality to those who would have otherwise not have come into close conduct with a gay person since the tradition was to keep

¹⁸² Traditional chiefs as custodians of Shona culture add their weight to the popular view that homosexuality is a foreign phenomenon. Chief Makoni asked Parliament: "To meet a man and a woman, there is a purpose of producing children but if a man and a man meet what do they produce? I think isolation of the guilty creating some form of punishment will help. Whether it comes from donors, let them know that we do not accept money to bribe us in order for us to indulge in wrong things." Chief Mangwende shared Makoni's concern with the threat of homosexuality to reproduction. "Are we going to produce any children if we promote lesbianism? We can see that animals are behaving in a better way. Cows know that they have to go to bulls and the bulls know that they have to go to cows."

¹⁸³ A number of court cases here serve as evidence that people were now taking their cases to court and charges were made. The following examples can be given: Mbata, testifying in Rex vs Jenwa case 149 of 1921 (D3/10/2); Rex vs Mashumba case 311 of 1.11.1923 (D3/37/8).

¹⁸⁴ The adopted common law was the same as that which was in force in the Cape colony, the Roman Dutch law, which judges were obliged to follow. Green and D. West, eds., *Socio-Legal Control of Homosexual Behaviour* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1997), 31.

such persons under the confines of the family. Therefore, the criminalisation of homosexuality opened or enabled a significant spread of information and knowledge about the phenomenon. The subject became less hidden in the minds and experience of a considerable number of people. It should be noted here that the practice only become a crime when there was no consensus or when a problem arose and someone decided to take the issue up to the courts. But it can also be argued here that just as in heterosexual relationships, where the relationship is abusive surely one is bound to take it up with relevant social services. Homosexual cases presented in court were problematic. The fact is, introducing a criminal law does not rule out the fact that there were homosexual relationships which never reached the courts. On the same note, the fact that homosexual practice was regulated by society shows that it was not uncommon, for it can not be conceivable why a society would place regulatory measures on a non-existent sexual practice. However, going back to the court systems, initially issues of morality were determined in terms of previous South African court rulings, the Roman Dutch law which had almost no reference to Zimbabwe.¹⁸⁵

The Roman Dutch writers lumped all unnatural offences under the title sodomite or *venus monstrosa*. Sodomy and bestiality as they are today understood were not separate crimes, they were simply means of conducting *venus monstrosa*... constituted by the gratification of sexual lust in a manner contrary to the order of nature.¹⁸⁶

This was a law enforced with no consultation to the cultural perspectives of the people concerned. Such marginalisation of the indigenous input and viewpoint means that the common law was basically blind with respect to some of the African cultures as demonstrated by the case of a Malawian worker who was accused of homosexual acts and in defence he said: "I do not deny the charge. In my country it is the custom to commit sodomy when we

¹⁸⁵ Rhodesian Law Reports. Salisbury, 1939. p. 210.

¹⁸⁶ P.M.A. Hunt, South African Criminal Law Procedure 2nd ed., (Cape Town: Juta and Company, 1982), 267.

are unable to get a woman.”¹⁸⁷ However, that approach was later revised such that “By the first three years of the 1940s not even indecent charges were being tried anymore.”¹⁸⁸ This shows that the greater number of homosexual crimes were now being dealt with under the customary law which never kept any written documentation of the proceedings; as a result no records of their rulings were recorded. It is primarily through the lack of such records that some people would like to argue that there are no homosexuals among the Shona. There was a marked reversion from the open colonial approach to a typically traditionalist hushed approach whereby homosexual acts were viewed as a taboo and concealed from public knowledge. Explaining on the same note Epprecht rightly points out that “Homosexuality as a crime thus receded from the public gaze. It was tolerated when discreet and managed by vigilantism when not.”¹⁸⁹ One can note here that it can be argued then that even though homosexuality was criminalised during the colonial period, there was relative accommodation both in traditional culture as well as in government circles. This is so because even though those who were caught in the act could be fined, no immediate action was taken on the basis of mere suspicion. Thus, people who grew up during and after this period of relative concealment have remained oblivious to the existence of homosexual practice. It was during this period that the phenomenon’s status as a taboo was restored once more in traditional culture, mainly because it was now a criminal offence.

3.5 HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY ZIMBABWE

The way homosexuals organise their lives around their experience is fast becoming a significant part of the homosexual scene today. It was a move initiated by white

¹⁸⁷ Mbata, Testifying in Rex vs Jemwa, case 149 of 1921 (D3/10/2).

¹⁸⁸ National Archives of Zimbabwe. Section 235 of Circular 65 of 10 December 1934 from the Chief native Commissioner, C. L. Carbutt.

¹⁸⁹ M. Epprecht, *The Early History of Homosexual Behaviour*, op cit, p. 30

Zimbabweans consequently contributing to some people's claim that it is a Western phenomenon that found its way into Zimbabwe during the colonial period.¹⁹⁰ But as has been noted above, the practice seemed to have been prevalent in the culture before the colonial period. It was only in 1994 when the gay and lesbian community started organising themselves around political issues of identity, that their real problems started. A glimpse of some of the challenges they have to face are on their webpage:

the association's attempts to have its counselling advert published in the small columns of the state-controlled media had been frustrated and having appeared a couple of times on state radio, GALZ had been banned from the airwaves. In the same moment, the state had launched a virulent anti-gay campaign which allowed GALZ no space to respond and GALZ attempts to approach the independent media had back-fired with The Daily Gazette a sensational headline article "POLICE WARN HOMOS – Net is closing in!"¹⁹¹

This seems to be so because there was a deliberate move by the gay community to let their presence be felt. Venganai remarks that: "Upon gently peeping our heads into the public arena in 1994, we were slammed with a barrage of armoury that was totally out of proportion to the real size of the perceived enemy. We were seen as an affront, a serious danger to society in the same way that Blacks had been seen as a threat to white decency in colonial Zimbabwe."¹⁹² The emergence of homosexual clubs and the overt use of public houses as meeting places by the homosexual community led to some expressions of hostility and prejudice not only from the public but also the government and most especially the Church. The situation was even worse for black gays because when the organisation actually started in

¹⁹⁰ Keith Goddard, *Sexual Orientation and Zimbabwe's New Constitution: A Case for Inclusion*, (Harare: GALZ Publication, 2001), 5.

¹⁹¹ www.galz.co.zw/law.php, 11 June 2010.

¹⁹² Keith Goddard (2001) *Sexual Orientation and Zimbabwe's New Constitution: A Case for Inclusion*, (Harare: GALZ Publication, 2001), 17.

1990 it was exclusively white.¹⁹³ So in 1994 when black Zimbabweans joined this community (GALZ) they were branded as the puppets of the foreign white conspirators.

3.5.1 The Government and Homosexuality

The contemporary government's attitude towards homosexuality seems to be rooted in the assumption that this phenomenon is alien to Zimbabwean culture and was 'imported' from the West. The government sees its role as to safeguard its people's tradition from such influences, hence the far reaching attacks on gays and lesbians. In their effort to support the government, members of the Women's League organised a demonstration in which many people including university students took part. The demonstrators waved placards with messages such as, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve"¹⁹⁴ President Mugabe's stand was clearly supported by the Zimbabwean parliament, whose members saw the issue not as a question of individual rights but as a threat to culture and society. Parliamentarians were unanimous in branding homosexuality as an alien import of sick habits, as unnatural, against the will of God and the needs of reproduction.¹⁹⁵ Above all the newspapers rallied behind Mugabe. For example, the Sunday News praised him for his, "bold denunciation of homosexuals as undesirable sodomites"¹⁹⁶ The same page rejoiced, "University students and the Women's league have at last found something in common to agree on,"¹⁹⁷ The Chronicle characterised the government's action against GALZ as, "a refusal that all Africans who cherish their cultural identity – or what remains of it - should support unflinchingly."¹⁹⁸ Thus, the government's anti-gay attitude was seen as a position worthy of the support and

¹⁹³ B. Clark, "Zimbabwe" in R. Rosenbloom ed, *Unspoken rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights* (New York: Cassell Publishers, 1996), 331.

¹⁹⁴ M.Palmberg and C. Dunton, *Human rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*, The Sunday News, 1996, 12.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ M.Palmberg and C. Dunton, 'Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa,' Sunday News, Harare: 3 September 1995, 13.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., citing The Chronicle, 9 August 1995.

emulation of all who took their ‘African-ness’ seriously. The Zimbabwean government seems to have invariably maintained a strong position against homosexuality because of its control over state-run public media, and because of its threat to use force against dissension. The law has it that

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 intercourse that would be regarded by a reasonable person to be an indecent act, shall be guilty of sodomy and liable to a fine to or exceeding level fourteen or imprisonment not exceeding one year or both.¹⁹⁹

Without getting too much into the implication of this law, one can stop to note at least two aspects of it that can be debatable. The first and obvious aspect is that the law accords them no rights. Secondly, one might wonder what exactly is implied by ‘a reasonable person’? What is meant by this? Who exactly is a reasonable person and by whose and what standard? As previously mentioned I do not intend to go into detail to unveil some of the issues and challenges raised in relation to the law and homosexual practice, but these issues do bear consideration

3.5.2 Homosexuality and The Role of GALZ

GALZ understands and presents itself as a human rights group advocating for the full recognition in society of a wide array of human rights, particularly gay and lesbian rights.

This is clearly expressed in its Mission Statement

GALZ was formed... to provide gay men and lesbians in Zimbabwe with a network to facilitate communication within the gay community. It is primarily concerned with providing the community with social events. With the growing awareness of the needs of the gay community as a whole within the country, GALZ initiated a programme of outreach, which inevitably led to the organisation’s ‘outing’... Presently GALZ’s aim is to network broadly with other human rights organizations, the women’s movement, AIDS initiatives and regional associates. The objective is to increase awareness of gay rights in as

¹⁹⁹ www.galz.co.zw/law.php, 11 June 2010.

broad a forum as possible thereby integrating these rights with the other basic human rights for which civil society is currently battling.²⁰⁰

GALZ's self-understanding puts it side by side with other philanthropic organisations. As a non-governmental organisation (NGO), it seeks to complement government efforts to create an atmosphere conducive for human rights in society. GALZ believes that gay rights are human rights. But is that what the government and the general population of the country believe about the organisation? Is that what the Christian community believes? Are there any conflicting ideas in our understanding of God's rights and human rights? We shall return to this theological analysis in later chapters.

GALZ has evidently played a role in the coming out of Zimbabwean gays and lesbians. GALZ provide an alternative community, a family for those who have been ostracised by their own families and a shelter for those alienated and disenfranchised because of their sexuality. It is important to note that it seems many local homosexuals discover GALZ and eventually join it, after which they come to understand their sexual orientation more clearly. The stories of its members show that for some of them, they came to know more about feelings and experiences that had troubled them when they came to the organisation. In this regard then, GALZ offers a platform for self-discovery to people who are already experiencing their homosexuality without knowing what it is. They provide a centre for counselling and run programmes where gays/lesbians meet and interact. GALZ is therefore, not introducing a new experience, but rather helping to clarify an existing experience that is already there but scarcely understood. It is without doubt that homosexuality is a social reality among the Shona people. Shona gays and lesbians are also learning from homosexuals elsewhere, not how to be homosexuals, but rather how to gain a better understanding of their

²⁰⁰ GALZ internet Homepage: Available online: <http://www.galz.co.zw/aboutus.php>, 11 June 2010.

sexuality and how to organise themselves as a sexual minority in a predominantly patriarchal society.

3.5.3 Homosexual Practice: A Survival Strategy in Contemporary Zimbabwe

It is amazing how homosexual practice in the 20th century Zimbabwe acquired another meaning for the Shona people. There is an extent to which homosexuality is assumed to be a practice between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. Homosexuality seems to be understood more as a commercial enterprise initiated by those who are rich by using their money or goods in exchange for sex. It is a sorry situation that the unfortunate poor economic situation has driven some people to go to particular lengths which only contribute in portraying a distorted understanding of homosexuality. Homosexuality is assumed to be a commercial sex act undertaken by men to fend for their families.

Commercial sex is basically sex for money or goods. However, understood properly this is prostitution, of which there are far more heterosexual cases. Being gay and being a prostitute are two different things, for both gay and straight people can be prostitutes. The main issue seem to be that public awareness of homosexuality seems to have come at a time when the country is going through a tough economic period which has seen more people turning to the activities of the streets for survival. and unfortunately sex is one of them. Commercial sex has taken a particularly worrisome turn. It is a consequence of the violation of people’s human rights and this has become a major issue, especially in Zimbabwe where the rate of people dying of AIDS is so high. It is a matter of extreme poverty that is escalating by the day. Of major concern within this area is the matter of child abuse.

Let me here give this example of street children to explain my point. Street children are children who travelled from their rural homes and families to the city in the hope of a better way of life but unfortunately because of harsh economic conditions, a significant number of them end up on the streets.

Their lack of a normal family life means that street children must reinvent a family. They do this through their gang life. The street gangs are a form of socialisation by peers. They include parking boys, cigarette vendors, and market boys. To clarify my point I shall give an example of one village boy whom I followed to the city (Harare) when I met him at his uncle's compound. His uncle's intention was for me to pray for Todini so that he could come back to the village but Todini's argument was that there was nothing exciting for him in the village, he was better off in the city where he could hang out with his mates and raise some money to send to his village folks. In an attempt to convince his uncle that what he was doing in the city was not 'evil' as his uncle refers to it, Todini persuaded me to come to what he referred to as 'our corner.'²⁰¹ So as a matter of curiosity I made an appointment with him and arranged to follow him to Harare where he was based, so the following is the summary of what I gathered.

Todini, a seventeen-year-old leader of a gang, explained the operation of his gang.²⁰² According to him, his gang, called Kubatana, is composed of five members, one of whom is only eleven years old. As the eldest, the other boys seek his permission before embarking on most tasks and everyone in the gang has to be productive. Besides using each gang member

²⁰¹ When I followed Todini to Harare I soon learned that each gang operated from a specific area or corner as they were popularly referred to. Any infiltration or evasion of one's area is not normally taken lightly, in most cases it only serves to incite fights between different gang members. Each group adheres to a strict code of conduct and this ranges from dress to signs and other languages of communication so that they disguise themselves as well as distinguish themselves from members of other gangs.

²⁰² Interview with T. Todini, Harare, December, 2003.

to make money according to their talents each night they take turns to go out with “daddy to give him some company” (daddy is a very well-off man who seems to assume a father figure role to the gang while at the same time having sexual relations with them; in turn the boys are given money and a room to share so that they have somewhere to sleep at night and can have a wash every now and then). At the end of a good day the gang sometimes shares its earnings among the members or holds a party. Daddy takes on the role of a parent with Todini assuming the first-born child role, hence he carries with him the responsibilities that come with being a first born in a Shona family. The responsibilities include warning the younger boys against excessive drug taking or drinking or calling for ‘daddy’ to come and help them out in case of police arrests.

It also goes without saying that ‘decent’ people frown on the street children and their practices, which in most cases include thieving, drug taking – mostly glue - and loose sexual practices. However from Todini’s point of view their sexual relationships with ‘daddy’ seem to be survival strategies.²⁰³ He explained that it was of no use for him to stay in the village because his siblings would be looking up to him for food and all the basic necessities. With jobs getting scarcer by the day and more industries retrenching, for boys like him with very little education things can only get worse. So one can say, from the street children’s perspective, being with daddy is mainly a survival strategy rather than an expression of their sexuality. Unfortunately, it is this contemporary understanding that contributes to the majority of people’s perception of homosexuality - that homosexuals are child molesters.

The question that one may want to ask at this point is whether we have street girls who are also involved in same-sex relationships? From the few street girls interviewed, none of them

²⁰³ Interview with T. Todini, Harare, December, 2003.

seemed even to know that such practices exist except that they admitted to prostitution. From what was gathered during our brief discussion it seems that their getting involved in prostitution also serves to them as a survival strategy because in Mashonaland, “girls are seldom prostitutes from choice.”²⁰⁴ They may be using their only available asset, the ability to exploit the sexual proclivities of men to raise money for survival.

It can be argued, therefore, that all persons are dependent on the social organisation or resources that make human life possible, but when the society deprives a person of the resources needed the consequences can be unimaginable, and the sexual morality of street children is thereby explained. While it may not be reasonable to refer to the sexual practice of these street kids as evidence of homosexuality as we know it today, it may help us however to understand the general attitude of the Shona people and also the attitude of the Church. This will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

This type of sexual practice should only be best understood as abuse or paedophilia not homosexuality. It might be necessary at this point to note that even though homosexuals may be accused of child molestation there are no statistics yet to confirm if heterosexuals may be exempted from such accusations. There is no evidence to show that exclusively homosexuals abuse street children sexually. A paedophile can be either homosexual or heterosexual with an aggressive disorder; “Something is wrong in his ability to protect the self or pursue a goal without hurting another person. He has difficulty in understanding that he is acting in destructive ways toward others and does not understand the consequences of his aggression on others, especially in a society where there is so little accountability for such crimes.”²⁰⁵ Therefore, in reference to the case of Todini explained above, ‘daddy’ is an abuser

²⁰⁴ Aylward Shorter, *The Church in the African City* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 112.

²⁰⁵ James. N. Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 65.

irrespective of whether he is gay or straight. Unfortunately this is a context over-shadowed by such abusive scenarios where sexmongers certify their quest by preying on extreme economic situations thereby creating more confusion in a already muddled situation in terms of the general population's attitude towards homosexuality.

3.6 CONCLUSION

The considerations of this chapter strongly suggest that homosexual practice is indigenous to Zimbabwe but has been obscured historically in a variety of ways. In the pre-colonial period, homosexuality challenges and evinces itself through the very structures that have kept it out of the public spheres such as marriage, sexual taboos, the family, the patriarchal systems, language and spirit possession.

Although reliable statistics on how many were persuaded to resort to alternative sexual practices by urbanisation are difficult to obtain because research in this area from this context is still both complex and politically sensitive, the thesis that urbanisation and urban growth created an increased potential for alternative sexual practices such as homosexuality, is plausible. It seems however, that, the terminal crisis of social and economic disintegration constitutes additional causal factors for same-sex sexual practices in Zimbabwe. Thus, it can be argued that unknowingly the urban centres presented scenes or created pronounced environments which were favourable to same-sex practice.

The phenomenon of homosexuality among the Shona is not then new, but when viewed against a historical background where it was less visible, it may be argued that the Shona now lack the institutions and authority which were available in the past to handle what is clearly an equally or even more serious challenge in their community.

The colonial period weakened the powers of the traditional family and strengthened individualism thereby creating a cleavage between the family and its individual members. However, it would be quite wrong to see the pre-colonial family as one governed totally by collectivism and the need to survive, just as it would be wrong to see the modern family as one governed only by individualism and the pursuit of happiness. However, urbanisation saw the rise in emphasis on individual rights, which in turn seems to have promoted the rise in organised self-affirming homosexuals. Thus, it seems, there was a slight shift of emphasis from encouraging communal achievement to providing more, a context for the pursuit of personal happiness and the achievement of its members, as a prime goal.

During this period, two contrasting social organisations among the Shona emerged – the collectivism of the traditional tribal society, and the individualism of the industrial and commercial societies. In neither of them could the Shona find a full personal life. Hence, we find the migrant labor who oscillates between the town and the village. This social and cultural conflict is the most important characteristic of the Shona people's existence even up until today. Despite the practicality of maintaining kinship ties intact proving to be more and more difficult, many Shona people today still see the centrality of the village which is always referred to as home (*kumusha*) and the family as a social institution and that is the reason why they never cut ties with their rural relations.

On the other hand, it does not follow to argue that same sex practice among the Shona is a foreign phenomenon which was made known to the people during the colonial era. Even though the colonial government seemed to have created an environment that appeared to be more conducive to same sex sexual practices, it seems that, to a certain extent, they

maintained the same attitude to this phenomenon as the local people were doing, thus maintaining a culture of silence and punishing those caught in practice. Urbanisation therefore does not provide people with a completely new culture. Rather it gives people the consciousness of an unfulfilling extra cultural dimension, which is not easily integrated with traditional approaches. There is no doubt that urban living has a marked effect on a person's way of life. As has been shown in this chapter, living conditions and the imbalance of ages and sexes led to a disruption of the approved traditional sexual relationships. I now go to the next chapter which is an attempt to critique the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's approach to homosexuality.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE AND HOMOSEXUALITY: APPROACHES TO SEXUALITY ANALYSED

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter two it was noted that marriage among the Shona was regarded with paramount respect. The culture provided a way to get everyone into marriage. In chapter three we demonstrated that homosexuality was practiced among the Shona, but it was protected by a deeply embedded culture of discretion. Furthermore, it has also been demonstrated how urbanisation weakened the structural mechanisms of culture that constrained the manifestation of homosexuality and as a result facilitated the practice of homosexuality to a certain extent.

Chapter four seeks to map out the position of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe in relation to homosexuality. Up until today the Church has maintained an almost striking silence on the matter, but once it is known publicly that a member of the Church is gay, they are dismissed from the Church. The Church has almost no written documents with regard to its position. However, by analysing its approach to the broader concept of sexuality one can decode intriguing paradoxical insights, hence the purpose of this chapter. My argument here is that even though the Church from the time of its inception in Zimbabwe has been propagating a hetero-patriarchal approach patterned on the indigenous people's culture, it seems that, from the same structures, one can unearth pointers that can be argued as favourable to homosexuality. In other words homosexuality manifests itself through the same structures that are meant to suppress the phenomenon.

A brief background of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe will be given first followed by an analysis of the missionaries' approach to sexuality. After setting the Church firmly within its historical sexual background the chapter shall proceed to explore the contemporary Methodist Church's approach to sexuality. The last part of the chapter highlights the findings in relation to homosexuality and the Methodist Church.

4.2 THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe started in 1891, a century after the death of John Wesley, the co-founder of Methodism. This expansion of Methodism to Zimbabwe was not an isolated event, but was part of the expansion of the Methodist movement before and after Wesley's death to various parts of the world such as North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. The first Methodist missions on the African continent were begun in West Africa in 1792.²⁰⁶ The Methodists next established themselves in South Africa in 1816.²⁰⁷ The Methodist Missions in Zimbabwe were founded by Revs. Owen Watkins²⁰⁸ and Isaac Shimmin²⁰⁹ when they arrived at Fort Salisbury on 29 September 1891 from the Transvaal District²¹⁰ in South

²⁰⁶ Methodism was first introduced in Sierra Leone by Negro Methodist converts from Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1792. It was however not until 12 November 1811 that the first Methodist missionaries under the leadership of George Warren, arrived in Sierra Leone. C. J. M. Zvobgo, *A History of the Christian Missions in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991), 1.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Rev Owen Watkins was largely responsible for the expansion of Methodism in the Transvaal. He was born of Welsh Methodist parents near Manchester in 1842. After working for 13 years as a minister in England he was sent to South Africa. After serving for four years he was appointed the first district chairman of the Transvaal and Swaziland Mission in 1880. Watkins worked in this capacity until 1891 when the missionary committee in London decided to send him and the young minister, Isaac Shimmin, to pioneer the first Methodist missions in Mashonaland. Ibid., 17-18.

²⁰⁹ Isaac Shimmin was a young Methodist minister serving in South Africa as a missionary from the British Conference. He pleaded most strongly with the Missionary committee in London to be chosen as one of the first Methodist missionaries to Mashonaland (Zimbabwe). *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, Correspondence*, Transvaal, 1891 – 96, Shimmin to Hartley, 14 February 1891. However when the missionary committee in London chose Shimmin to pioneer the work in Mashonaland this decision was strongly opposed by other missionaries like Owen Watkins and Appelbe who also wanted to pioneer the work and argued that Shimmin was too young and inexperienced for such a venture. Ibid. Owens to Hartley, 21 March 1891; Appelbe to Hartley 18 April 1891.

Africa. During the first three decades (1859-89) these first missionaries in Transvaal found their work extremely hard and their efforts unfruitful. After more than twenty years of labouring in Matabeleland, the London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries made only twelve converts, who were baptised between 1881 and 1883.²¹¹

The first Methodist missionaries to Zimbabwe had learned from their previous experience in other African countries such as Sierra Leone, South Africa, the Gold Coast and Nigeria that the evangelisation of Africa could best be done by Africans witnessing to Africans.²¹² Shimmin wrote “The African is to be saved by Africans themselves. Under the careful and constant supervision of the minister, the native evangelist can become the most effective missionary, and especially in a country like Mashonaland.”²¹³ It was mainly because of this that the Methodist missionaries who first came to Zimbabwe brought with them African evangelists and teachers from the Transvaal and Cape colony where they had settled since 1816. These included Joseph Ramushu, Mudumedi Moleli, Samuel Tutani, Wellington H Belisi, James Anta and Daniel Mochuadi.²¹⁴ With the help of these South African evangelists, a number of mission stations were established in Mashonaland. These include Moleli, Woddilove, Sandringham, Kwenda, Chemhanza and Pakame. These stations were strategic

²¹⁰ Methodism in South Africa had its autonomous Conference in 1892. The Transvaal, however was a Boer territory, and it was felt expedient to retain Methodism here as a dependent extension of the Church in Britain. It was to Transvaal that the Methodist missionaries to Zimbabwe came hence they were under the auspices of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society based in London. J. Weller and J. Linden *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 81.

²¹¹ J. Weller and J. Linden *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 64. This is supported by Elliot *Gold from the Quartz*, (London: Kent and Company, 1910), 146-147.

²¹² C.J. Zvobgo, ‘An Overview of the Methodist Church,’ in Cnaan S. Banana, ed., *A Century of Methodism in Zimbabwe 1891-1991* (Harare: The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1991), 6.

²¹³ Ibid., 8-9. “We could find immediate work for a dozen at least native teachers at important centres. I hold the view very strongly that the best way to reach the natives is by the natives themselves, of course under English superintendence, that the more native evangelist we shall have up here the next year the better it will be for our work” Shimmin’s letter to Marshall Hartley, 29/11/91. in Brandon Graaff, *Mudumedi Moleli: Teacher, Evangelist and Martyr to Charity: Mashonaland 1892-96*. p. 20.

²¹⁴ C.J. Zvobgo, ‘An Overview of the Methodist Church’ in Cnaan S. Banana, ed., *A Century of Methodism in Zimbabwe 1891-1991* (Harare: The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1991), 7. Rev Brandon Graaff, *Mudumedi Moleli: Teacher, Evangelist and Martyr to Charity: Mashonaland 1892-96* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1962), 23.

points on which mission work was centred and also one of them, Sandringham area, is in the area on which my research is based.

4.3 MISSIONARIES AND HOMOSEXUALITY: ANALYSIS OF THEIR APPROACH TO SEXUALITY

For us to understand the attitude of the early Methodists in Zimbabwe to homosexuality we need to analyse and discuss the missionaries' approach to sexuality in relation to the African concept of sexuality. The missionaries did not make any record of homosexual activities during their period. Their silence about homosexuality in Zimbabwe gives the impression that it was not an issue or that there were no such people among the Shona. The latter cannot be true because we have learned in chapter three that homosexual practice among the Shona was known for a long time. Again in chapter three it has been noted how the colonial government dealt with those caught in practice and these incidents were reported as happening at the farms, mission schools, mines, prisons and townships to which the missionaries were connected. It would seem very unlikely that such a practice could have gone unnoticed by the missionaries. Maybe the missionaries could not detect any suspicious sexual relationships because "African men developed some strategies for coping with mission concerns, strategies that were more complex."²¹⁵

Otherwise one may want to argue that the fact that the mission-run Church was centred around men and male leadership gives the impression that missionaries were very patriarchal by nature.²¹⁶ A statement cited by Barbra Moss from the Reverend W. J. Noble, who was a

²¹⁵ Carol Summers "Mission boys, Civilised Men, and Marriage: Educated African Men in the Missions of Southern Rhodesia, 1920-1945", in *Journal of Religious History*, 23 (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 79.

²¹⁶ Ibid. In her attempt to explain the patriarchal nature of the missionaries Moss gave the following details: "Women missionaries did not function independently of men; those who did not know their place were forced to leave the mission field. Wesleyan depicted female insubordination as a fountain of domestic evil, synonymous with disrespect for the lord Himself. Relegated to domestic matters, termed 'woman's work,' they taught in

district superintendent, seems to shed more light; “when women missionaries are coming out, they belong to a Church order and they must walk by rule.”²¹⁷ Thus, the rules were gendered and dictated by the men. Therefore, the missionaries’ silence on homosexual practices probably indicates a reflexive defence of patriarchal, heterosexual masculinity. “Men getting physically intimate and perhaps emotional with other men was simply too viscerally threatening to the dominant ideology of male control, self-contentedness, and self-discipline for the representatives of order to bear.”²¹⁸ Therefore missionaries could have viewed homosexuality as a stigmatised behaviour because it challenged the idea of male supremacy and patriarchal hierarchy. I would like to argue, then, that in their effort to propagate heterosexuality, missionaries created a more conducive approach and environment for homosexual practice. Missionary approaches also created areas of conflict with the traditional approaches to some areas related to sexuality. To clarify this point further the following concepts will be analysed and points of conflict highlighted: Christian homes; education; marriage; *roora*; rites of passage and freedom of choice.

4.3.1 The Concept of Christian Homes

The Church, whose visible institutional presence was signified by the mission stations, was at the same time a civilising agent. To show that one was a Christian, one had to adopt the new ways of life and thought. The convert was expected to abandon their traditional way of life,

schools, conducted sewing and cooking classes, and religious training for African women. They were expected to act as models for African womanhood... African woman viewed religion as a resource; their cultural expectations reinforced missionary promises and facilitated Christian conversion. They filled the churches and provided most of the labour and energy to sustain them. Nevertheless, within patriarchal Christian churches foreign missionaries and African clergy ignored African women’s views.” Barbara A. Moss “And the Bones Come Together”: Women’s Religious Expectations in Southern Africa c1900-1945’, in *Journal of Religious History*, vol23 (Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 109; 112.

²¹⁷ Barbra Moss identifies some of the characteristics of early missionaries to Zimbabwe and their patriarchal approaches. Barbara A. Moss “And the Bones Come Together”: Women’s Religious Expectations in Southern Africa c1900-1945’, in *Journal of Religious History*, vol 23 (Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 108-27.

²¹⁸ March Epprecht, “Good God Almighty, What is this!”: Homosexual “Crime” in Early Colonial Zimbabwe in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (London: Haddon Craftsmen, 1998), 217.

detach themselves from unconverted relatives and friends and team up with fellow converts under the guidance of the missionary. For the missionary to achieve this challenge they introduced the concept of Christian homes whereby converts to Christianity had to stay on the mission farms. Thus Christianity came with the teaching that the Church was to be understood as a new family. This concept of a new family was not based on kinship, clans or ethnic identity. Neither was it based on racial origins or social status. Primarily, it was founded upon faith in Jesus Christ, and its cohesion was maintained within the Church, whose individual members were expected to live according to the new relationships as proclaimed by the Gospel. The concept of Christian homes became a new idea in Shona cultural life. Christian homes were to become the nuclei of the new wider family, the Church. The basic family unit became the husband, his wife and their children thus disregarding the significance of the extended family and, to some extent, encouraging individual decision-making as opposed to the traditional concept of consulting the elders before making major decisions. This weaning of individuals from their extended families was the genesis of individualism.

4.3.2 Education

Earlier in this chapter we noted that from their experience in other African countries missionaries had learned that the evangelisation of Africa was best performed by the African. Hence, on their arrival in Zimbabwe they were quick to set up schools on the mission farms. Those first recruited to the mission schools were young unmarried individuals.²¹⁹ The main objective of missionary education was religious, hence:

Moleli worked to develop an awareness...He believed that if individuals were personally touched with a sense of wrong committed, his call for submission to the biblical message as he

²¹⁹ This point is echoed by Samudzimu who observed that like all other religious societies in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, the Methodist Church's initial concern for the indigenous people was their conversion. Samudzimu. op cit. p. 81.

understood it would be stronger and more effective. It is for this reason that he brought to attention those aspects of Shona tradition most at variance with the Christian tradition namely polygamy, witchcraft, the right of a father to expect a girl to accept a marriage in spite of her feelings, the *mashave* ceremonies, and other ancestral rites.²²⁰

The fact that the major objective of missionary education was initially to recruit Church members who would in turn go out to evangelise their own people is quite evident from the extant literature.²²¹ By introducing schools they wanted to catch them young, and more often than not parents are emotionally attached to children and if children are indoctrinated parents will be persuaded to follow suit.

The initial link between the setting up of missions and education was strong²²² and when a mission station first opened, the preaching place was almost invariably accompanied by a school. “At this time religious and education work as we know it today was inextricably intertwined in one operation.”²²³ Usually a building that was put up to serve as a classroom during the weekdays was also used for Church services on Sundays. As Methodist schools became established on mission farms, provision was made for boarding accommodation to enable those who come from far to attend school. This was also to remove pupils from their ‘heathen’ environment.

²²⁰ Brandon Graaff, *Modumedi Moleli, Teacher, Evangelist and Martyr to Charity: Mashonaland 1892-96* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1998), 69.

²²¹ Zvobgo gives examples from various missions in Zimbabwe that illustrate this point. C.J. Zvobgo, ‘An Overview of the Methodist Church’ in Canaan S. Banana, ed., *A Century of Methodism in Zimbabwe 1891-1991* (Harare: The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1991), 149-50.

²²² Peaden argues that to the early communities, Church and school were identical and one could not be conceived without the other. The sense of identification was strengthened by the type of education. (p. 8). Peaden further says that because of this identification of Church and school “a community in accepting a school also accepted the church and in principle the things that the church stood for. By the same token when people gave their children to school they were also giving them to the church to a large extent.” W.R. Peaden, *Missionary Attitudes to Shona Culture* (Salisbury: Central African Historical Association, 1970), 11.

²²³ Brandon Graaff, *Modumedi Moleli, Teacher, Evangelist and Martyr to Charity: Mashonaland 1892-1996* (Gweru: Zimbabwe, 1988), 68.

Schools were important in achieving missionary objectives because it was regarded as easier to instil the new religion in the minds of the young. Writing on Moleli, Graaff observed that “His aim was to equip new Christians to read the scriptures for themselves, and this was the basic justifications for school work.”²²⁴ This emphasis on the young was expressed by Shimmin in a letter to Hartley on 18 May 1899 “It is with children that our main and indeed our sole hope of building up a Christian community in this country rest and from the beginning it is our aim to endeavour to provide them with a Christian education.”²²⁵

Another missionary objective was the destruction of African customs regarded as ‘heathen’. Peaden pointed out that “missionaries said quite frankly that schools would assist converts in developing the culture change considered necessary for the Christian life in a way which was not possible otherwise.”²²⁶ A spokesman for the southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference testified to the 1925 Education Commission the need for the eradication of traditional customs by substitution: “When you educate the native you weaken tribal customs, and in consequence unless we are careful to instil religion into the mind, as well as educating him we are taking away something without putting anything in its place.”²²⁷

When educating young boys one of the first objectives was to instil in them a ‘high’ conception of morality which was not possible in those who were older and set in their ways.²²⁸ To consolidate these high ideas it was thought necessary to keep the students as far away as possible from heathen influences.²²⁹ Secondly, it was thought that educating girls

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ *Wesleyan Methodist Society, Archives, Correspondence, 1889-1904*, Shimmin to Hartley, 18 May 1899.

²²⁶ W. R. Peaden, *Missionary Attitudes to Shona Culture* (Salisbury: Central African Historical Association, 1970), 9.

²²⁷ Ibid., 249.

²²⁸ The implication of this statement is clearly that the moral standards of the people were lower.

²²⁹ R. Sykes op cit. p 10.

would give them increased independence of mind.²³⁰ Thirdly, by increasing the horizons of the boys it was thought that it would encourage them to seek fulfilment in other ways.

To a large extent, the education system succeeded in weakening the traditional educational systems especially where morality was concerned. For example, the moral teachings that the boys and girls constantly received from uncles and aunts every day was reduced since they now had to spend most their time on the mission and go home only on school holidays. The boarding schools provided them hostels to sleep in which seemed to resemble the traditional *gota* (boys' sleeping room) and *nhanga* (girls sleeping room). The sleeping arrangements mirrored the traditional set-up where even older men also had their own place to spend some time socialising and at times sleeping (*kudare*). I would like to argue here that just as it was highly probable for homosexual relationships to take place in the gender-centred groupings within the traditional setting, the same can be said for the boarding school setting. Even though the missionaries were very much against homosexual practice, because a large number of students had to be accommodated, they ended up in gender-centred shared dormitories. One can argue that the missionary strategy on boarding accommodation served to create a more conducive environment for homosexual practice.

4.3.3 Marriage

Initially missionaries objected to the Shona traditional approach to marriage. 'Christian marriage' was presented as something totally different and even opposed to traditional forms of marriage. Marriage by 'heathen' custom was demonised and Church marriage was presented as the real thing. This failure to make connections with the existing understanding

²³⁰ Myenga *Rhodesia Missionary Advocate* Vol. 2 1911, 5. gives an example of a girl who appealed to the native Commissioner against her marriage to a polygamist; the appeal was granted and she was allowed to remain in school.

of marriage undermined the very foundations upon which the new Christian understanding was supposed to be built.

In the traditional Shona culture, marriage between two individuals was understood as a means of initiating or cementing the union of the households and clans to which the couple belonged. Hence the individual man and woman intending to marry needed the approval of their respective parents and relatives. For instance, we have learned from chapter two that marriage is a social responsibility in which the kin of the two bonding families are fully involved; it is a communal affair. That marriage is a process primarily sealed by the initial payment of bride wealth (*roora*) and the climax is the birth of a child, especially a male child. It is the basic principle by which the Shona understand sexual relationships.

However, the missionaries did not accept traditional marriages as Christian. Instead they made their Christian view of marriage a requirement for all those who desired to be members of the Methodist Church. The Christian wedding was introduced as a new experience in Shona cultural and religious life. Zvobgo referred to this rule when he wrote that:

No person could be a member of the Methodist church who did not accept the Christian view of marriage. All person converted to the Christian faith who desired to marry were required to take the Christian vows of marriage.²³¹

The same view was affirmed in 1919. One of the rules states that “We regard the solemnisation of marriage according to Christian rite as obligatory on all members, except in those cases where a previous polygamous arrangement makes this impossible.”²³²

²³¹ C.J. Zvobgo, ‘An Overview of the Methodist Church’ in Canaan S. Banana, ed., *A Century of Methodism in Zimbabwe 1891-1991* (Harare: The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1991), 112.

²³² Wesleyan Methodist Church, Directory of the Rhodesia District 1919, *Regulations Relating to Membership in the Methodist Church of Rhodesia* (Salisbury: Art Printing Works), 19.

Unlike the Shona traditional marriages which were celebrated within the bride's parent's compound or household, Christian marriages had to be celebrated in the Church following a liturgy that was new to Shona religious life. It was not only the liturgy that was new to the Shona but also the white bridal dress, wedding rings and cakes. The element of kissing in front of people during the wedding was not only new but abominable because it was not part of the Shona culture to perform such a sexual act publicly.

Nonetheless, the Shona accepted the Christian teaching about marriage and celebrated Christian weddings, only as the climax of the social marriage rite. That is, the Shona did not entirely abandon the traditional understanding of marriage. Consequently the Christian wedding came to be only one aspect of the Shona marriage rite. The first aspect was the traditional one, in which the kith and kin of the marrying couple would celebrate the inaugurated relationship irrespective of whether or not the Christians participated in this aspect of the wedding. This dual celebration of the marriage rite is an illustrative instance of the Shona Christians' adaptation of their understanding of the Gospel to their cultural tradition.

On another note, it can be argued that the introduction of Christian marriages among the Shona weakened the traditional marriage support systems and as a result paved the way to other sexual practices which were formerly prohibited by the society. The encouragement of individual choices and discouragement of consultation with family elders on matters of sexual relationships (marriage) seems to have weakened the social support systems for the Shona. As a result the way may have been paved, to some extent, for more people to engage in homosexual practices using their new found freedom. Therefore, in Zimbabwe to a certain

extent one can argue that the missionary approach to issues related to sexuality paved the way for and encouraged the development of homosexual practice.

4.3.4 *Roor*a/Bride Wealth

The Methodist missionaries also denounced the *roora* custom which they understood as the buying of women. Douglas Gray, a Methodist missionary, observed that “on account of the *roora* paid by the new man, the woman becomes to all intents and purposes, the property of her husband, and on his death she and the children are inherited by the nearest male relative.”²³³ Missionaries in other denominations in Zimbabwe also denounced *roora*.²³⁴ Peaden of the United Methodist Church says that, unlike the colonial administration, missionaries were opposed to polygamy and *roora* because “both were considered to degrade the status of women to that of a chattel or a servant. The feeling was so strong that attempts were made to influence the government to legislate for their abolition.”²³⁵ After unsuccessfully attempting to enlist Government support in suppressing polygamy and *roora* by force, the two customs persisted and for that reason the various Churches devised their own means of dealing with these customs.

²³³ Gray op cit p. 46. Richard Sykes, an Anglican missionary, concurred and said lobola was simply buying and selling of women. “The wives by native custom are bought for many heard of cattle, the great source of wealth an importance amongst the wild native tribes of South Africa, as indeed among all primitive races. The man therefore amongst them, who can purchase a number of wives, proves his wealth, his social luxuries, and so secures for himself importance in the eyes of his less fortunate neighbours” R Sykes, (April 1902), op cit pp. 56-7.

²³⁴ Fr. Richartz of the Catholic Church, for example, denounced lobola on the grounds that “It was simply buying of wives and had much in common with slave dealing since the girl’s wishes and inclinations were very often not considered at all and that it was not unusual for a girl to be forced into a marriage because her father had sold her when young and if she refused when she had grown up, her father would insist and might even torture his own daughter to make her agree. F Richartz, (November. 1898) Chishwasha After the Rebellion”, in *Zambesi Mission Record, (1898-1901), Vol. 1.* p. 63.

²³⁵ Peaden also makes reference to a resolution passed by the southern African Missionary Conference in 1915 and 1922 seeking the abolition of polygamy and lobola which clearly shows there was unanimity among different mission churches on their opposition to these aspects of African culture. W. R. Peaden, *Missionary Attitudes to Shona Culture* (Salisbury: Central African Historical Association, 1970), 4. Bhebe records that the colonial administration refused to give in to missionary pressure to abolish polygamy and roora because the secular power would not attack apparently harmless African practices simply because they did not conform to the requirements of the Christian life... the Government believed that to abolish roora and polygamy would be striking a blow at the whole African social and economic order, which was bound to provoke universal disaffection and dangerous unrest.”

Missionaries tried hard to discourage the payment of *roora* which they regarded as an aspect of a pernicious social concept of which men take advantage in order to enslave their wives, but were not very successful.²³⁶ There were several reasons for this. Firstly, not all the kith and kin of Shona embraced Christianity. Therefore, a Shona Christian wanting to get married peacefully had to obtain the approval of his relatives. Thus, a Christian convert who wanted to get married to a woman or man belonging to a non-Christian family would be obliged to go through all the traditional marriage transactions. For example, a man would be expected to contribute goods in kind (*roora*) such as cows and blankets to seal the marriage. If he was determined to marry he would have no option but to comply with the customs, although his Christian instruction might have taught him that such customs were heathen.

Secondly, because *roora* is not only for sealing relationships between the marrying families but also for appreciating the womb that will bear children for the husband, it was seen as being very disrespectful to stay with someone's daughter without paying *roora*. For every Shona man wishing to marry, paying *roora* is an obligation. On the same note because of the emphasis placed on procreation by the Shona, the missionaries experienced that the Christian marriage was in most cases delayed until the birth of the first child. This point is also noted by Bourdillon:

Many Shona are not prepared to go into a monogamous marriage, especially if there is no possibility of subsequent divorce, without first ascertaining that the proposed wife can bear children. The result was that many entered a church marriage only after the birth of the first child, a practice that conflicts with the morals taught by the churches. The missionaries brought a new understanding to the purpose of marriage.²³⁷

²³⁶ N. Bhebhe, *Christianity and African Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe 1859-1923* (Gweru: Longman, 1979), 113.

²³⁷ M.F.C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1976), 337.

Thirdly, *roora* brings some dignity to the wife and her family; therefore it is the pride of every Shona woman to have *roora* paid for their marriage. The more *roora* is paid the more she feels proud to be married. Even society treats her with dignity once they know that her parents charged a lot for her *roora*. For this reason therefore, no Shona would just let their daughter get married with no *roora*. If that happened, that family would become a laughing stock for the whole community. Having said that, there are still many couples who live together without paying *roora* first, however, the relationship is given other names. Such a relationship is referred to as *mapoto* and has already been discussed briefly in chapter two. This is a very base, immoral and humiliating relationship for the Shona. In most cases it is the woman who is accused of embarrassing herself and losing her self-respect.

However, since the missionaries discouraged *roora*, some individuals took heed of their teaching, hence cases were reported of families demanding a full payment of *roora* before burying their relative²³⁸. On the same note it can be argued that in Zimbabwe, some homosexual practices may have developed as a result of the missionaries' liberal approach to marriage. It can be argued that homosexual practice in Zimbabwe is a practice engaged in by men who felt liberated from the bondage of *roora*. Thus, even though *roora* payment is a communal effort, since all members of the family are obliged to contribute to it, it remains the bride's responsibility to see to it that everything requested has been paid. In most cases *roora* payment is not complete until very late in life. Therefore there may be some men who see it as a burden and wish to escape. As a result when missionaries discouraged *roora* some Shona men decided to grab the opportunity. And because Shona women are socialised to

²³⁸ In Zimbabwe in the event of a wife dying, the husband is expected to ask for permission for burial from his in-laws. He is not expected to contact the burial by himself because the wife is a 'foreigner'. It is only her blood relatives who have got rights over her body. So if *roora* has not been paid, the wife's family in most cases will demand its payment to the last penny before they agree to bury their daughter.

loathe the idea of living with a man as a married couple (co-habiting) with no *roora* paid to their families, homosexual relationships seem to be another alternative.

Another argument can be that because one of the significances of paying *roora* is a sign of gratitude for the womb that bare children, the idea of not having to pay *roora* must have been a great relief to contemporary gays and lesbians, since children are rarely realised within these relationships.

On the part of women the whole concept of *roora* may have instilled a number of negative feelings such as feeling as if they were being sold like slaves or being made to feel obliged to have children. An example of an argument that broke out during my interviews with the Sigaukes may help to clarify this point. “As for our family we only hope that the fifteen cattle didn’t drown in the Sakubva river”, snapped *mbuya* Sigauke, as if to imply that the bride price paid by her son is an investment which has to yield dividends by way of children. In response to *mbuya* Sigauke’s comment Takunda asked “What exactly do you mean *nhai mhai* (mother)?” *Mbuya* Sigauke fumed “What a pity, feeding an unproductive cow? All the cattle in my husbands’ kraal were swept away by the river?” *Mbuya* Sigauke’s comments bring to light the general social attitudes whose impact can be devastating on all women who cannot conceive. Consequently it can be argued that lesbianism in this context is practised as a protest against attitudes and beliefs that unwittingly underpin the patriarchal order.²³⁹ Even though we do not have written evidence of lesbians in the Zimbabwean context it seems most likely that relationships could have been formed in women’s gender segregated groupings.

Schmidt note that

²³⁹ It must be noted that not every Shona women appreciate the idea of huge amounts of lobola paid for them. I still recall how my sister reacted when she got married. My parents had made a very large request for lobola and my sister felt it was too much. Even though she tried to pursued my parents to reconsider their request, no one listened to her. As a gesture of her anger she ran away from the house and stayed with her husband, only coming back home after the birth of her first child.

Before colonialism intervened, African women occupied complex positions in their societies: important as farmers, revered as mothers, respected as spirit mediums, yet restricted by gender taboos, and silent in most public decision-making. However women were the glue which bound communities together...woman spent most of their time in gender- segregated groupings where they performed most of the daily tasks which kept the household viable.²⁴⁰

Thus for most part of the day women were left to do most of the work while men who were the leaders of the families, were ‘socialising’ with other men in the village. Therefore even though homosexual practice could have happened between women in their gender segregated groupings prior to the missionary period, the discouragement of *roora* by the missionaries could have been welcomed as a revolt against the domination of men. Therefore, it can be argued that the missionary approach to *roora* served to weaken the existing traditional cultural approach to marriage that seemed to have constrained the manifestation of homosexual practice for years in this context. It was an unconscious reinforcement of same-sex relationships.

4.3.5 Rites of Passage

Missionaries introduced new rituals concerning the growth of the individual in the context of the Church, from birth to death.

4.3.5.1 For Babies

With regard to birth, Christian parents were expected to take their newborn child to Church for thanksgiving. The ceremony of thanksgiving is an expression of appreciation to God for the gift of the child, for its safe delivery and the healthy condition of its mother. In the

²⁴⁰ Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives; Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992), 2. The same sentiments are expressed by Moss when she explains that women depended upon their own labour rather than on the men to whom they were related by birth or marriage. Self sufficiency was an essential part of their identity and it reinforced their sense of worth. Barbara A. Moss, “African Women’s Legacy: Ambiguity, Autonomy and Empowerment” in Kim Marie Vaz, ed., *Black Women in America* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 19.

ceremony the child and its parents are committed to God's care and guidance. Prayers are made that the child might grow up to be a prayerful Christian who would become an active member of the Church. Unlike the traditional thanksgiving which is spontaneous and extempore, the Christian liturgy is formally written and the parents are guided through it by the minister. Their response during the service is indicated in the liturgy. This ceremony continues to be an aspect of the life of the Church up until today, and in the Methodist Church it is conducted simultaneously with baptism.

The traditional rituals concerning the birth of a child were culturally different from those that came with Christianity. With the traditional approach of the naming ceremony, it was not the responsibility of the parents to choose if they want to have the ceremony or not, but as soon as a child is born in the village every member starts preparing for the naming ceremony, which is usually on the seventh day after the day of birth. Thus for the Shona, seven days after the child has been born relatives and friends would gather to celebrate not only its birth but also the name given, not by the child's immediate family, but by the eldest uncle in the extended family. During such gatherings the ancestral spirits are requested to protect and bless the child and guide him to grow in wisdom, courage, and generosity and in other values that are cherished by the community. Prayers of thanksgiving would include references to deity, spirits and ancestors. The ancestors would be beseeched to keep the child healthy and remove any curses that might negatively affect the child's life. The naming ceremony is considered of paramount importance for the sexual development of the child. If it is a boy child the community will start calling him father (*baba*) or uncle (*sekuru*) and a girl, mother (*mhai*) or auntie (*vatete*). This just goes to show the extent to which the Shona understand human sexuality. Emphasis is put on marriage and procreation from the moment a child is born.

With the Christening service, (Baptism) it was the choice of the parents to take their child for baptism or not. If they choose to have their child baptised, a god-parent was chosen who became the sponsor of the child at the ceremony. The god-parent is expected to ensure that the child whom he has sponsored for baptism is brought up in Christian instruction and that when the child grows up he will learn the catechism of the Church and be confirmed as a full member. According to the Methodist catechism the god-parents make three promises to God on behalf of the infant being baptised: (1) that while growing up the child will renounce the devil and fight evil, (2) that he will believe and hold fast the Christian faith and put his whole trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour; and (3) that he will obediently keep God's commandments and serve him faithfully, all the days of his life.²⁴¹

It seems the Shona people did not have any problems with the rite of baptism. However, they did not stop performing the naming ceremony. For the Shona, Christening was the climax of the naming ceremony. Even though the missionaries did not consider this naming ceremony to be Christian, they did not try to stop its practice. Instead they gave new English (Christian) names to all the Shona children brought in for baptism. However the Shona kept both the indigenous and the Christian names. The Christian name was more popularly used since it was easy for the missionary to pronounce.

One may want to argue that by renaming Shona children at baptism it implies that something was inherently wrong with the names that children received according to their customs. Yet the English names at Baptism were culturally linked to English traditional customs. The theological understanding of Baptism also springs to mind at this point. Is there any

²⁴¹ Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. *Nziyo DzeMethodist ne Minamoto* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1972), 324-329.

relationship between the sacrament of baptism and the cultural custom of naming? By associating baptism with naming the Shona was psychologically deprived of the power to name himself and the world as he understands it. This was a point of conflict which was culturally and not theologically motivated.

4.3.5.2 On Adolescence

Adolescence, marked outwardly by the physical changes of puberty, is another stage at which a rite of passage was to be performed. As discussed in Chapter two, the community prepares the adolescent socially, psychologically and religiously for the next stage of growth in the life of the community, thus adulthood.

In the initiation into adulthood, the adolescent is guided through a series of experiences contrived for that purpose, to learn the implications of the changes of puberty. The individual was expected by the community to conduct themselves responsibly, without degrading themselves and the family. Initiation rites were a means for the establishment of sexual identity and adult status. The rite includes a physical ordeal, which the adolescent is expected to go through courageously as proof of his readiness to leave childhood behind and enter adulthood with maturity. In some Shona communities, for example, circumcision is practised as part of the initiation rite. The education and training which is given at this stage is vital for the community's maintenance of its self-understanding, and for providing every individual with the opportunity to learn what the community expects of him.

Even though the missionaries were against some of the physical ordeals that the young initiates had to go through, very little could be done to stop them since they were performed out in the villages, not at the missionary centres. With the passage of time the Methodist

Church's approach to youth training was structured along the Shona method of training. For example, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's approach to the confirmation of youths seems to be patterned on the process and purpose of the Shona traditional initiation. Confirmation of youths in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe marks the end of childhood. It is also after confirmation that youths begin to participate as full members of the Church, being welcome to participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Confirmation signifies the beginning of a long educational process, which is aimed at preparing the youth for mature and responsible adulthood. Even though the admission into full membership of the Church does not involve any physical ordeals like those experienced during initiation ceremonies, there are catechetical procedures for the preparation of On-Trial members. The test for readiness for confirmation in the Church is not only age (13 years) but also the extent to which they understand the doctrines outlined in the catechism and their willingness to conduct themselves according to the expectations of the Church.

Thus, just as initiation in the Shona tradition is an inevitable stage in the social development of the individual, in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe all young people who have reached the age of 12 are prepared doctrinally for confirmation at the age of 13. The preparation mainly involves the recitation of the doctrines stated in the catechism. Thus, confirmation came to be the Methodist ritual through which the youths are progressively initiated into full membership in the Church. It is only after confirmation that youths are considered as full members of the Church. Although in the Church confirmation is an individual choice, it is not automatic that when youths reach the age of 12 they are confirmed, in the traditional system initiation was a social expectation which all had to go through. It was also a very physically painful process and an automatic turning point from childhood, where one was now expected

to behave like a grown up ready to start a family. This must have been a very daunting experience to the initiates, therefore the Christian approach must have been welcome.

4.3.6 Freedom of Choice

In the traditional setting of the Shona, no individual choice was implemented without blessings from the family because it was always a communal affair, never an individual affair, in most aspects of life. However, with the advent of Christianity among the Shona, religion was an individual choice, conversion was an individual decision, confirmation was an individual decision, education was an individual decision, living arrangements were an individual decision, getting married was an individual decision and having children was an individual decision. A little elaboration on the last two aspects can help to clarify this point further.

4.3.6.1 Marriage

As has been noted earlier, in the Shona tradition everyone was expected to get married and there were structures in place to assist those who delay in marriage. Firstly, they had the custom of *musengabere*²⁴² for women and *kupindira*²⁴³ for men. Secondly those who did not marry were stigmatised *tsikombi* for women and *tsvimborume* for men (these customs were discussed in detail in chapter three). Such people are said to have *zvitsinha* which means people with bad luck caused by alien spirits. “That woman could be sexually attracted to woman was even less admissible. The only possibility for a woman to avoid heterosexual

²⁴² Musengabere was a system that worked in two ways. Firstly, if a man loves a girl but is not confident enough to propose, he would arrange with his relatives and send a delegation of strong men to go and carry the girl from her parent’s home without the knowledge of either the girl or her parents. This is more like socially approved kidnapping! After a couple of days the young man’s family will send a delegation to inform the girl’s parents that they wish to marry their daughter. Secondly, the custom of Musengabere could also take place in the case of a girl late in marriage. Arrangements were made to carry the girl to her arranged husband.

²⁴³ Kupindira was a custom which also worked in two ways. Firstly, if a man delays in marriage the family will make arrangements with an interested girl and while the man is in bed a girl is brought in for him as his wife. Secondly, when a man is not able to have children the family will arrange without his knowledge that one of the relatives goes in and sleeps with the wife, until she conceives.

marriage leading to childbirth was to become a healer or prophetess”²⁴⁴ Rev Brandon Graaff noted that, at times the extent to which people were forced into marriage could be harsh:

Though extreme measures may have been rare, they were occasionally resorted to... an adamant daughter might be fastened to the ground and a fire built besides her and fanned until in sheer agony she consented to the arrangements. With the coming of the Christian teacher, the question became more complex and the girls began to ask, “Why should we leave our village with its Christian teacher, where we are each day learning about God who loves us; and go to a man we do not want to marry and live in a village where we will no longer be taught about God” One such girl fled to Moleli for protection.²⁴⁵

With the missionaries’ approach to marriage there was an option of getting married or not. Of course for missionaries homosexuality was unacceptable but their approach made it possible to conceal one’s homosexual orientation and still live peacefully under the protection of religious orders. Thus, without any obligation to marry, indigenous people with a homosexual inclination had room to develop relationships as long as they did not talk about it.

4.3.6.2 Children

Heterosexual marriage resulting in successful pregnancy was a vocation that children were taught from their earliest years. Epprecht clarifies that:

producing children was the defining characteristic of social adulthood for both woman and man. To remain childless or to be impotent was to remain a perpetual child oneself... For a woman or man to choose to elicit universal condemnation of family and community for the love of another man or woman was an absurd and dangerous life choice.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ ²⁴⁴ March Epprecht, ““Good God Almighty, What is this!”: Homosexual “Crime” in Early Colonial Zimbabwe” in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 202.

²⁴⁵ Brandon Graaff, *Mudomedi Moleli: Teacher, Evangelist and Martyr to Charity: Mashonaland 1892-96*. p. 79.

²⁴⁶ March Epprecht, “Good God Almighty, What is this!”: Homosexual “Crime” in Early Colonial Zimbabwe in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 202.

The logic behind having polygamous marriages was to maximise the probability of having children. However, the Christian practice of discouraging polygamy and encouraging lifelong monogamous marriages where having children can be optional was working to minimise the probability of having children. Procreation was no longer considered as the primary purpose of marriage. This view was in complete contrast with the Shona understanding. It can therefore be argued that, with children no longer central in sexual relationships, and having children now a matter of personal choice not obligation, an opportune scenario was created that homosexuals could have seized.

The argument here is that even though missionaries seemed to have been reticent on homosexuality, creative reading of the text can exhume very useful information that suggests otherwise, as demonstrated above.

4.4 CONTEMPORARY METHODIST CHURCH ATTITUDES TO HOMOSEXUALITY: ANALYSIS OF THEIR APPROACH TO SEXUALITY

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe does not seem to have any outlined position specifically on homosexuality. However, the Deed of Church Order and Standing Orders list homosexuality among other unacceptable practices: “Full members are expected to conduct themselves in a way which brings honour to the name of Jesus Christ. They must not practice drunkenness, immorality, drug abuse, homosexuality and gambling.”²⁴⁷ Of the whole Methodist Policy Document this is all there is. Nevertheless, analysing the Church’s approach to the whole concept of sexuality does help to decode and understand its approach. Therefore,

²⁴⁷ The Deed of Church and Order Standing Orders, mostly referred to as the Standing Orders, is the policy document for the Methodist church in Zimbabwe. As a policy document it serves as a guide for all administration purposes on most issues of the Church. *Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Deed of Church Order and Standing Order* (Harare: Research and Publication: 2009), 193.

to achieve this purpose, this chapter analyses some of the major Church structures and Church bodies and in the process identifies the place of homosexuality within them. Besides Church documents information drawn from interviews and questionnaires will be used as sources of information. In addition the researcher's experience of working in the Church is also helpful.

4.4.1 Approach to sexuality

The contemporary Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's approach to sexuality is patterned along the traditional Shona model of sex education. As noted in chapter two, the Shona model of sexuality is aimed at grooming its people into becoming responsible wives and husbands. Following the same concept and with the intention of achieving similar goals, the Church put in place structures aimed at achieving these objectives as will be discussed below. The membership of the Church will be discussed first then a few organisations within the Church will be discussed as a way of illustrating and elaborating on the Methodist Church's approach to sexuality and where homosexuality fits in within this perspective.

4.4.1.1 Church Membership

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe divides its membership into three categories: Full Members; On Trial members and Adherents.

4.4.1.1.1 Full Members

According to the Deed of Church Order and Standing Orders of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, the following are considered as full members of the Church:

namely (i) Those who confess Jesus Christ as lord and Savior and accept the obligations to serve Him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as full members. (ii) If not already baptized those seeking full membership and have not previously received Christian

Baptism shall be baptized either before or in connection with the service of confirmation or Reception into Full Membership. Children can only become full members of the church at the age of 12 years old after confirmation.²⁴⁸

Youths from 13 years of age and above, can be full members of the Church if (1) they are baptised and confirmed; (2) if not, are encouraged to attend classes for at least three months to learn about basic Christian principles and Church doctrine after which they can be baptised and confirmed as full members of the Methodist Church; (3) if they are under a disciplinary matter such as being pregnant or a single mother or in the case of a boy, having made a girl pregnant before marriage, they are to remain On-Trial members until such a time they get married according to the recommended standard.²⁴⁹

Adults can be full members of the Church if (1) they are baptised and confirmed; (2) If they are married to one wife or one husband; (3) In the case of polygamists, they remain as On-Trial members for ever or they can wed the first wife (*vahosi*) and divorce the rest; As for a woman from a polygamous marriage, she can be a full member of the Church only if she is the first wife otherwise she remains as an On-Trial member of the Church for ever; (4) Single and mature mothers can be full members of the Church after being assessed on their faith and commitment as On-Trial members for at least one year, as for single fathers they remain On-Trial members of the Church until they get a Christian wedding; (5) As for those who are married traditionally only the wife is accepted as a full member of the Church after an assessment for at least five years but the husband remains an On-Trial member until such a time he has a Christian wedding, if the husband is not a Christian the lady is assessed for at least five years as an On-Trial member, elderly ladies are asked especially to check on her marital status – that is if she is coming from a monogamous or polygamous marriage, if she is

²⁴⁸ *Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Deed of Church Order and Standing Order* (Harare: Research and Publication, 2009), 191.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 191-192.

really married or just co-habiting (*kubika mapoto*); (6) Those who are cohabiting are not accepted as full members of the Church until such a time when they get married.²⁵⁰

4.4.1.1.2 On Trial Members

These are members who desire to be prepared for reception into full membership of the Methodist Church. On Trial members are arranged into classes for training. This training takes a period of at least three months, depending on each individual case. After this probation period, those who have been examined and approved are admitted into full membership by the leaders meeting and publicly recognised at the earliest opportunity at a service to be known as the service of confirmation, or reception into full membership, preceded by the sacrament of Baptism, conducted by the Minister in the presence of the Church and including the sacrament of the Lord's supper.²⁵¹

4.4.1.1.3 Adherents

These are made up of:

- a) Members from other denominations who enjoy the fellowship of the Methodist church, be it on-trial members or full members of those churches, without any commitment to Methodist discipline.
- b) Members whose marriage falls out of the recommended acceptance in Standing Orders 900 (3). Standing Orders 900 (3) states that those to be received into full membership of the church must produce proof of marriage. Where no marriage certificate is available each case should be considered by the leaders' meeting. The meeting should verify that the marriage is life long, monogamous and has been stable for at least five years. Thus, polygamist men, men married traditionally (*roora*) but who did not have a Christian wedding, women from a polygamist marriage (starting from the second wife onwards).
- c) Those who come to the Methodist church for worship or fellowship but do not wish to become members.
- d) Disciplined members.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ *Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Deed of Church Order and Standing Order* (Harare: Research and Publication: 2009), 194-195.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 191

²⁵² *Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Deed of Church Order and Standing Order* (Harare: Research and Publication: 2009), 101-192.

Most of those who fall under the category of adherents are not allowed to participate in any of the sacraments, that is, Baptism and Holy Communion, mainly because they do not qualify. Adherence in the Methodist Church cannot take up any leadership role, that is from being a class leader to being ordained. They are not to take up leading responsibilities in any of the Church organisations such as Sunday school, Girls Christian Union (GCU), Boys Christian Union (BCU), Men's Christian Union (MCU) and Ruwadzano (Women's fellowship) because they are not regarded as active members of the Methodist Church.

It is evident from this brief structure of membership that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's approach to sexuality seems to be patterned along the people's culture, where only heterosexual relationships and marriage are accepted as the norm for sexual relationships. For those who are homosexuals, their place in the Methodist Church is on the peripheries of Church structures. That is they can come and worship but since their relationships are listed among the unacceptable practices, that means they cannot be full members but only Adherents of the Church.

Having said that, it is extremely difficult for self professed homosexuals to have the nerve to attend Church even as adherents because of the tensions one is bound to arouse. On the other hand if they keep their sexuality to themselves they can become full members of the Church and participate in all of the sacraments with no problem. For homosexuals the major problem is that they are forced by the Church to stay in the closet or live a lie. Coming out would mean risking being ostracised, not only by the Church but by the whole society of which the Church is a part. For the homosexual it is a question of choosing between the two 'devils': The first devil is being forced to live a lie and enjoy the benefits of socialising, interacting and having the privilege of being a full member of the Church, the second devil is being

honest by coming out but isolated and ostracised by the Church and society or even worse. The cost of being gay can be highly expensive.

4.4.1.2 Worship Discussed

When worshipping in Shona services of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, men and women sit separately. Mostly, men sit on the right and women on the left. It seems this seating arrangement has its roots in the traditional Shona culture where there is so much emphasis on gender-segregated groupings. In the traditional homes, women sit on the floor on the left side of the hut while men sit on a bench specially designed for them (*chigara vakwasha*) on the right side of the hut. The ladies can only sit on this bench if no men are in the house. The Methodist Church seemed to have borrowed the same principal where, in a Church where there are not enough pews, women sit on the floor to allow men to sit on the pews. It is very much a deep seated patriarchal Church in most respects. Nevertheless, it can be argued that just as same sex relationships were reported in gender segregated groupings in the traditional Shona society the same could be happening right there in the Church. This gender divide is not only reflected by the seating arrangements during worshipping services but also in the fellowship groups set up by the Church. A brief analysis of these groups would help to elaborate on this point.

4.4.1.3 The Organisations Discussed

According to the Shona culture sexual education is taught separately for boys and girls. The same pattern is reflected in the Church's Christian education system where sexual matters are concerned: they have put in place groups for boys and girls to be taught separately. These are the BCU and GCU organisations and they will be discussed in detail below.

4.4.1.3.1 The Boys Christian Union (BCU)

It has been pointed out earlier on that traditionally initiation was a long process involving the whole community and lasting at least several weeks. It was an integral part of community life in which the young boys of a particular age group were initiated into adulthood. Initiation marked the end of childhood and beginning of manhood. Although this traditional process of initiation was not adopted into the life of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, the whole educational programme for boys seems to be modelled around the traditional approach.

Thus in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, all boys are encouraged to be members of the Boys' Christian Union (BCU). This group is divided into two groups – junior BCU (ages 6 to 12) and senior BCU (ages 13 to 25). Lessons for the junior BCU are mainly aimed at encouraging the young boys to be gender sensitive, thus to appreciate themselves as boys who will one day grow up to be fathers. Emphasis is for the senior BCU is mainly aimed at them realising the beginning of their adulthood. Examples of such lessons are: Courtship; How to choose a girl for marriage; Where to meet an ideal partner; What to look for in a life partner; Characteristics of a perfect husband; Why it is important to get married; How to get married the Christian way. These are just some of the lessons that make up the syllabus for the BCU organisation. In these organisations they also have an advisor (*baba*)²⁵³ who supervises their activities and advises them where necessary. The advisor is also there to monitor their programmes, making sure that they meet the intended objectives, that is finding the right girl and getting married. If the advisor notices any untoward behaviour from the

²⁵³ While in the traditional setting uncles (*vana sekuru*) are expected to teach the boy child while the aunties (*vana tete*) are there for the girl child, in the Methodist church in Zimbabwe married elderly members of the church are chosen to teach the BCU and GCU members. Two men (*baba nasekuru*, thus an uncle figure and a grandfather figure) are chosen for the boys (BCU) and two women (*mai nambuya*, thus an auntie figure and a grandmother figure) for the girls (GCU). These elders are there to reinforce the expectations of the church, that is to educate and train the boys and girls to become responsible adults to be specific, thus responsible, 'wives and husbands'.

boys he would let the family and the minister in charge know so that appropriate action can be taken. This action mostly takes the form of counselling and prayers.

In most cases the intended results are achieved. However, statistical evidence from the circuit under study proves that most of the boys get married traditionally but for some reason very few make it to the Christian wedding.²⁵⁴ Just like in the Shona traditional setting, the Methodist Church also expects all its youths to get married and have children.²⁵⁵ Most Christian weddings in the Methodist Church take place after couples have had children first.²⁵⁶ This goes to show the centrality of children even among Shona Christians. The BCU education syllabus is designed in such a way that all members are groomed to marry. One may wonder if the Church by its approach to Christian education, is bullying its young boys into marriage. In relation to the topic under study, one can argue here that an all boys environment is good enough for those whose sexuality is not considered as appropriate by the Church to practice behind the religious orders without raising any eyebrows. In this case then, the Deed of the Church Order and Standing Order of the Methodist Church does enable same sex relationships, it just does not categorically state it.

²⁵⁴ From the 22 churches in Chivero circuit between 2001 and 2004, 233 young people were reported to have been married in the minutes of the quarterly Meetings. However, of these 233 marriages only 23 were reported to have had a Church wedding and the rest undertook the traditional Shona marriage only. Chivero circuit Minutes of the quarterly Meetings January 2001-January 2004.

²⁵⁵ In an interview with Rev Makwehe, a retired minister of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe, he emphasised the role of *baba* and *sekuru* (father figure and uncle figure) in the BCU as to persuade every boy to have a girl friend and get married, he used the Shona adage “*zirume risinganyengi hariroore*” which means if a boy does not make an effort to have a girl will remain a bachelor. And being a bachelor in Shona culture is not something to be proud of. So this is intended to encourage all boys to always be on the look-out. If once a boy is married from the BCU group, *baba* would still make follow-ups to the boy to see if ‘everything is going on well’ mainly if the wife is now pregnant, only when the wife has given birth to her first child that *baba* will stop visiting. Interview with Rev Makwehe, Sandringham Mission, Chivero Circuit. December 2003.

²⁵⁶ Of the 63 church weddings recorded in Chivero circuit between January 2001 and January 2004; 42 were recorded as having the wedding after having at least one child, 7 were pregnant and 14 were not pregnant. Minutes of the quarterly Meetings, Chivero circuit, January 2001 to January 2004.

4.4.1.3.2 The Girls Christian Union (GCU)

Shona Christians have continued to appreciate the importance of preparing their children for responsible and mature adulthood. Since it is obligatory for all adults to marry in traditional Shona society, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe intentionally designed its Christian education curriculum for girls to meet this particular requirement. Thus, by forming the Girls' Christian Union (GCU), a programme is specially designed to prepare the young girls in the Church to be conscious of not only the Church's expectation of them but also that of society, thus to get married. The curriculum for this organisation include programmes like the following: Where and how to choose a perfect husband; Praying for a husband; Health and hygiene; How to be presentable as a lady; Flower arrangement; Tidiness; What to look for in a good husband. They are taught a wide range of housekeeping duties including ironing, bed making, cooking, sewing, spring cleaning and a bit of gardening.

The nature of these lessons is meant to prepare the girls to be ready for marriage, to be responsible housewives. In order to achieve this aim, the educational syllabus is designed to utilise material from both Shona culture and the Bible. All the programmes are closely monitored by the girls' advisors *amai* and *ambuya*, (auntie figure and grandmother figure). Any untoward behaviour is reported to the family or the minister's wife who would advise as appropriate. All the girls are encouraged to introduce their boy friend to *amai* or *ambuya* who in turn will closely monitor their relationships. The main aim in the GCU is to get everyone into Christian marriages. Most of the girls do get married but not in the Church to begin with. For the majority of girls, it is only after they have had children that their husbands agree to the Church wedding. All the girls interviewed seemed to express that they would rather have the Church wedding before becoming mothers if it was their choice. However, in the Shona context it seems the man has the final decision as to when the Church wedding is to be held.

And, as noted earlier, since children are central in Shona marriages, men consciously delay Church marriages until such a time when they are convinced that the wife can have children. Consequently, the survival of a childless relationship is extremely low. Even though the Christian education syllabus for the girls seems to encourage the girls to get married one can also argue that by creating an all girls environments, the Church has unconsciously created a conducive environment where those with homosexual orientation can easily have their relationships camouflaged within the GCU organisation. Therefore, subtly, the Deed of Church Order does accommodate same sex relationships. It is not what it says but what it does not say, bearing in mind that this is a very secretive society when it comes to sexual matters.

It can be rightly concluded that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's youth organisational programmes and Christian education are consciously designed to encourage young people into marriages. Any divergence from the Church's teaching is faced with discipline which can be in the form of reducing a person's membership until they are ready to abide by the Church's regulations. The traditional approach to moral education, it appears, is viewed as compatible with the Christian community by the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. The common element between these organisations (BCU; GCU) is not only to create conducive environment to teach sexually related issues in a socially acceptable manner but also that they are patterned on the Shona traditional social structures of *gota* (BCU), and *nhanga* (GCU). However, it can be noted that, the Methodist Church in its frantic attempt to get its young people into marriage has created an environment favourable for same sex practice.

4.4.1.4 Marriage Discussed

Even without the contemporary emphasis on the indigenisation of Christianity, Shona Christians had already initiated ways of dealing with the challenges of accepting the new religion in the context of their culture. Christian doctrines and worship were accepted, but at the same time, some of the aspects of Shona culture which Shona Christians considered necessary were maintained by the Church. This includes the Shona understanding of marriage.

In its attempt to bridge the gap between the traditional approach to marriage and the missionary approach, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe came to an agreement where some of the basic principals of Shona marriages were accepted by the Conference. These include the payment of *roora*. The main reason for accepting the Shona concept of *roora* was that according to the tradition of the people marriage and *roora* are inextricably intertwined. Therefore, those accepted for marriage in the Church would have paid their bride-price, in other words married according to traditional customs first. This is the norm for all who aspire to be full members in the Methodist Church to this day. In other words, there is no way that, in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, couples can go through the Christian wedding without first going through the traditional marriage. It seems that the Christian wedding has become a culmination of the process of traditional marriage. The implication of this approach to sexual relationships is that, any sexual relationship that is frowned upon by Shona society cannot be blessed by the Church.

One more aspect to be noted is regarding virginity tests. This aspect has been briefly discussed in chapter two however, in this section I would like to elaborate on how this cultural aspect is reflected within the Church's approach to weddings. If a girl gets married

and her aunties know that she is a virgin, they will have the opportunity to show it to everyone at the wedding. That is, if she is a virgin on her wedding day she will walk down the aisle proudly showing off an egg²⁵⁷ as an indication that she is a virgin and for that she will have a standing ovation from all the people gathered for her wedding.

4.5 THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY: FINDINGS FROM QUESTIONNAIRES ANALYSED

In this section we are going to concentrate more on what was reflected in the responses from the questionnaires to determine the attitude to homosexuality among Methodist Christians. The survey was carried out in two ways: interviews and questionnaires. This section will look at the questionnaire survey. I decided to give a section on responses from the questionnaires because they were targeting specific individuals who were representative Church authorities. As explained in chapter one the intention for questionnaires was to capture qualified and focused responses on specific questions aiming to bring out and highlight the actual attitudes to homosexuality by the Methodist Church drawn from authoritative Methodist Church officials; hence I thought it significant for me to include a section here with some of the responses I received. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: Section A) asking fifteen questions with two possible answers to choose from for each and Section B) asking fifteen questions requiring short written responses. Even though I specified on the questionnaire for respondents not to indicate their names, a few of them chose to give their names. I also sent four questionnaires as attachments to retired ministers living in this circuit, who all responded. For those whom I send as an attachment by email it was also obvious that their

²⁵⁷ During the virginity test they slide an egg into the vagina. If the girl is a virgin it is argued that the egg is not supposed to be able to be inserted; if the egg can be inserted, then she is not a virgin.

names would be revealed. Nevertheless, in all cases for those who have been cited pseudonyms have been used in order to maintain anonymity. Both interviews and questionnaires were meant to establish the attitude of the Church to homosexuality and also reflect how the phenomenon is understood among the Shona.

4.5.1 Responses from the Questionnaire Briefly Analysed

4.5.1.1 Section A

In this section I will give a brief analysis of the outstanding responses out of the fifteen target questions given. These questions can easily be summarised into seven questions. Out of the condensed fifteen questions these are the seven summarised responses I received: 96% reported that homosexuality was foreign and 4% said it was indigenous. 98% indicated that the practice is not part of Shona culture and 2% indicated that it is in the Shona culture. 89% of the respondents indicated that homosexuality in Zimbabwe was a matter of individual choice and 11% indicated that it was given. 63% indicated that they knew someone who engaged in homosexual practice while 37% reported otherwise. 98% indicated that homosexuality is not part of God's creation, 2% indicated that it is part of God's creation. 98% indicated that a homosexual person cannot be a Christian while only 2% thought differently. On the question of whether the Methodist Church should allow gays and lesbians to be Church members, 99% gave a negative response and 1% said yes. The findings of this section give the impression that the phenomenon is generally known in this circuit because over 60% knew someone who was gay. They reflected that it is foreign, unacceptable and not compatible with Christianity and not acceptable in the Church and that the relationships cannot be acceptable as marriages. Therefore, judging from these responses one can say that even though the Church does not have any policy statement or document that explicitly lays out its position on homosexuality, its attitude is clearly portrayed from the findings from this

part of the questionnaire. The Church does not accept homosexuality. The reasons that seem to be able to be drawn from the questions provided are: God forbids homosexuality; homosexuals cannot be Christians; the practice of homosexuality is not part of Shona culture; the practice of homosexuality is foreign; people choose to be homosexuals and homosexual practice is a sin: Do these perceptions reflect the same results when analysed in relation to the following: the people's culture where sexuality is concerned; The social and ecclesiastical presentation of sexuality as well as the actual biblical presentation of the phenomenon?

If analysed here in relation to the discussion on the Shona concept of sexuality in chapter two; the development of homosexual practice among the Shona outlined in chapter three, as well as the practical actions of the Church, it helps to a certain extent in understanding the Church's approach to sexuality but at the same time presents a number of issues because of the ironies that seem to be prevalent some of which have already been discussed. Issues that are theological in nature will be dealt with in the next chapters. What this part of the questionnaire does highlight is that in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe those who practice homosexuality are seen as sinners who need repentance before they can qualify for a place in the Church.

4.5.1.2 Section B

From this section I have chosen to give just a few of the more outstanding responses to the fifteen questions. In response to the question "What is your understanding of homosexuality?" respondents showed their knowledge that it involves two members of the same sex. However, only two people seemed to indicate its relation to sexual orientation. The most outstanding was from Rev Mutisi who in his response wrote elaborated and showed his understanding was quite broad

Homosexuality is a sexual preference for persons of the same sex. The homosexual condition can either be inversion or pervasion: (a) Inversion - One's physiological or psychological makeup is such that his or her sexual orientation is gay or lesbian. However, while inversion itself may appear to be morally neutral the acts which it may give rise to, can be subjected to moral judgement in relation to the society's norms. (b) Pervasion - Homosexuality by pervasion is an alternative to heterosexuality. It is by choice. There are several factors to this:

- Some find themselves in such circumstances due to the disappointed failure to express their sexual needs to the opposite sex. As a result they turn to members of their own sex.
- Transitory experimentation. One may engage in homosexual acts but may adjust to heterosexuality later. In some cases it is not experimentation but a situation caused by some traumatic event or psychic disorder but may recover if help is rendered.
- Contingent homosexual practice. Men or woman isolated in barracks, schoolboys or girls in boarding school may engage in such practice. Contingent homosexual is situational. One may not engage in the same acts outside, for example barracks.
- Variational. Some people engage in homosexual acts out of curiosity or simply in quest of an easy means of sex.
- Commercial. Given the harsh economic climate some people are being lured into homosexuality by offers of money and material goods.²⁵⁸

However, Rev Mutisi represents a very small percentage of people who seem to have a wide perspective on homosexuality. Most of the respondents to this question gave only one sentence answers such as "Homosexuality is man sleeping with other man, those things men are now doing to feed their families; Homosexuality is the practice of sexual attraction, relationship and act of members of the same sex."²⁵⁹ It was interesting to note that respondents did not show a clear awareness of lesbian relationships.

To the question "Do you think a homosexual has any contribution to make in Church or society?" many responded that the only contribution that they have is negative. The following examples were given as contribution of gays and lesbians relationships: AIDS – one respondent even went to the extent of giving figures from the Zimbabwe National HIV/AIDS Organisation to support her point.²⁶⁰ Other example pointed out were child abuse, abuse of

²⁵⁸ Nyasha Mutisi, , *Questionnaire*. August 2004.

²⁵⁹ *Questionnaire*, August 2004.

²⁶⁰ According to the Zimbabwe National HIV/AIDS estimates for 2007, 2 214 adults and 240 children died per week in Zimbabwe in the year 2007 and this is a country with a population of 11 634 633, according to the 2002

power (examples of Members of Parliament were given as well as tourists), abuse of God's creative purpose and that they were "the devil's agents. Reverend Toriro wrote in her response that: A homosexual person has no contribution in Church and society because their behavioural practice undermines the norms and rights of the majority of Church and society"²⁶¹ But then, how authentic are these allegations? Is it true that homosexual practices contribute to the spread of AIDS? Are tourists gay? Is it true that homosexuals are child abusers? Does God approve or disapprove of any homosexual activities? What are the real issues at stake here? These are some of the questions that will help to inform our study in the next chapter.

The responses to the question, "What is the Church's approach to homosexuality?" showed that an surprising 89% did not seem to be certain of the Church's official position on homosexuality, however as members of the Church the majority indicated that they assumed that the Church should not approve. Some indicated that because they were aware of two prominent Church officials who were ministers in the Methodist Church, but were disciplined by the Church after being alleged of homosexual practice, this implies that the Methodist Church does not tolerate such practices. One respondent added that "The Church's approach is this approach by the Church is the right one for the sake of personal Holiness, social justice, ministry and mission of the Church as commanded by God and commissioned by Jesus Christ the Head of the Church Matthew 28:19-20. Furthermore, Leviticus 18 and 22 declares that homosexuality is an abomination before God"²⁶² A significant number argued that homosexuality is a threat to marriage and family. This view was supported by Rev Chamunorwa, who in his response echoed that:

census figures . the estimated HIV/AIDS prevalence in adult (ages 15-49years) for the year 2007 was 15.6%. (Zimbabwe Central statistics office, CSO).

²⁶¹ *Questionnaire*, August 2004. One respondent wrote that she/she could not think of any other contribution than seeing them as the devil's agents who are there to defeat God's plan on sexuality.

²⁶² *Questionnaire*. August 2004

The Church does not allow. The Church should reject all sexual expressions that damage the humanity God has given us, support should be given to sexual expressions that enhances humanity. Homosexual relationships are exploitative, destructive and abusive and are beyond the parameters of acceptable Christian behaviour and the Church should never support such behaviour, God forbids. NO. NO Homosexuality is a corruption of human sexuality, and a decay now eating away our society. The source of the problem is only perverted thinking which suggests that all people were wrong all along to suppose that only a man and a woman could be intimate, and start a family.²⁶³

Another question that I want to give to illustrate the Church's position is in relation to the following question: "Can homosexual relationships be marriages? Please explain why you say so". 99% of the respondents indicated that homosexual relationships cannot be marriages while 1% indicated that they can. I shall give just a couple of examples from the questionnaires: One of them wrote: Homosexual relationships cannot be legal marriages according to the Zimbabwean Laws, Church polity and Social Principals.²⁶⁴ Another one cited the Shona concept of marriage, especially as it relates to the aspect of bride-price payment and children

The Bible say obey your mother and father that is why as a Church we accept for Christian marriage only those who have blessings from their parents and this is done by paying *roora*. For this reason homosexual relationships can never be marriages. If governments and Church organisations do not stand strong against the homosexuality at this critical stage, the institution of marriage as we know it in Zimbabwe will cease to exist. Marriage is going to pay *roora* for your wife, a man can never be a wife, that is not normal, it is corrupting the order of nature. God created a man and a woman and commanded them to have children. This indicate what God want us as human beings to relate as sexual beings. The Bible says it clearly. The order of nature is being corrupted by the day, and with the order of nature corrupted, we can be sure that the wrath of God will be visited on all humanity with a severity that surpasses the current HIV-AIDS scourge, which is itself a product of immorality.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Rev Chamunorwa, *Questionnaire*. August 2004.

²⁶⁴ *Questionnaire*. August 2004.

²⁶⁵ *Questionnaire*. August 2004.

According to this view, to fight for the recognition of same sex relationships is to completely redefine the institution of marriage, to go against God and nature and to propagate immorality in the Church.

Most of the responses on the question: “Is homosexuality synonymous to sin?” showed that they believed homosexuality was synonymous to sin, with 98% giving very brief but straightforward answers such as “Homosexuality is synonymous to sin because it is disobedience to God’s commandments and statutes, through thought, word and action”.²⁶⁶

From those who made an effort to elaborate I will give here one example

Homosexuality is a sin but the Church should give them a chance to and an opportunity to participate in the life of the Church, the Church’s doors should be open to all. Homosexuality maybe undesirable to the Church but the homosexuals themselves must be seen as people in need of the Church’s help. The Church does not have to condone the practice in order to help them. Just as Jesus Christ showed interest and love in the marginalised the Church of today should do the same but without feeling compelled to condone their acts. There is need to fight homophobia among most of our Christians in this country. This phobia can be so intense in some people that they would not even want to discuss the subject, they say it is a disgrace for a Church to engage in such discussions. What if it is your child who has turned out to be gay? Will you allow people to walk all over him? We are all sinners, it only by his Grace to be called children of God. However, in this country the Church must focus on homosexuality in relation to poverty, prostitution and AIDS, for me these are the root problems.²⁶⁷

This response echoes the sentiments expressed by only a minority in the sense that, even though this respondent like the majority seems to express that homosexuality is a sin, where the majority go on to say that they should not be allowed as Church members, this respondent is saying they should be allowed to participate in the life of the Church. The response indicates that homosexuality is a pastoral concern that the Church needs to deal with. Some

²⁶⁶ *Questionnaire*. August 2004.

²⁶⁷ *Questionnaire*. August 2004.

of the reasons cited for homosexuality being a sin were noted as follows: That God forbids; that it is not natural²⁶⁸; that Bible condemns it²⁶⁹. For the other 2% three main reasons stood out: That no-one is perfect; that it was not for them to judge; that everyone is saved by God's grace.

One more question I used to demonstrate the Church's attitude to homosexuality was: "Do you think there is a possibility of change from being a homosexual to be straight? How?" 97% believe that it is possible to change. These are the major reasons given: Change of values and behaviour; need to repent of this sin; It is a choice, they can just stop; If gays and lesbians are made to realise the "problems they have caused" (examples of AIDS, child abuse and corruption were cited); prayer; counselling; 2% said that it was not possible to change since sexual orientation was a given. 1% indicated that they did not know. Therefore, judging by the majority of the responses on the question one can argue that for the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe homosexuality is understood to be an individual choice and that it is possible to change and be straight.

The outcome of the questionnaire helps to clarify, focus and identify the primary issues at stake in relation to the Church's attitude to homosexuality. However, the evidence from the Zimbabwe context is quite ambiguous. This is because homosexuality is not only identified with social-economic problems and AIDS, but is also explained as a survival strategy.²⁷⁰ In this scenerio one may wonder what the implications and challenges are for the Church, the

²⁶⁸ *Questionnaire*. August 2004. This respondent wrote that the Bible relates to the concept of human sexuality as only normal in a man-woman relationship.

²⁶⁹ *Questionnaire*. August 2004 One respondent wrote that "As far as the scriptures are concerned homosexuals are sinners and their practices are condemned. In its condemnation the bible does not make a distinction between inversion and pervasion." Interview, January 2004.

²⁷⁰ *Questionnaire*. August 2004. Commenting on the question of whether homosexuality in Zimbabwe was a problem, opportunity or blessing, a former Bishop pointed out that it was a problem but some mission Churches are hesitant to denounce the practice for fear of being refused assistance from their mother Churches overseas. They would rather remain silent as a Church and treat each case as it comes up.

society and the homosexual community. These findings bring out very challenging theological aspects for discussion that the next chapters will discuss.

4.6 CONCLUSION

A very significant point to note here is that it appears that Shona culture shows resilience in the sense that the basic Shona traditional values and ideas seem to be pertinent to the theological approach of the Methodist Church. While initial mission work to a certain extent seemed to have disrupted traditional Shona patterns of life, the matrix of that life has not been destroyed. The majority of Shona, irrespective of their levels of schooling, are still deeply rooted in their culture. As shown above sexuality is still socialised and institutionalised according to dominant heterosexual, marital and procreative models. This is evidenced by the Church's hetero-patriarchal structures and the intentionally set gender-segregated groupings that are prevalent in the Methodist Church and the emphasis of Shona concepts in the Church's Christian education curriculum.

However, it is also significant to note that that the establishment of Christianity among the Shona was also a process of acculturation²⁷¹ in the sense that Shona Christians, through encounter and interaction with the new religion which was already expressed in terms of another culture, acquired and developed a new way of life which was distinct from, but also related to, both the old and the new cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, missionaries did not introduce homosexual practice to the Shona, but one can argue that they paved way for and created an environment conducive for gay and lesbian relationships. My point here is that according to the analysis above, the rise in homosexual practice can be argued to be a result of cultural disruption. Thus, I beg to differ with the popular claim "that the collapse of the

²⁷¹ Acculturation is used in this section as "the process whereby an individual or group acquires the cultural characteristics of another through direct contact and interaction". A.H. Richmond, "Acculturation" in G. D. Mitchell, ed., *A Dictionary of Sociology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968).

tribal order is resulting in a new immorality”²⁷² There are deeply held myths on homosexuality among the Shona. Epprecht argues that such assertions

helps to perpetuate the dangerous myth that real Africans are exclusively heterosexual by nature. One consequence of allowing this myth to stand can be seen in the chauvinistic assertions of Zimbabwean leaders (that homosexuality is a white man’s disease or is spread by inferior tribes like the MaBlantre, the MaNyasa, the MaZambezi and so on).²⁷³

Constitutionally those who are homosexually oriented cannot be part of the Church.

The Methodist Church gives full moral approbation only to a heterosexual model for human sexuality and as such heterosexual marriage has been the norm in Shona tradition and is upheld within the Church as the model for Christian sexual relationships. Therefore, it can be concluded that for any sexual relationship to be acceptable within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe it has to meet the basic principles of a traditional marriage first. One wonders whether there are some girls and boys who feel that their sexuality is different from the majority but the existing Church organisations do not consider the needs of such individuals. There is a question of whether there is need to evaluate the concept of *roora* so that it incorporates homosexual relationships. But would it be practical for gays and lesbians to pay *roora* to seal their relations? Is the concept of Shona marriage applicable to gays and lesbian relationships in Zimbabwe? These are the real challenging questions in a Zimbabwean context.

It has also been noted that even though the structures put in place by the Church are meant to propagate heterosexual relationships as per patriarchal models, by the same structures gays

²⁷² Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), xvii.

²⁷³ March Epprecht, ““Good God Almighty, What is this!”: Homosexual “Crime” in Early Colonial Zimbabwe” in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, ed., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 199.

and lesbians can participate within the life of the Church whilst being protected by the religious system. That is, the same Deed of Church Order and Standing Order can be argued to protect that which it denounces. Even though Church policy documents, structures and organisations all appear to be devoid of any homosexual content, such an approach is not surprising since the Shona are very secretive on issues of sex and sexuality. However, a careful decoding and analysis exhumed insights that can be argued to be homosexual in nature. In other words, the culture as upheld by the Church does protect same-sex relationships embedded in its structures and approaches.

Now that it has been established that homosexual practice has been in existence in the Shona culture well before any foreign invasion and in this chapter theological issues have been raised, therefore, the next chapter is aimed at exploring and analysing the authenticity of the widely spread claims that God forbids homosexual practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The popularly used phrase by Church members in relation to homosexuality is ‘God forbids’ and this is meant in reference to the biblical presentation of the phenomenon. It is significant therefore, to analyse what the Bible really says in relation to homosexuality. Since many Western theologians from various backgrounds have extensively written on homosexuality, this chapter will refer to some of their published works for my analyses of the popular biblical references that were brought up in interviews. By using works already published to clarify my points, in a way the chapter also serve as a review of related literature. With this background then, this chapter will proceed to analyse how the Bible has been used as a measuring rod by the Church in Zimbabwe for its approach to sexual ethics. Since the inception of the Church, the Bible has successfully played a pivotal role in shaping the Church’s theological approaches to many aspects of life including issues related to sex and sexuality. One reason why this has been effective is the way the Shona seem to identify themselves with the biblical community’s approach to sexual matters. The approach adopted by the Church seems to mirror the biblical community in many ways. The questions one may want to ask are: If the Shona have so much in common with the biblical community does it imply then that the Bible is an all time handbook for Christians? Does the Bible provide Christians with clear cut ethical approaches? What really is the Bible?

Many scholars have defined the Bible in different ways. In this work however, it is not my intention to dwell on this question. In short, the Bible has been defined as “the scriptural

pillar of Christianity. For the Church and Christians, it is of supreme authority.”²⁷⁴ Dan O Van defines “the Bible to be the highest authority for Christians.”²⁷⁵ However, even though the scriptures are the primary guide from which Christians draw their models on sexual ethics, caution should be taken because biblical authority does not mean perfection, inerrancy, or complete consistency.²⁷⁶ Among the Shona, the widely held assumption among Christians seems to be that people who are homosexuals choose to be such and that if they just loved Jesus enough, they would stop the practice, because apparently the Bible condemns homosexuality. Very often you hear comments such as, *vanhu avanhu vahedeni chaivo* which means these people are real heathens. The implication of such comments is that being gay/lesbian becomes synonymous with sin, therefore they are all doomed to hell unless they repent. It is significant therefore, to explore critically first the Bible’s models of sex and sexuality before analysing what it says about homosexuality. This approach helps to set the phenomenon of homosexuality within the broader biblical context of sexuality, and in so doing, it puts the study into perspective.

5.2 THE BIBLE AND SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

5.2.1 Genesis 1-2

Right from the beginning the Bible seems to inform us that God approved sexual relationships in a heterosexual context. Male and female, says the Genesis story, he created them. And when God had finished his handiwork he saw that everything he had made,

²⁷⁴ Emmanuel Adow Obeng, ‘The Use of Biblical Critical Methods in Rooting the Scriptures in Africa’ in Hannah W. Kinoti and John M. Walliggo, eds., *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1997), 8; Dan O. Via notes that the Bible is the highest authority for Christians in theological and ethical matters. Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2003), 2.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2; 42. In the same book Robert A. Gagnon believes the scriptures to be the primary authority for faith and practice.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

including the maleness and femaleness was very good. That is the first and the most fundamental fact the Bible teaches about sexuality from Genesis 1 – 2.

This body of literature seems to present heterosexuality as divinely ordained by God. Hence the Church in its approach to sexual relationships sees itself as having a duty to implement and operate within this divine plan. Thus, the Church assumes heterosexuality as the right way for understanding human sexuality. For instance, the form of solemnisation of matrimony observed by the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe is one of the evidences as it presents marriages to be between a man and a woman (*murume ne mukadzi*).

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in Holy matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted by God; signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and his church... Eternal God, Creator and preserver of all mankind, giver of all spiritual grace. Send your blessings upon these your servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in your name, that Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant between them and may remain in perfect love and peace together...”²⁷⁷

This liturgy assumes marriages to be heterosexual. On the same note some theologians opine that Biblical traditions have only one God-given pattern for human sexuality which is heterosexual.²⁷⁸ Barth argues that the sexual constitution of the person as either male or female is intrinsic to the image of God, “man is directed to woman and woman to man each being for the other a horizon and focus... man proceeds from woman and woman from man

²⁷⁷ *The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Service Book* (Gweru, Mambo Press), 326.

²⁷⁸ Moberly argues that God did not create homosexuals as homosexuals, but as men and women who are intended to attain psychological maturity in their gender identity. “It is precisely because God has designed man and woman to be in his image that he wishes to deal with all that falls short of this, and to fulfil the normal process of growth. Through the fulfilment of same-sex needs, homosexuals are in the process of becoming what God intends for them.” Elizabeth R. Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1983), 30. Bailey writes “Ethically it is of utmost importance never to lose sight of the fact that marriage, whatever else it may be, is essentially a personal union of man and woman founded upon love. Sherwin Bailey *Common Sense About Sexual Ethics*, (London: Gollancz, 1962), 115.

each being for the other a centre and source... It is always in relationship to their opposite that man and woman are what they are in themselves.”²⁷⁹

What Barth has done is to make a radical interpretation of Genesis 2:18-25.²⁸⁰ What we need, argues Barth, is a complement – one of the opposite sex. “The primal form of humanity is co-humanity, meaning the covenanted relationship of a man and a woman. There is a creation pattern for human sexuality and that pattern is heterosexual”²⁸¹. In Genesis 1: 27 it is stated that; ‘God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ Understood in this sense therefore, sexual relationships are displayed not in individuality, not in man with man or woman with woman, but in man and woman. This seems to be in line with Seow’s argument that “Even though the text does not mention homosexuality, this passage is considered pivotal because it presumes a heterosexual norm: God created human kind as male and female.”²⁸² It is from this understanding of the concept of human creation drawn from the above-mentioned biblical passages that the Church draws and constructs its theology on sexual relationships. Hence the specific gender roles approach within the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe as noted in the previous chapter, which can be identified from their seating arrangement in Church, dress code and the structures of the Christian education offered to its members. This kind of approach is a conscious effort by the Church to instil in its members a sense to recognise heterosexual relationships as the only God given context of sexual relationship. Consequently, to engage in any different kind of sexual relationship becomes a deviation from God’s plan. Kisembo, an

²⁷⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 111/4 (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1960), 163.

²⁸⁰ Ibid..

²⁸¹ C. L. Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 17.

²⁸² Ibid., 20.

African theologian, argues that heterosexuality was part of God's intention in creation and normative for humankind.²⁸³

Nevertheless, to use the creation story to argue for heterosexuality as the exclusive norm is largely an argument from silence since very little is written on homosexuality. But then, if the Bible does not say much about a certain subject does it imply that it prohibits it? Heterosexuality may be the dominant form of sexual relationships, but does it follow to argue that it is the only acceptable context of sexual relationships? The fact that the Bible is almost silent about homosexuality does not imply that homosexuals were not in existence or they were not acceptable before God. One can argue that just as it is in the Shona culture, the biblical writers wanted to keep up appearances by presenting the biblical community according to the patriarchal standard. The implication of this approach is that any practice that proved otherwise was swept under the carpet or kept at the peripheries of their story lines, as with homosexuality.

It can also be argued that nowhere do the creation stories say anything about homosexuality as a sexual orientation. Our understanding of homosexuality as a psychosexual orientation is a relatively recent development that has not yet taken roots especially among the Shona, who roundly condemn and deplore homosexual acts as a deliberate perversion and a flouting of God's intention in creation, hence the denial by some Shona Christians that "there is no such thing as a person being born a homosexual, it is an immoral behaviour and manifestation of sin. *Hatidi vanhu vakadaro musvondo medu* (We shall not have such people in our Church).

²⁸³ B. Kisembo, *African Christian Marriage* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 115.

Why should the Church bless acts which deliberately pervert God's created order? These people need to repent of their homosexual sin.”²⁸⁴

However, it is important to highlight here that to suggest that heterosexuality is the sole biblical sexual relationship seems to be synonymous to concluding that God only gives blessings for heterosexual relationships. Scholars such as Seow would have problems with such assertions because he opines that not all truths about creation are recorded in Genesis 1-2. There are many truths about God that people may discern from observation of life and the world, and there are realities that may yet remain beyond human comprehension.²⁸⁵ In agreement with Seow I would like to add that such suggestions limit God and God's potential in the continuing creation of the world because God is omniscient. Omniscience points to God's uniqueness, otherness and his utter contrastingness with men. Omniscience “implies freedom from a single perspective, such as a characteristic of our human knowing, for God (Being) both transcends every perspective and occupies every perspective at once.”²⁸⁶ Analysed from this perspective homosexuality then, indicates the otherness of God that surpasses all understanding. Because the research is still going on, no school of thought has claimed a full comprehension of the phenomenon but studies are still going on in all fields of human sciences and it is this limitedness that distinguishes human knowledge from God.

5.2.2 The Model of a Sexual Relationship

Marriage as God ordained is described as the union of two in one flesh. The Hebrews believed it was the duty of all, as far as possible, to marry. Partners were found for young people by their parents, and it is probable that most were married soon after puberty. An unmarried man was not only considered an oddity, he was regarded as having failed in a clear

²⁸⁴ Rev Chindori. Interview, January 2003

²⁸⁵ C. L. Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 20.

²⁸⁶ John Macquarie, *Principals of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 206.

religious duty. The Bible also presents procreation as the primary purpose of sexual relationships (Gen 1-2). In the religion of the Hebrews, as the Old Testament describes it, sex played a central role. It was the means by which a man became a father; and becoming a father was without exception the most important event that happened in his entire life. It was an event, moreover, with religious significance.

For the Hebrew, sex was the means of procreation – literally, continuing the work of creation on behalf of God... A man was always identified as the son of his father. Through him the family line continued. The greatest tragedy that could befall him was for his line to die out, for his name to be forgotten.²⁸⁷

Thus fruitfulness was like a token of the divine blessings. David R. Mace emphasised that “We can summarize Hebrew teaching about sex in two simple statements. It is a gift of God, to be used and enjoyed as he directs; and its primary purpose is for procreation. These two concepts lie behind everything the Old Testament has to say about sex.”²⁸⁸ Thus since procreation was viewed as the continuation of God’s work, the Hebrews delighted in becoming parents. Given this frame of mind, it is easily recognisable why the Shona identify themselves with this Biblical community; consequently the Church patterned its theology on sex and sexuality to follow suit. It may not be surprising for a Church in a context where so much emphasis is put on child-bearing, a Church that exists in a society that would do whatever it takes to ensure that children are realised in any marriage, a Church that exists in a community that associates blessings with child bearing and curses childless marriages, a Church that operates among a people who strongly believe that getting married (heterosexually) is the normal thing to do and that remaining single is associated with being possessed by evil spirits (*ane chitsinha*).

²⁸⁷ David R. Mace, *The Christian Response to the Sexual Revolution*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1970), 18-20.

²⁸⁸ David R. Mace, *The Christian Response to the Sexual Revolution*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1970), 28-29.

A good number of studies such as Green, Seow, Gagnon, Thatcher and Stuart, have revealed that one of the motives for the strong condemnation of homosexual practices in the Old Testament was that these were seen as a threat to the preservation of the family group.²⁸⁹ Some scholars such as Chigwedere, arguing from an African perspective, have emphasised that the creation material in Genesis 1: 28, “God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and multiply,” assumes that humanity was created for the purpose of marriage and family²⁹⁰ and, even though procreation was not the only purpose, it is the primary purpose of it.²⁹¹ Therefore it was important for every man and woman in Israel to receive this life and pass it on in marriage. The conception and birth of another human being discloses the depth of meaning in human sexuality. Consequently, the changes that have taken place in people’s view of sex have been met with vehement opposition. Holloway suggests, “to affirm the homosexual way as an alternative... is to do something radical to the social consciousness as it affects the family”²⁹² Thus, even though there have been radical changes in family living arrangements as explained in chapter three, the family is still regarded with paramount importance.

In view of the emphasis on having children, it is not surprising that Old Testament law would frown on homosexual activity as such, from which no children come. Thus, any sexual relationship that does not result in the birth of a child seems to have very slim chances of survival both in the Hebrew and Shona communities. In both communities the fear seems to be that if a man dies childless, his line is ended, his major purpose in life unfulfilled, hence

²⁸⁹ M. Green, *The Church and Homosexuality: A Positive Answer to the Current Debate*, London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1980); C. L. Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); R. A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart, *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender* (Wiltshire: The Cromwell Press, 1996)

²⁹⁰ There is, however, a problem. According to Nelson, marriage is a calling, which not everyone receives. James B Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality And Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1979), 135.

²⁹¹ A. Chigwedere, *Lobola- The Pros and Cons* (Harare: Books For Africa, 1982), 12.

²⁹² Holloway, *The Church and Homosexuality: A Positive Answer to the Current Debate*, (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1980), 105.

the custom of levirate marriages where a brother of the dead man could deputise for him and give his wife a child. Since they were both the sons of the same father, the seed was essentially the same, and it could be reckoned to the dead brother. Procreation for the Hebrew community had the religious significance not only of carrying on the family name but, most important of all, of creating on behalf of God. So a relationship that does not achieve this religious purpose was likely to be frowned upon because it was like letting God down, and as a 'Chosen people' it instills the fear of God's curse. Therefore, any sexual relationship that would not achieve procreative purpose was most likely to be frowned upon by the Hebrew community. It can be concluded then that in both Shona and Hebrew context children are considered a blessing from God (Ps127:3), where the blessing of God in the land is depended on having children (Gen15:5). Indeed the hope of Jewish women is to bear the promised Messiah (Gen3:15; 4:1, 25) and that of the Shona is to keep the family name going. Procreation then becomes the primary purpose as far as sexual relationships are concerned. Nevertheless, though procreation is still highly regarded as a blessing among the Shona it seems that, to a large extent, it is no longer prestigious to have large families. Thus, verses such as "God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it," (Gen 1:28) have assumed a very different meaning. Also the cultural aspect of polygamy which was mainly aimed at maximising the number of one's children is fast disappearing.

Just like in the Shona society, for Hebrews, a wife's prestige was dependent on her ability to give her husband children. Thus, her role was to bear a man's children, and so give him immortality. To be a childless wife was the greatest tragedy that could befall a Hebrew woman, and when Rachel cried, "Give me children or I die", she was very near to despair. It was in giving her husband sons that a wife reached her full stature and fulfilled her destiny as a daughter of Israel.

But what was a Hebrew woman to do if her husband died before she could give him children? This tragedy could be redeemed. A brother of the dead man could deputise for him and give his wife a child. Since they were both sons of the same father, the seed was essentially the same, and it could be reckoned to the dead brother. It is a means by which a man restored immortality to his dead brother and rescued his name from oblivion. The story of Onan in Genesis 38 can be a good example. The sin of Onan was not masturbation but a heartless rejection of his duty to his dead brother Er. As required, he had sexual intercourse with Tamar, his brother's widow, but he practised a mean deception by trying to avoid making her pregnant through withdrawing his penis and spilling his seed on the ground. This action, insulting to Tamar and deplorably disloyal to his dead brother, was considered so sinful that God punished Onan by taking his life.

Judah, the father of Er and Onan, having lost two sons, was unwilling to risk his only surviving heir Shelah, having any encounter with Tamar whom he considered dangerous. But Tamar, determined to save her dead husband's name from extinction managed to have intercourse with Judah himself. Judah, confronted with the fact, acknowledged that her action was justified.

This custom of deputising in the case of a dead brother can be likened to the Shona custom of *kugara nhaka*. The custom has it that in the case of death, a brother has the right in agreement with his brother's wife as well as the whole extended family, to come in and take on the responsibilities of his deceased brother's family. He is expected to look after the family as his own and this includes his brother's wife. Children born out of this relationship belong to his dead brother.

The book of Ruth is another Bible story that makes sense primarily when its sexual significance is understood. Ruth is praised for her determination to find a near kinsman of her husband and secure a son to continue his line. As in the story of Tamar, in the absence of a brother the duty of the levirate was extended to the nearest male relative. It can be concluded then that in both the Shona and the Hebrew context, barrenness is seen as a curse (Gen16:1; 1Sam1:3-8).

5.3 The Bible and Homosexuality: A Critical Theological Analysis

Taken at face value, the Bible seems to present us with a consistent mono-sexual ethic. Nevertheless, through an analysis using mainly the historical critical method, one can see that it is not easy to sum up the basic teaching of the Bible on the subject in terms that can conclusively be applied to the conditions of our life today. An evaluation of the biblical presentation of homosexuality will now be presented to clarify this point followed by a highlighting of the major themes that can be married up to the Zimbabwean context. This is a two-part section in which the first part presents the biblical perspective where homosexuality is mentioned and the second part identifies and analyses major areas of theological contention in relation to the Shona.

Five texts are generally agreed specifically to address homosexual behaviour. They are: Genesis 19: 1-29; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-28; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; and 1Timothy 1:9-10. The fact that the above mentioned passages were indicated by most of those interviewed makes it imperative to have at least a brief analysis of these biblical texts. The people echoed statements such as: “God forbids! That there is no such thing as homosexual relationships in the Bible; God intends all human beings to be heterosexual,

sexual fulfillment is exclusively the right of heterosexual and that homosexual act is sinful and contrary to God's plan." Some even went to the extent of attributing the current economic and health problems in Zimbabwe to homosexual practices, implying that God was punishing the nation for "letting such a thing to happen" and a disregard for Biblical teachings on morality. It is highly significant therefore, that we briefly analyse and evaluate some of the popularly biblical texts used against homosexuality and see what we can draw from them. These texts have been thoroughly discussed by prominent scholars of different theological backgrounds and this chapter intends to analyse some of the outstanding views gathered from the interviews in light of what other scholars have already written. In the process I will be highlighting issues that stand out as unique to the Zimbabwean context.

5.3.1 The Biblical Perspective Presented

5.3.1.1 Genesis 19:1-29 (Sodom and Gomorrah with Ezekiel 16:46-56 as parallels);

The traditional explanation has held that the destruction of the two cities (Genesis 19:1-29) is the positive sign of God's utter disapproval of homosexuality. Current Old Testament scholarship generally holds that "the story's major themes are the affront to God's will in the breach of ancient Hebrew hospitality norms and persistent violations of rudimentary social injustice."²⁹³ Thus, this story has recently been interpreted by scholars to mean a breach of ancient laws of hospitality and also a story of humiliation and domination. However homosexuality did play some role in the story.

The story of Sodom is the most popularly quoted to illustrate God's vengeance on those who practice homosexuality. However, at times translations appear to be based on preconceptions

²⁹³ James B. Nelson, (1979) *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1979), 183.

rather than serious scholarship. In doing so sometimes the translation that has been made does not convey the original meaning.

The basic question that scholars attempt to answer in relation to this text is what the men of Sodom really wanted from Lot's two visitors. Even though it is clearly stated that the visitors wanted to know them, because the verb 'to know' seems to carry with it different meanings, no conclusive answer has yet been reached. The interpretation of this verb 'to know' remains a thorn in the flesh of many scholarly debates even up to this date. Helminiak explains that:

Some take that to mean the men wanted to have sex with the visitors. Lot's offering his daughters for sex in place of the male visitors certainly indicates as such. Still others argue the word to know does not need to refer to sex. It may simply be that the men of Sodom wanted to find out who these strangers were and what they were doing in their town. After all, Lot was not a native of Sodom. He, too, was an outsider. The townsfolk were not happy with his inviting strangers in.²⁹⁴

Nelson suggests that, "if the verb 'to know' does signify homosexual intercourse, it is also patently clear that what is being threatened here is homosexual rape."²⁹⁵ Moreover the men of Sodom have threatened to rape the two visiting angels and since the angels represent Yahweh's presence there, a direct sin against God here is portrayed. Their sin was inhospitality to the stranger, and a disregard for justice. Ezekiel says: This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy (16:48-49). No word about homosexuality there.

Kimball Jones referring to the Sodom and Gomorrah story (Genesis 19: 1-29), doubts that

The verb to know (*yadah*) in this story refers to sexual intercourse. More probably it means the crowd's rude insistence upon knowing

²⁹⁴Daniel A Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (Francisco: Alamo Square Press, San, 1994), 37.

²⁹⁵ James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1979), 184.

who these two strangers were. Lot, in their eyes, was not properly qualified to offer hospitality to strangers inasmuch as he himself was an outsider, a resident alien in Sodom.²⁹⁶

The same applies, in the Shona context, where the same verb, ‘to know’ (*kumuziva*), interpreted in the context of the Sodom and Gomorrah story can refer to both sexual intercourse and knowing who the strangers were. The reason being that even though this verb carries with it different meanings depending on the context in which it is used, in this particular case both meanings can be implied. Used in the context of someone inquiring whether an individual has had any sexual contact or whether any intimacy was shared with another person, the question is phrased like this “Do you know him/her?” (*Unomuziva here uyu?*) The same verb is used in a context of inquiring if you recognise or are familiar with something, whether a place, a country, a person, a subject etc. In other words, ‘to know’ as a verb assumes its meaning depending on the context in which it is used. Therefore, reading the Sodom story from a Shona perspective the verb to know actually means either to have sexual intercourse (because Lot offered his daughters as sex objects to the men crowding around his door) or to know who the strangers were. Having said this, one further challenge that can not be overlooked if the later interpretation of the verb ‘to know’ is to be considered is that, Lot would not have offered his girls if the request was not sexual in nature, it just does not seem logical.

Nevertheless, one can certainly conclude that the sin of Sodom is firstly, male rape.²⁹⁷ Rape is rape and sinful, and gang rapes all the more so even to our modern moral sensibilities, whether it be homosexual or heterosexual rape. It appears therefore, not to be justifiable to

²⁹⁶ H. K. Jones, in James B. Nelson, ed., *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexual And Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1978), 183.

²⁹⁷ Michael Carden, ‘Homophobia and Rape In Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken Stone’ in David j. A. and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 82 (Wiltshire: The Cornwall Press, 1999), 83-84.

judge against and construe all homosexual practice on the basis of this rape incident as is the case with the contemporary Church in Zimbabwe. Secondly, it is also a story about abuse and offence against strangers. Thirdly it is a story about insult to the traveler and fourthly it is a story about inhospitality to the needy.

Following the contemporary understanding of Genesis 19:1-29, it can be argued that it is the Church that is guilty of sodomy. If we understand the story correctly the real sodomists are not those who indulge in homosexual acts but those who bully vulnerable people within the community. The story is about cruelty and the oppression of the weak and the powerless, not about homosexuality. In view of the way that some members of the modern Church have bullied not only the homosexual community, then it is they who might more biblically be called the sodomists. This includes President Mugabe who denounced homosexuals as perverts who do not deserve human rights and whose behaviour is lower than that of pigs and dogs.

5.3.1.2 Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Leviticus 18:22 states the principle: "You [masculine] shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The second (Lev. 20:13) adds the penalty: "If a man lies with a male as a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." The questions that one might want to ask at this point are: What was the rationale behind all those different instances of uncleanness? What made all those things abominations? Does the word abomination carry the same meaning for us today as it did for the ancient Hebrews? Can the meaning of the word abomination be universalised considering the fact that it was specifically presented from the Israelite holiness code, which:

reflects ancient Israel's concern for purity, which was understood quite objectively as the state of being clean and whole as opposed to

unclean and polluted? To be pure meant to be unblemished specimen of one's kind, unmixed with other kind (which would be pollution). Within this context therefore, defilement does not mean moral defilement but uncleanness in a literal physical sense. This is why the Holiness code prohibits such things as breeding animals with a different kind, sowing a field with two kinds of seeds, and wearing a garment that is made of two different materials (Lev 19:19).²⁹⁸

The fact is that the Old Testament does not make distinctions between moral goodness and ritual purity in the way Christians came to do after the destruction of the temple and the end of the ancient cult. Holiness in the Old Testament context is all embracing but, as for the modern Shona, a decision has to be made as to what parts of the old law still have relevance as guidance for us and in what way. One has to take into account the historically cultural conditionings of the Bible and link this with the other important questions about the exclusive truth and the universal normativeness of the Bible in matters of sexuality. Whatever the rationale was behind the ancient Hebrew purity laws, such thinking certainly can not be applicable in every context today. Such thinking is almost foreign even to the Shona. Therefore one cannot simply transfer it as a universal truth. Indeed, if one does so, one is likely to relinquish the truth. For example, the following injunctions from the Bible may not be applicable to the Shona, Leviticus 18:16 "You must not have intercourse with your brother's wife, that would bring shame on him"; 18:18 "You must not take a woman who is your wife's sister...", the reason being that in the event of childlessness for either a man or woman, the culture has it that arrangements can be made so that a man's own brother can come in and assist so that children can be realised in his brother's house. The children that are born out of such arrangements belong to the impotent man. Likewise, for a woman who is infertile arrangements are made by the family to get her sister (if she has no sister or if the

²⁹⁸ Victor Paul Furnish, 'The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Text in Context', in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*. (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 20; Daniel A. Helminiak also notes that abomination was just another word for unclean and a violation of the purity rules that governed Israelite society and kept the Israelites different from the other peoples. Daniel A Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994), 48.

sisters are all married her niece is asked to come in) and have children for her relative. The resulting children are well received by both the woman and her husband in good faith. Even though the Church does not receive into full membership this sister or niece, they are accepted as adherents until the death of their sister or aunt. But in the case of a brother who goes in to assist his infertile brother, the Church seems to be silent about its position.

A point to note here is that the “issue of homosexuality is not merely an exegetical one – that is, it is not merely a question of what the ancient texts meant. It is, more importantly, a hermeneutical issue, a question of how we understand the texts and appropriate them for our specific contexts. It is a theological – ethical issue, a question of how we as Christians think about ourselves and our conduct in relation to God.”²⁹⁹ Our decisions in most cases are influenced by the culture of which we are members.

5.3.1.3 Romans 1:26-27

In Romans 1:26-27, Paul sees homosexuality as idolatry, freely chosen by an individual, associated with insatiable lust and a violation of the created order as a result: “God has given them up to shameful passions... and are paid in their own persons the fitting wage of such perversion.” Thus, because they have not seen fit to acknowledge God, he has given them up to their own depraved way of thinking and this leads them to break all rules of conduct³⁰⁰.

²⁹⁹ Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), x; See also Michael J. Clark. *Defying the Darkness: Gay Theology in the Darkness* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 12 – 15.

³⁰⁰ Richard Hays notes that the fundamental human sin is the refusal to honour God and give God thanks, consequently, God’s wrath takes the form of letting human idolatry run its own self destructive course. Homosexuality then is not a provocation of the wrath of god (Rom 1:18) rather it is a consequence of God’s decision to give up rebellious creatures to follow their own futile thinking and desires. ³⁰⁰ Richard B. Hays, ‘Awaiting the Redemption of our bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality,’ in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 8.

Paul is here attacking deliberate perversion. That was the basis for the strong statements of condemnation. This makes it difficult simply to take over the statements and apply them to everyone who has a homosexual orientation. The potential is there to do a terrible injustice to those people who are homosexual by orientation. It would represent an inappropriate use of scripture because these were not the people the scripture had in mind.

However, in Zimbabwe homosexuality is portrayed mainly as a deliberate perversion, hence the negative attitude from the Church. For instance from our previous chapters we have noted instances where homosexual practice seem to be prominent: thus with the increasing numbers of street kids, cases of child sexual abuse are escalating; with the declining economy, there are growing cases of those in economic power sexually abusing their subordinates (inappropriate abuse of power); with the problem of AIDS at its peak, one can only imagine the kind of challenge the Church is facing³⁰¹. Homosexuality is portrayed as relationships of abuse, desperation, inequality, impermanency, and humiliation. The media also seem only to focus on problematic homosexual relationships and practices giving the impression that all homosexual relationships are a deliberate pervasion. Thus, sources object clearly and solely to the abusive, dominating, demeaning practice of pederasty as the only expression of homosexual behaviour they know. The relationships manifest themselves as brutal sexual behaviour heavy with lust; they are not relationships of consenting adults who are committed to each other as faithfully and with as much integrity as any heterosexual couples. It is this context that contributes in shaping the people's understanding of the phenomenon hence the

³⁰¹ Commenting on the current economic situation in Zimbabwe, Peter Stephens, a Methodist minister in Britain note that inflation was between 60,000 and 150,000. How would you cope if something you almost bought yesterday cost twice as much when you went to buy it today? Stephens asked. Some teachers and nurses have stopped going to work because transport would cost more than they earn. The expectation of life is now 34 for women with the huge rise of HIV/AIDS a major factor in this. Peter Stephens, 'Peter Stephens Reports on a fact-finding visit to Zimbabwe: Where five loaves cost a month's wages' *Methodist Recorder*, 3 April 2008, 5. These are some of the basic facts that the Church has to face. It is in the midst of such economic problems, where some individual abuse the situation sexually by offering or demanding for sex in return for economic favours. Until such conditions improve genuine homosexuals will continue to suffer and the Church's dilemma worsen.

loud cry that it is a deliberate pervasion and a sin. The Church's objection is therefore that this is abnormal sexual behaviour which they cannot envision. Therefore, the Church's negative attitude to homosexuality, in this context seems to mirror Paul's approach in a number of ways.

Firstly, just like Paul it seems the majority of Shona are unaware of the distinction between sexual orientation, over which one has apparently very little choice, and sexual behaviour, over which one does have choice. They seemed to assume that those condemned are heterosexuals, and are acting contrary to nature, 'leaving', 'giving up', or 'exchanging' their regular sexual orientation for that which is foreign to them. Paul knew nothing of the modern psychological understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life, persons for whom having heterosexual relations would be contrary to nature, 'leaving', 'giving up' or 'exchanging' their natural sexual orientation for one that is unnatural to them. In other words, Paul really thought that those whose behaviour he condemned were 'straight', and that they were behaving in ways that were unnatural to them. The Shona have this strong belief that everyone is 'straight', hence the enforcement of marriage. If, anyone is found behaving otherwise, there are corrective measures in place to make the individual straight. There seems to be no concept of homosexual orientation. Both interviews and questionnaires reflect that the concept is vaguely understood.³⁰²

The problem with assuming that all homosexuality is a willed condition is that it lets those of who are heterosexual not to have to wrestle with the reality of this complex phenomenon. It also allows heterosexuals to feel superior to those whom they believe are sinning when they could and should know better, thus creating a class system in both the Church and the society.

³⁰² We are now hearing a lot about same sex relationships in Zimbabwe because many homosexuals are beginning to break the silence and talk about their experiences.

However, the Church should take note that even though Paul listed homosexuality as a sin, in chapter two of the same letter he issued a warning that “those who uphold the biblical teaching against homosexuality must remember Paul’s warning ‘You have no defence, then, whoever you may be, when you sit in judgement – for in judging others you condemn yourself, since you the judge are equally guilty...’ Romans 2:1-3. The Church is called to be a fellowship of committed believers, knowing itself to have an identity and vocation distinct from the world.”³⁰³

And it remains a challenge for the Church to surf through the sexual muddle and offer the pastoral support that is desperately needed. The challenge for the contemporary Church to learn, understand and come to terms with, is that just like the Zimbabwean Church, biblical authors seem not to be aware of people who were homosexual by orientation. For such a person it would be acting contrary to nature to have sexual relations with a person of the opposite sex. Furthermore, if care is not taken those who are genuinely homosexual will continue to be persecuted and suffer because their needs have been overshadowed by socio-economic problems.

5.3.1.4 1Corinthians 6: 9 – 10; 1 Timothy 1: 10

1Corinthians 6:9 identifies types of people who do not qualify for the Kingdom of God.

Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.

The first problem that scholars are faced with here is that two words were used to describe homosexual acts. These are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Theologians have been attempting to

³⁰³ Richard B. Hays, ‘Awaiting the Redemption of our bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality’ in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 13.

translate these two words but up until the present day no conclusive definitions have been reached. In his attempt to explain what *malakoi* meant Furnish explains that:

In Paul's day, this term was often used negatively to describe men who, in the eyes of others, appear to be somehow effeminate. It was also applied to the more passive male in a same-sex relationship, and – more specifically – to adolescent boys who sold themselves for sex with older men.³⁰⁴

Helminiak on the other hand clarifies further that:

Malakoi is rendered as catamites, the effeminate, boy prostitutes or even as sissies. But until the reformation in the Sixteenth Century, the word *malakoi* was thought to mean masturbators. It seems that as prejudices changed, so have translations of the Bible.³⁰⁵

On the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, which is also listed among the vices identified in 1 Timothy 1:10, Boswell argues that it refers to a form of male prostitution, not to homosexuality.³⁰⁶ Scroggs' view is that the whole model of homosexuality of the day was pederastic.³⁰⁷ That is, it always involved an older man and a young boy or youth. Thus the social critics of the day thought of exploitation, inequality and abuse when they thought of male-male sex. It is the use of such unclear words that means scholars have a diversity of opinions. Helminiak's conclusion is that "There is no real certainty about what these texts mean... Nobody knows for certain what these words mean, so to use them to condemn homosexuals is really dishonest and unfair."³⁰⁸

³⁰⁴ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Text in Context*, in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 24. The following scholars have also attempted to interpret the meaning of this Greek word *malakoi*: Robin Scroggs, *Homosexuality in the New Testament: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 106-107.

³⁰⁵ Daniel A Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994), 86.

³⁰⁶ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 107.

³⁰⁷ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 106-108

³⁰⁸ Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (New Mexico: Alamo Square, 2000), 107.

If the model of homosexuality was pederastic by nature during the New Testament times, is it still the same situation today? If the Bible condemned a particular act for whatever reason, should that act still be avoided without any further considerations? If the same situation still prevails today as it did in Paul's days, will it be justifiable then to condemn homosexuality? Take for instance the situation in Zimbabwe (as explained in chapter three) where children have turned to the streets. Because of desperation they find themselves involved in pederastic relationships, which they are powerless to oppose. The paradoxical nature of such a situation is that on the one hand the children involved suffer sexual abuse, but on the other hand their unfortunate circumstances give a false impression of what homosexuality really is to the general population. At the end of the day the majority of the society is left with a distorted understanding of homosexuality and regrettably genuine homosexuals suffer the consequences.

5.3.1.5 Areas of Theological Concern

In view of the direct biblical texts on homosexuality presented above one can argue that, just as in the Shona culture and the Methodist Church, a silent motif can also be traced in the Hebrew community, especially in relation to homosexuality, the reason being that the biblical texts are 'almost silent' on homosexuality. Of the eight possible references for disapproval of homosexuality, only two (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13) clearly indicate and condemn homosexual relationships, even to the extent of demanding physical punishment and death³⁰⁹. The other six passages (Gen. 19: 1-29, Rom, 1: 26-27, 1Cor. 6:9, 1Tim. 1:10, Rev. 21:8 and 22:15), which are frequently used to exemplify the sinfulness of homosexuality, are questionable.

³⁰⁹ The Holiness Code (Lev. 18:22, 20:13) originally established the connection between idolatry and homosexual activity. The code specifically warns the Israelites against accepting the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites. One of the provisions of the code is that homosexual activity is punishable by death. J. J. McNeil, *The Church and the Homosexual* (London: Longman and Todd, 1977), 58.

These passages condemn not so much homosexuality as other harmful practices such as inhospitality, male temple prostitution, and certain inappropriate kinds of homoerotic behaviour. These text have been critically analysed by a vast number of theologians, of which the general consensus is that scriptural authors never dealt with homosexual orientation. They presuppose that they are dealing with lustful activity freely chosen by heterosexuals or are dealing with humanly destructive activity in the context of idolatry, prostitution, promiscuity, violent rape, seduction of children or violation of guests' rights. Nowhere is there a specific text that explicitly rejects all homosexual activities as such, independent of these circumstances. Such ambiguities, according to Seow, keep these texts from functioning as clear scriptural prohibitions of homosexual practice.³¹⁰

However, it can also be argued that it does not really follow to assume that since very little is put in black and white in the Bible about homosexual orientation, therefore the biblical authors were not aware about it. I would like to argue that it could have been a conscious effort to portray the Israel the 'chosen people', the community as 'good people' who abide by God's creative plan. The approach would have been different if the Bible was written from another context where people were more liberal in their approach to sexual issues. One has to bear in mind that biblical writers were also humans with their own limitations. Their approach needs to be examined in relation to their social locations as well their individual purposes. But if one assumes that the texts do indeed speak of same sex relationships as some people think of them today, there is not much to build upon here in terms of a direct addressing of homosexuality as a sexual orientation since the texts do not reflect an awareness in that area.

³¹⁰ C. L. Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 76-77.

It must be added that even though the Bible nowhere explicitly condones homosexual behaviour, some interpreters, however, would like to argue that the relationship between Naomi and Ruth or David and Jonathan were homosexual in nature. David's love for Jonathan was said to exceed his love for women. And the relationship of Ruth and Naomi is described as a bond of deep love. Interestingly, there is no indication that there was any sexual expression in either of these. But this would not be surprising, given the strict hetero-patriarchal nature of their society that pushes to the peripheries anything they regard as unacceptable. But does this imply therefore that these relationships were homosexual? Anyway, as observed by Seow, at times we desire, "consciously or unconsciously, to soften or dismiss passages that would make us uncomfortable or stand in the way of what we want to do."³¹¹ It is very important for us always to be aware of this influence upon our search for meaning in the Bible. It calls for self-knowledge and rigorous honesty, so that the passage as such can speak to us and not us to the passage.

Stephen C. Barton comes up with an alternative way to attempt to understand sexuality. He argues that the Bible is not the right starting point when reflecting on the issue of sexuality. He notes that

There is the danger that the text becomes captive to tribal interests of one kind or another, whether conservative fundamentalism, liberal biblical criticism, feminism, gay liberation, or whatever. When this happens, the meaning of the text and even more the truth of the text tend to get confused with the question of whether or not the text can be used to support the identity and self understanding of the group concerned.³¹²

He advocates instead for an alternative approach which does not focus on the first instance on

³¹¹ C. L. Seow, *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 44.

³¹² Stephen C. Barton. 'Is the Bible Good News for Humanity? Reflections on Method in Biblical Interpretation' in *Theology and Sexuality* 1 September (1994): 47.

what the Bible say but on human experience, in this case the gay/lesbian community.³¹³ On the other hand scholars such as Nancy Wilson argue that employing the historical critical method and linguistics is just being defensive. Her argument is that there is more to the message of the Bible for queers than just silencing the texts of terror.³¹⁴ Such positive reading would include using biblical texts such as the Exodus story (Exodus1-19)³¹⁵ or that of eating the crumbs that fall from the table (Matt. 15: 21-28).³¹⁶

5.3.2 The Ethics of Homosexuality

Having noted and discussed the prevailing silence on homosexuality together with the aspect of compulsory heterosexuality that seem to be eminent in the biblical narratives one wonders if it is ethically sound for the contemporary Church to keep gays and lesbians at the peripheries of the Church's life. Can the participation of gays and lesbians in the Church be viewed as analogous to compromising the Gospel? Is it like letting down the Church of God? From a patriarchal traditional point of view it does not seem surprising how the Bible presents homosexuality even if at that time people were aware of sexual orientation. A patriarchal tradition is based on rule by the 'father', thus what the father say goes and the survival of a marriage mostly depends on the procreativity of the wife. Nevertheless one is not born a patriarch but born into a patriarchal society. The implication here is that, if an individual is born with homosexual traits the society in which that they are brought up can do

³¹³ Ibid., 53.

³¹⁴ Bob Goss identifies the popularly used scriptures against homosexuality as text of terror because they are used to promote homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians. Robert E. Goss, *Jesus ACTED UP: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: Harper San-Francisco, 1993), 90-94. Goss borrows the phrase from Phyllis Trible, who applied it to unredeemable texts in the Hebrew Bible that promoted violence against women. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992).

³¹⁵ Mona West insists that from the social location of gay and lesbian Christians, the Hebrew exodus is indeed a coming out story. The exodus tradition reminds the queer community that silence equals death and that to claim the power of the stories makes a way for life. Mona West, 'The Hebrew Exodus as Outsiders, Aliens, and Boundary Crossers', in Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word. A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 71-81.

³¹⁶ Justin Tanis, 'Eating the Crumbs That Fall from the Table', in *ibid.*, 43-54.

very little to alter the sexual orientation. At the end of the day some individuals would abide by the social norms by getting married and having children but the moral dilemma faced by these individuals is hard to imagine. While these are very hard decisions to be made, what the Church may need to ask is: If Jesus came so that all may have life in its abundance, how ethical is it to deny someone what seems to be rightfully their life? One obvious challenge that the Zimbabwean Church needs to face up to is in relation to how they read the Bible. The point here is that it is highly significant to use appropriate hermeneutical tools to get to the core of any biblical text. Literal reading of the Bible has been for a long time discredited by many scholars. In the case of texts relating to homosexuality, then, the Bible seems to present the Church with two kinds of messages and these match two kinds of approaches. That is, if the Bible is read from a literal point of view homosexuality is presented as a sin:

The literal reading claims to take the text simply for what it says. This is the approach of Fundamentalism. It claims not to be interpreting the text but merely to be reading it as it stands.³¹⁷

It hears only one kind of message in the Bible, what is plainly stated on the surface. The Church in Zimbabwe seems to be in line with this kind of approach. The literal approach has a number of limitations some of which have already been pointed out above. The implementation of this approach is ironic in the sense that some statements cannot simply be applied to today, because they depend on the cultural values of biblical times and these have to a large extent, changed. The Church would unanimously dismiss them because they are no longer applicable at this day and age. If then the Church can dismiss some biblical aspects as not relevant for our day why should the literal approach apply to texts on homosexuality, especially with the available knowledge from other human sciences? The Church needs to engage some serious thought into the effects its approach has to all concerned, more so,

³¹⁷ Daniel A Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994), 25.

where human beings are concerned. This is a human rights issue. Christ came that all may have life in its abundance - that means including sexuality. Jesus' ministry was concerned with breaking the barriers humans put up against each other.

Another approach asks what is at the heart of the scripture and what light does that shed on how we understand and interpret the statements of the Bible today.³¹⁸ This is the historical critical method. As shown above, by using this method a significant number of biblical scholars have shown that the scriptures are nowhere near as precise as they are made to be by some people. Jean Lambert suggests the use of "corrective lenses" when reading the Bible so as to overcome these obvious limitations.³¹⁹ The idea is to make our reading of the Bible more faithful to God, that is, the Bible is still relevant for today's moral guidance if it is read using appropriate hermeneutical tools and also read in context.

One should also bear in mind that to a great extent, both Testaments were created to reflect the development of the Church and its doctrines at a particular time out of particular concerns. The scriptures were rewritten and retouched to fit a specific perspective. Even the canonisation of the Bible as we know it today was a long drawn out human process necessitated by the different challenges of that period.³²⁰ I am emphasising that it was a human process because humans are fallible by nature and that limitation cannot be dismissed. Thus, those who pioneered canonisation were far from divine figures, but human beings like

³¹⁸ This is what Helminiak refers to as the Historical-critical method of studying the Bible. This method oftentimes reverses long standing interpretations and raises very serious questions about religion and society. Daniel A Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994), 26.

³¹⁹ Jean C Lambert, 'Theologians' use of the Bible', in Isabel Mukonyora; James L Cox; Frans J Verstraelen, eds., *Rewriting the Bible: The Real Issues* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993),187.

³²⁰ As for the New Testament, Pfeiffer observes that Judaism was in danger of yielding to Hellenistic influences and Christianity to emperor-worship and other Roman practices, when they suffered cruel persecution under Antiochus iv Epiphanes (168-165 B.C.) and under Domitian, who ruled from 81-96 A.D. Therefore the canonisation of scriptures was to safeguard them from the Hellenistic world; It is in this context of a nation eager to safeguard its people that we see homosexuality sidelined. Robert, H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times: With an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1940), 502-504.

anybody else. Therefore, since they were generally men, they had a model and a culture to protect, that is, a heterosexual culture with its emphasis on marriage and fatherhood, a model that portrays patriarchal society.

Furthermore, even though the process of canonisation itself was closed it does not really mark the end of God's revelation otherwise we will be either limiting God or putting His revelation in an iron cage. Because God's revelation cannot be canonised or limited to any time or space this is the time that He has chosen to make a better revelation of that which was concealed. Proclaiming that God forbids is like claiming to understand the mind of God, which I think this is inconceivable, even by our own human standards. I would like to argue that homosexuality challenges all Christians to openly accept that it is possible that there is more that needs to be elaborated (as well as subtracted) from the Bible as we know it today, to make it relevant to our times and people,³²¹ bearing in mind that there are things that were sanctioned by both the Old and the New Testaments that the Church would not consider today.

There is a shift in certain aspects of the biblical moral approach. For instance, circumcision is set aside in the New Testament because of the further revelation of God's nature and purpose found in the Gospel of Jesus. In the New Testament there is a move from polygamous marriages to monogamous marriages. Many Old Testament Laws relating to the offering of sacrifices, for example, are simply no longer relevant, for Christ put an end to the sacrificial

³²¹ Canaan, S Banana, 'The Case for a New Bible', in Isabel Mukonyora, James Cox and Frans J. Verstraelen *"Re-Writing" the Bible: The real Issues; Perspectives within Biblical and Religious studies in Zimbabwe* (Mambo Press: Gweru, 1993). Elizabeth Stuart argues that Christians have made an idol of the Bible. Like the deluded and blind idol makers of Isaiah we have forgotten the process that went into the forming of the canon of scripture. From a wide variety of writings some were selected and some rejected among often heated arguments and indecisiveness. We easily forget that the Hebrew canon was not fixed until the first century CE and that even Hellenistic and Palestinian Jews followed a different canon... it was not until 382 CE that a council set the canon of the Christian scriptures. Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 6-7.

cult by the offering he made of himself. In the New Testament the new Israel abandoned many of the things which the old Israel saw as vital for the preservation of its distinctive religion and society and to which it ascribed the status of divine commands. At the same time it is still significant for Christians to refer to the Bible for moral guidance but there is need to use appropriate hermeneutical tools for the contemporary audience.

Therefore the challenge from the Old Testament still stands for contemporary Christians to live in holiness. Our bodies are still temples of the Holy Spirit (1Cor. 6:19). But to declare that the Holy Spirit only works with heterosexuals seem to be a claim that is too far-fetched especially when it is not explicitly stated in the Bible. It also puts at stake the ministry of people like Paul and even Jesus since we do not know for sure if they were heterosexuals or homosexuals. To this end then one can argue that sexual orientation cannot be a determinant factor for being a Christian. Nevertheless, the task of the Church is to determine for the people it serves the valid basis for understanding certain passages of the scripture in any particular situation.³²² It is the task of the Church to decide in the light of the gospel what holiness involves. Very few would implement the Old Testament in saying for instance, that if someone is menstruating she cannot therefore receive Holy Communion because she is unclean. It is also necessary for the Church to be aware that they may not get the full story if they ignore insights on homosexuality from other human sciences as well as the gay and lesbian community for they are also a part of the same body of Christ which is the Church.

The crux of the matter as far as sexuality is concerned may be whether the sexual behaviour in the lifestyle of an individual or group is holy in itself and conducive to growth in holiness, rather than what is written in the biblical texts or what the Church dogmas say. For Christians

³²² D. K. Switzer, *Pastoral Care of Gays, Lesbians, and their Families* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, p. 1998), 40.

the primary definition of holiness in relation to sexuality will be whatever is in accord with the spirit of Christ and promotes Christlikeness. The question that one may want to ask at this point is whether homosexuality promotes Christlikeness? This is a question that in itself prompts a wide range of debate that this thesis does not have room to deal with. However, just like Paul what I can say is: as mentioned above, the Church as the body of Christ is made up of many parts, some parts being more dominant than others; but even the minute body parts have a contribution to make for the wellbeing of the body at large. The crux of the matter, it seems, is simply that the problem is that the Bible does not seem to have a specific sexual ethic. Many of the practices that the Bible prohibits, the Church allows, and many that it allows, the Church prohibits. In many other ways one can argue that the Methodist Church, hetero-patriarchal as the Church may seem, has developed different norms from those explicitly laid down by the Bible, for example the ordination of women.

5.3.3 Compulsory Heterosexuality

Just like the biblical community the situation in the Church in Zimbabwe today demands compulsory heterosexuality as a requirement for Church membership. We noted in the previous chapter that even participation in Holy Communion is by qualification not invitation. The implication for such an approach for gays and lesbians is that because heterosexuality is mandatory, homosexuality is not considered to be a legitimate Christian lifestyle. In the West the acceptance of gays and lesbians into the Christian community varies:

Some have taken the attitude of love the sinner, hate the sin; they require, not that one give up one's homosexual orientation, but rather that the homosexual practice celibacy. Others insist that homosexuality is unnatural and sinful; a minority of these individuals even believe that it is the result of demon possession. The requirement of these good Christian believers is that gay and lesbian

people pray and take other steps (including exorcism) toward changing our sexuality.³²³

This calls to mind how the earliest Christians approached the issue of including Gentile Christians within the community, as Jeffrey S. Siker explains:

The earliest post-resurrection vision of Christianity did not conceive that Gentiles would become part of the Christian movement as Gentiles, namely apart from essentially first converting to Judaism and abiding by the Jewish law (circumcision, Sabbath, food laws, etc). Recall Peter's vision from Acts 10 where he is scandalised at the notion of eating anything he considered impure and unclean, a metaphor for the Gentiles.³²⁴

To be a Gentile was analogous to being a sinner just as to be gay or lesbian is in the Zimbabwean context. Since the Gentiles did not have the law, since they were, by definition unclean, polluted and idolatrous, they were expected first to repent of being Gentiles and be purified before they could become Christians. However the experiences of Peter and Paul were an eye-opener for it led many to realise that to be Gentile did not by definition mean to be a sinner. Thus, "Paul's letter to the Galatian Churches has a particular message of liberation for queers who are seeking to reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality, just as it did for those original readers who were wondering what they had to do as Gentile outsiders to embrace the new Christian faith."³²⁵ Paul's argument was that what may have been regarded as an entry requirement is no more, for there is freedom in Christ and we are all justified by faith not by our sexuality. No one is made righteous by the works of the law. Since everyone is created in the image of God (Gen1: 26-27) it means that whoever is

³²³ Thomas Bohache. 'To Cut or Not to Cut', in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 231.

³²⁴ Jeffrey S. Siker, 'Homosexual Christians, The Bible, and Gentile Inclusion', in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 1994), 187. See also an article by Thomas Bohache 'To Cut or Not to Cut', in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 227-236. He argues that noncircumcision, as a symbol for nonacceptance of the entire Hebrew law, is directly comparable to homosexuality because both challenge long-accepted standards of religious entry requirements.

³²⁵ Thomas Bohache 'To Cut or Not to Cut', in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 228.

considered a human being represents the image of God; sexuality should not therefore be a determining factor for being a Christian, for Christ's love knows no sexuality. However, since what constitutes love and sexuality varies from one context to the other, it is almost not practical to come up with a universal Christian approach to the challenges presented by the phenomenon of homosexuality. Each context and Church should determine for itself what is most appropriate.

The assumption here is that, we can only speak about a theology that makes sense at a certain place and in a certain time. It is highly improbable to have a universal theology on sexuality. For instance, while it may make sense and be a moral duty in the Shona context for a man to stand in the place of his dead brother and continue taking care of his dead brother's family, in the West this might be seen to be immoral and to have a lot of human rights implications. In this sense one can not be far from the truth to argue that we learn from others but the theology of others can never be our own. Consequently, the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context is really a theological imperative.³²⁶ The approach to any moral issue cannot be universalised because each context is unique and moral issues are culturally bound.³²⁷ "Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression."³²⁸ Consequently, the traditions we bring to the Christian community influence and contribute to the attitude of this community.

³²⁶ Any attempt to universalise sexuality is synonymous to the MacDonaldization of sexuality. MacDonaldization is a term introduced by Ritzer and used by John Drane in his analysis of the Church and its future. John Drane, *The MacDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, and the Future of the Church* (Bath: The Bath Press, 1988).

³²⁷ It is very important to note that each context is unique to itself. What might be permissible in one context can be very offensive in another context. Take for instance, it is very disgraceful in Zimbabwe for a woman to go to the pub, drink, smoke, and wear trousers or mini-skirts. In the Church when it is a communion Sunday, all women are expected to cover their heads with scarves. Any women found going against any of these ideas is branded as loose and not worth of any respect. But for Western countries, it is not a big deal for women to do all the above.

³²⁸ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 4.

Two things are worth noting at this point. First, as demonstrated in previous chapters culture plays a very primary role as a formative factor in doing theology, however it also imperative to appreciate the fact that culture is never static, no matter how one may attempt to cling to it. This feature has remained even in the biblical community. In his teaching Jesus echoed statement such as “You have heard from those of the old times...but I say unto you,” signifying the change of time. Even though he seemed to have reaffirmed the sanctity of marriage as an institution ordained by God, He also challenged the Hebrew concept that marriage was a universal duty. It can be noted here that even though a number of similarities can be drawn between the traditional Shona and the Hebrew culture in terms of their approach to sexuality, it is highly unlikely that the same approach is still applicable for the contemporary Shona because a lot of changes are taking place every day. Second, any recognition of the culture as unchanging is equivalent to arguing that theology is final. The reality is, the work of theology needs to be done again and again. Theology needs reinterpretation as cultural forms change. As we learned from previous chapters, in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe’s approach to sexuality, everything seems to be historically conditioned, thus there is a sense of a desperate clinging to traditional approaches that are fast disappearing. If tradition is passed on in a merely mechanical way it becomes a mere lifeless tradition. Writing on the Church John Drane argues that:

Churches where everything is pre-packaged can often thrive for a while, but eventually they too lose their appeal. In any case part of the emerging post-modern culture is a questioning, if not a rejection of such rationalised ways of doing things, and even those churches which have been successful through such strategies in the past are likely to find themselves struggling soon enough, so they are not going to be useful models for the rest of us to imitate.³²⁹

³²⁹ John Drane, *The MacDonalidization of the Church: Spirituality, and the Future of the Church* (Bath: The Bath Press, 1988), 37.

I would like to argue that clinging to and continuing implementing the old traditional models and approaches to sexuality in a contemporary Church is just like the MacDonalidization³³⁰ of sexuality. The MacDonalidization of sexuality has more dehumanising effects though it might seem to be an attractive option to moral ethics because it appears to be efficient, calculable, predictable and controllable.³³¹ This is so because “somebody else does the thinking for you, predigests it, and serves it up in an efficient manner.”³³² This is exactly how best the Shona approach to sex can be described. There is a particular way of ‘doing sex’ and any divergence from it has consequences which range from being dishonoured by one’s family to being shunned by the whole community. There is a set standard of sexual relationships, which is marriage and everyone is brought up to get married and have children. The Church as a social institution takes upon itself the responsibility of ensuring that all get married by way of setting up Church organisations with set targets and specific age limits and specific Christian education materials. For instance, the set age limit for GCU and BCU (girls’ and boys’ Christian union) is twenty five; the implication is that the target is to get everyone married by the age of twenty five. However, there is a way in which the continued implementation of such an archaic approach to sexuality can be understood as an issue of power and control, a process designed to mould its adherence into an unthinking populace.

³³⁰ MacDonalidization was coined by Ritzer as an appropriate way to describe the destructive and dehumanizing effects of social rationalisation under the influence of modernist thinking. The four key characteristics of the MacDonalidization process are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. These four characteristics seem to fit very well when applied to the Church’s approach to sexuality in Zimbabwe judging from what we have learned so far from the previous chapters and this one.

³³¹ John Drane, *The MacDonalidization of the Church: Spirituality, and the Future of the Church* (Bath: The Bath Press, 1988), 35.

³³² *Ibid.*, 37.

The various themes to which Ritzer draws attention are all ways in which our culture believes it can measure success.³³³ Where one is seen as doing well in life by getting married, so that even if one fails in all the other toils of life, the least one should achieve is getting married and having children. The most common remarks to those who are not married are “What is the problem? You are so unfortunate! You can not even succeed to get married.” In this case then Christian morals on sexuality raise a further question about how we define success, for it has to be obvious that on these definitions Jesus could certainly not be considered to be a ‘successful’ person because He was never married. Does it make Jesus a failure not to have got married and have kids? A thought that have just sprung to mind is that if Jesus had been born in the Shona community could he been have been a laughing stock of the people, buried with a corn cob (*guri*) on his back because that is the way the culture treats those who die childless after the marriageable age. The idea of propagating a theology which comes pre-packaged, and in which there are no loose ends, is not true to life nor can it adequately reflect the richness of the Gospel. Jesus was against this pre-packed approach, he broke the Sabbath rules by, for example letting his disciples pluck some ears of corn and eat them. Hence, each generation has the obligation to appropriate their culture and its traditions in light of contemporary challenges. This needs more insight and patience than the simple rejection of tradition. Reinterpretation is needed if the tradition and culture is to be carried on critically and responsibly as a living and growing tradition for the benefit of all.

5.3.4 Tradition versus Modernity

The issue of homosexuality in Zimbabwe is an issue about tradition versus modernity. It is about clashes between traditional approaches and modern approaches. It is about the Church and society trying so hard to cling on to traditional approaches which are believed to be

³³³ The Church in Zimbabwe has always measured its success in sexual morality in terms of marriages conducted. In other words marriage has always been the measuring rod for successful Christian education on sexual morality.

Christian while the modern ones are seen as less Christian. It is as if the issue of homosexuality has put the Church on a crossroads, where it is almost meaningless to maintain the silence. The Church has to speak up and make clear her position because the context has changed from being passive to being vocal to a certain extent. The fact that gays and lesbians now have an organised group speaks volumes. To deny their existence and attribute homosexuality to the West does not seem to hold water. It comes across as a mere desperate attempt to cling on to a fast disappearing culture and tradition.

However, as we noted earlier, no context is static either, especially with the impact of modernity and the contemporary expansion of global connectedness. As the interaction of one culture with another takes place and as knowledge within a culture develops, new views and new ideas take shape. As a result new forms of culture come into being and are added to, or perhaps replace the deposits of the original culture. This process is true, for no society is an island to itself. The world is fast becoming a global village. Theology needs therefore, to be dynamic and ever-developing as it seeks to meet the new challenges with which it is brought face to face. In reformatting theology to each new situation many aspects come into play, such as the Bible, the history of the people, the experiences of the people; all have their part to play in formulating a sexual theology appropriate to its adherents.

It should be noted however that if care is not taken there can be a danger in trying to be modern for the sake of modernity, to accommodate sexuality to the mood of time. It was against this prostitution of theology that Karl Barth protested so vigorously in his early writings: "Form believes itself capable of taking the place of content... Man has taken the

Divine into his possession, he has brought it into his management.”³³⁴ But over against this warning from Barth, one may set the words of his contemporary, Paul Tillich, in defence of his procedure of stating theology in forms derived from the prevailing culture: “I am not unaware of the danger that in this way the substance of the Christian message may be lost. Nevertheless, this danger must be risked, and once one has realised this, one must proceed in this direction. Dangers are not a reason for avoiding a serious demand”³³⁵ Most important of all, God created people in all their diversity – surely this should include sexual diversity.

On the other hand, in the Christian community, any theology which claims to be a Christian theology must maintain close and positive relations with the Bible. However we should recall that the purpose of the Bible was not to lay down precise rules about all aspects of everyday life. Therefore if care is not taken, a Church that does not reflect on biblical statements critically in light of contemporary challenges may not be true to itself. John Parrat explains that theology:

does not simply restate the events of the Bible. It has to attempt to find some sort of pattern and order in them, and to take from them principles or beliefs (dogmas). So the Bible is a raw material of theology, but it does not present us with a systematic set of truths as it stands. It needs to be worked upon in order to draw out principles about the nature of God and his liberating activity, which are then to be formulated into a coherent pattern.³³⁶

The reason for advocating such an approach to the Bible is that, as we have noticed above from our analysis of biblical presentation of homosexuality, the very fact that there are textual variants destroys at once the idea of taking the Bible as an infallible book, providentially preserved intact. There are in the Bible divergences and discrepancies and not merely on trivial questions and details but on questions of theology and ethics. The Bible

³³⁴ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 68.

³³⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. iii., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 4.

³³⁶ John Parrat, *A Guide to Doing Theology* (London: SPSK, 1996), 6.

does not speak with one voice. Therefore, it is a misuse of the Bible to try and absolutise it and then make it the exclusive formative factor in theology. Over against this exaggerated regard for the Bible, it must be argued that the critical study of the Bible and the recognition that other factors too have their place in theology, will in the long run do more justice to biblical teaching.

5.3.5 CONCLUSION

The debate over homosexuality is a remarkable opportunity, because it raises in an especially acute way how we interpret the Bible, not only in the case of sexuality, but in numerous other cases as well. The real issue here, then, is not simply homosexuality, but how Scripture, a people's culture and contemporary challenges inform us on how to live our lives. Even though the Bible does not seem to give a conclusive guide on homosexuality it does not mean all homosexual activities are to be blessed. For a start, there are doubtless many instances of deliberate perversion today as there were in biblical times. The research seems to show that in Zimbabwe, some of the situations that seem to inform the general people of homosexuality presents themselves in the form exploitation of minors and sexual abuse. Consequently, such scenarios leave the impression that that homosexuality and perversion are synonymous. All people are assumed to be naturally heterosexual; therefore homosexuals are perverts. It is in such a situation that the Church finds itself. On one hand they have a mission to tend God's sheep; on the other hand they are trying not only to understand the phenomenon of homosexuality but also to distinguish between genuine homosexuals and those who are abusing the phenomenon for personal gratification. It is a double tragedy that both the Church and society have to face. Because sexuality is a natural part of our being, whatever orientation, it can therefore be used healthily or unhealthily, destructively or constructively.

Because the genuine homosexual find himself/herself muddled in all the above mentioned challenges, the best approach for them seem to be to lie low “for the sake of the weaker brother”, to adapt to a sexual secrecy ethic, hence the adoption of the euphemism *sahwira* (friend), to camouflage their identity. The challenge for the Church that serves in a society with strictly defined definitions of gender and sexual identity is at least to make an effort to have a proper understanding of the phenomenon in the light of theological issues at stake in the context which it serves. In the next chapter an attempt will be made to identify and analyse the prominent theological themes that underlie the Church’s approach to homosexuality.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF SEXUAL SECRECY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The theology of sexual secrecy is drawn from the Church's approach to issues of sex and sexuality drawn from Shona culture and the Bible as demonstrated in previous chapters. The Oxford dictionary defines secrecy as covertness, furtiveness, surreptitiousness, stealthiness, inclined to conceal feelings and intentions or not to disclose information.³³⁷ When applied to the Church's approach to homosexuality this definition seems to fit well. The sexual secrecy of the Church presents itself in the same way that the Shona presents us with strict, traditional, systematic, coherent and intrinsically intact social structures that are presented as making it almost impossible for anyone to behave otherwise. Social institutions are intentionally designed to protect, uphold and sustain people's cultural values in relation to sexuality. It is primarily because of this that the Church as a social institution would like to argue that there are no homosexuals amongst the Shona. However, by analysing the same social as well as ecclesiastical fabrics, I have managed to identify that homosexual practice could have successfully been exercised within the traditional as well as contemporary structures that are meant to guard against it. In other words there is a way in which the approach to sexuality covers or conceals as well as protects homosexuals among the Shona. Understood from this perspective, one can go on to argue that, paradoxically, the Shona are the most welcoming of homosexuality, even when compared to the West. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that such an approach for homosexuals has been possible because there seem to be among the Shona an anathematised or secretive approach to the whole concept of

³³⁷ Catherine Soanes, Maurice Waite and, Sara Hawker, *Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus and Wordpower Guide*. (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 1166.

sexuality. That is, as has been discussed in previous chapters, there seems to be a strand of silence that cuts across the subject of sexuality and it is within this ideology that homosexuality both as a sexual minority and as an unacceptable practice has for years prevailed. The previous chapters have discussed how both social and ecclesiastical sexual concepts, language and structures have for a long time continuously obscured, and in doing so protected, homosexuality. In this chapter, an attempt will be made to develop sexual secrecy theology as a theological theme that emanates from the people's ideological approach to sexuality, for that reason seeming to be the appropriate approach for the Church in Zimbabwe to homosexuality. The chapter will start by outlining the basics of the sexual secrecy motif and then the theological perspectives drawn from the ideology of sexual secrecy. The chapter will end with concluding remarks.

6.2 The Shona Ideology of Sexual Secrecy

The extent to which the Shona attempt to keep homosexuality out of the public eye and ear has already been discussed in previous chapters. Sexual secrecy is an approach that encompasses not only homosexuality; it seems to be at the centre of Shona sexual ethics. The sexual secrecy motif provides the answer to the 'why' question. That is, why would the Church implement the approaches as discussed in chapters four and five? Why would people claim that the Shona do not do such things; why would people say they do not even have a word for homosexuality in the local language? Even though there are other issues that have already been pointed out as reasons, for instance the cultural perspective of sexuality and the biblical presentation of the phenomenon, for me the crux of the matter seems to lie in the fact that for the Shona sexual issues are mostly secretive. I shall give brief highlights of the sexual secret motif as it is reflected in three aspects of the Shona life - language, social structures

and the socialisation ethic. These aspects are selected from previous chapters and they serve to show connection, clarity and how the theme of sexual secrecy was developed.

The power of language lies in the fact that it helps to identify individuals to a certain extent. “Linguistic communication is an inherent factor in human personhood, for without language our ability to relate to one another is impaired... Thus the integral part of being human persons – that is being relational beings – is communication and our paramount communicative and world comprehending tools is language.”³³⁸ However, there are situations that compel people to engage in a certain language that is only conceivable to those to whom it is intended. Such reasons vary depending on a variety of reasons. As for the Shona they have in their language a rich confederation of idioms, proverbs, metaphors and other words that they can use, and at times if one has not had the opportunity to learn about them it can be difficult to make head or tail of some of the discourses. For instance it has been established in chapter two and three that homosexuality is camouflaged by the use of words such as *tsikombi*, *svimborume*, even words such as *ane zvitsinha* which is literally meant in reference to being possessed by evil spirit. In a community where homosexual orientation is not acceptable the use of such terms can become useful just to avoid upsetting the social norms. *Ngomwa* is used to refer to an infertile woman. It is significant that we note here that the Shona do not seem to have a word for men who are infertile. What does that tell us about this people? Does it imply that they do not have impotent men in their society? As explained in earlier chapters of this work, we know they do have; for me the answer lies in the sexual secrecy especially where the male gender seems to feel threatened. As a patriarchal society they have an image to protect and an agenda to propagate. Therefore, the language used serves to keep up appearances that there is no male infertility, and that the Shona do not have

³³⁸ Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Modern World*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1999).

homosexuals, while these same people might be doing exactly what the society is claiming to not be a part of their culture; this is where sexual secrecy comes in. It is all hidden in the language adopted by people. At the same time the use of such language puts pressure on the individual concerned to join the club, in this case by getting married.

However, as has been noted the Shona have another word, *sahwira*, which means a friend. Of all the Shona words that I have put forward as having secretive connotations *sahwira* is the most outstanding. The secretive nature of this word is such that it is all-embracing. *Sahwira* simply means ‘a friend’ and is popularly used by the Shona to refer to a family friend or someone nominated by the family as an advisor on issues close to the family’s circle such as marriages and funerals. *Sahwira* plays a central role within the family and most of the family secrets are made known to him/her. He/she is not a relative in any way. *Sahwira* can also mean one’s best friend. And because best friends are generally assumed to be of the same sex, no eyebrows are raised when two people of the same sex are seen together more often. In fact people tend to want to know more if a man and a woman are seen together several times than when either two women or two men are seen together. The word, as already been discussed in earlier chapters, can be used to refer to friendship of any kind. This word *sahwira* has been adapted by the gay and lesbian community today in Zimbabwe because of its secretive connotations.³³⁹ That is, in a context where it is not safe to come out, it seems that *sahwira* works very well as a euphemism.

Still on the use of language, the secrecy motif is also reflected in how males and females address one another. Because it is disrespectful to address a person by their first name, most people tend to address a man as *mukwasha* and a woman as *ambuya*. This reflects the fact

³³⁹ The GALZ (Gays and Lesbians in Zimbabwe) organisation have even gone as far as naming a publication *Sahwira*, this is a collection of stories by gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe. It was first published in 1995.

that in the Shona culture relationships are tailor-made to reflect a sexual relationship. *Mukwasha* refers to one who marries your daughter and every woman is *ambuya*, meaning the mother of your wife. This is meant to define marriage patterns because you cannot say *ambuya* to a male or *mukwasha* to a female, so from the onset sexual relationships are defined. Therefore, the Shona have a lot of words that could camouflage any aspect of homosexuality, thus sexual secrecy.

From the use of language as a secret motif, the second aspect I would like to briefly analyse is the social structures. I would like to argue here that even though marriage stands out clearly as the people's model of sex and sexuality, given the emphasis on gender-segregated groupings coupled with the disintegration of the traditional social set-up with couples spending even more time living apart (men in the city and women in the village), the irony of such circumstances is not hard to comprehend, especially in a society that propagates and advocates a mono-sexuality. Understood in these circumstances then, marriage as well as social institutions can be argued to camouflage homosexual practice. That is again, to keep up appearances, people could just get married knowing very well that after all, they are not going to see much of each other since the husband will be in the city working while the wife is looking after the village home or because since much time is spend in gender-centred groupings and sex is mainly functional. This makes it much easier for homosexual practice to go on under the protection of social systems. It is however important for me to note here that, my argument is not that people end up practicing homosexuality because of sexual frustration, even though for some that could be the case, as pointed out mainly in chapter three; my point here is that even though society puts in place specific structures intended to discourage sexual immorality and foster cultural sexual norms and values, by the same token

it provides a conducive environment for same sex relationships to flourish with no eyebrows raised. This brings me to the third aspect, is the Shona socialisation ethic.

Chapters three and four demonstrated in elaborate detail the Shona socialisation ethic, where men and women are brought up to interact more with those of their own gender than with those of the opposite one. There is a clear demarcation of responsibilities between the different genders. A man who found himself doing a women's job would only bring shame upon himself and very often you would hear comments such as '*rakadyiswa*' implying that his wife gave him traditional herbs to pacify him or make him submissive. If a woman attempts men's jobs then people would say *aneshave* implying that she is possessed by some alien spirit, she is not normal. Such remarks are meant to put off any attempt to divert from the traditional social norm and so maintain the gender-centred social setups. Examples of such setups were pointed out in chapters three and four. Thus each individual knows their place depending primarily on their gender as well as age. Society would not take lightly someone who crosses the boundaries, especially where women are concerned; they are branded as *wakareruka* which means loose and that is where comments such as *ndiyani angade kuroora zvakadaro* come from, that is, who on earth would want to marry such a person. Again, the reference point is always marriage and pleasing the men. However, it is not difficult to comprehend the irony of the social setup.

Another point that might be worth pointing out here, since it was also raised in the discussions of previous chapters is that the Shona are very much a hierarchical and protocol-fanatic society where nearly every aspect of life seems to have its place and its specific channels to be followed. To this end, according to the Shona, homosexuality is one of those practices that the immediate families are supposed to keep quiet, thus within the family

confines; that approach automatically makes the phenomenon secretive. Therefore, the Shona provide perfect, neat, coherent and systematic social structures where gay and lesbian relationships can flourish as long as those concerned do not talk about it. Thus the gender-centred socialisation ethic can be argued to provide a cushion for same-sex relationships, hence the secrecy motif.

6.3 The Church and the Sexual Secrecy Ideology

We have noted in previous chapters how the Church can be argued to have successfully camouflaged homosexuality. This is mainly because the approach employed by the Church reflects in many respects the Shona cultural sexual ethic. Hence, Church structures, Christian education systems and doctrines reflect a strict socio-cultural traditional approach to sexuality. However, in chapter four I pointed out the limitations of such an approach. That is, the approach propagated by the Church to foster a hetero-patriarchal model of sexuality can be argued to also provide a conducive platform for homosexual practice. It is very easy for gay and lesbian relationships to flourish in the different Christian education groups such as GCU (Girls' Christian Union), BCU (Boy's Christian Union), MCU (Men's Christian Union) and Ruwadzano (Women's Fellowship). These are the Church's main Christian education bodies that are meant to foster the Church's principals on sexual issues, however, the composition of these organisations seems to present a different message. What I mean is that these are single sex organisations; they are meant to encourage heterosexual marriage. However, encouraging and emphasising gender-centred Christian education groups can present an ironic situation in which gay relationships can be nurtured. This extends even to the seating arrangement during worship services, where men and women sit separately. This seating arrangement is not a rule in the Church but one can refer to it as a Shona cultural hangover manifesting itself in the Church. One may see it as if the Church is saying "Do it as

long as you do not talk about it". The secret motif is reflected in the ironic nature of such hetero-patriarchal approaches which do not acknowledge homosexual practice yet provide the most appropriate and convenient setting for gays or lesbians.

6.4 The Secrecy Theology

The premise of sexual secrecy theology is to have a clear concept of secrecy theology or at least some pre-understanding of it. Therefore, in this section I will attempt to give the background to sexual secrecy theology. I would put it that secrecy theology is engraved in the nature of God himself. The reason for this argument is that theology as a discipline is concerned about God, who by nature can be argued to be secretive or hidden, because no one has ever known Him, or maybe seen is the better word. Already, there seems to be a problem of defining what exactly I mean by to know God, the very word that a number of Old Testament scholars as discussed in the previous chapter were battling to define in relation to homosexuality (Genesis 19:1-29) but unfortunately with no consensus up to now. The picture of God is ambiguous. To argue that God is ambiguous, secretive or hidden is very debatable but I am basing my theological argument on the fact that even in the instances when God revealed himself to certain historical figures, He did not reveal himself in such a way that the individuals got to see him visibly. In every case all that is visible are the signs of God's presence. Take for instance, the burning bush (Exodus 3:2); the pillar of cloud at the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 13:21); clouds on Sinai (Exodus 19:9, 16). Moses is told that he cannot see the face of God, 'for man shall not see me and live'; 'Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself'" (Isiah 45:15). These are but some of the many examples from the Old Testament. The secretive nature of God lies also in the fact that, even though we do have doctrines about God, no human words can adequately describe Him because of his supreme nature. He is also secretive in the sense that He is personal. That is, the Church may put in place what they

believe about God, for instance in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe it is a requirement for all to learn the Apostles Creed before confirmation as full members of the Church, but when it comes down to experiencing God in one's life, that is very subjective or personal hence, secretive and unique. What I am driving at is that God does not have a single identity but He reveals himself to us in many ways; the Bible has many metaphors to describe Him and there are also many attributes of God all of which are attempts to explain who God really is.

In the New Testament God reveals Himself through Jesus Christ. At this point one might want to argue then that because Christ himself proclaimed that “whoever sees me sees the Father” (John 14:9), thus God was assuming human form. But I would like to argue further that the ‘seeing’ that is meant in this passage is by Faith, since God the Father and God the Son were one but also distinct (The doctrine of the Trinity). Hebrews gives an elaborate explanation of what is meant by having Faith: “Faith is giving substance to our hopes and convinces us of realities we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1ff). Hanson summarises Faith in three words, which are belief, commitment and trust.³⁴⁰ Anyhow, the idea of literally understanding God in human form has so many limitations that this study has no intention of discussing in detail because it would mean going into the Trinitarian arguments and that is not really related to my topic. The simplest way to put it may be is that God was hidden in Jesus Christ, hence advocating His secretive nature. In short the Bible seems to present the secrecy of God as a given, (Romans 1:20; Colossians 1:15) and that His thoughts and decrees are incomprehensible (Romans 11:33ff) and that He dwells in unapproachable light (1Timothy 6:16). To sum up, one can say that, because Christianity as a religion is based on faith, it is to a large degree secretive, in the sense that faith is subjective.

³⁴⁰ Bradley C. Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 1-2.

Talking of Jesus himself, being the head of the Church, He can be understood as being contiguous with the secrecy ideology. I would like to argue here that Jesus' life was full of secrecy, from his conception up until his death. Jesus' life is not only secretive in nature but also mysterious. Nevertheless, in this section I would like to elaborate on two areas of Jesus' life which demonstrate and illustrate how he is at the centre of the secrecy motif. For me to achieve this purpose, I will first demonstrate how his own ministry was shrouded in secrecy, using as my basis Wrede's theory of the messianic secret.³⁴¹ I shall attempt to discuss Jesus' messianic secret and demonstrate how it can stand as a model for a theological approach in situations where it is not safe to 'come out'. Secondly, I will then proceed further to show how Jesus seemed to have implemented this model of secrecy to the concept of sexuality.

Jesus' messianic secret is most clear in the Gospel of Mark where he made constant pleas to those whom he healed, asking them not to tell anyone. As mentioned above, the theory of the messianic secret itself was first argued for by Wilhelm Wrede.³⁴² Writing at the turn of the century, when scholars were primarily concerned with the quest for the historical Jesus, Wrede argued that the gospel of Mark was a theological statement of Jesus' identity rather than an objective account of his life. I am in agreement with Wrede's core argument that during his public ministry Jesus did not identify himself as the Messiah. Jesus knew that he was the Messiah but was constrained by socio-political issues from coming out. As long as Jesus stayed in the 'closet' He was certain that His ministry would continue. For Him to come out claiming to be the Messiah was according to Jewish tradition automatically blasphemy because it was only God's prerogative to pronounce him as such. Therefore, Jesus knew that He was the Messiah but He had to maintain a low profile about it for two main

³⁴¹ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge and London: James Clark and Company 1971).

³⁴² Ibid. For a brief presentation of Wrede's theses and the discussion following it, see James L. Blevins, *The Messianic secret in Markan Research 1901-1976* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 1-23; Christopher Tuckett, "Introduction: The Problem of the Messianic Secret," in Christopher Tuckett, ed, *The Messianic Secret* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 1-28.

reasons. First, attempting to do so would be blasphemy, in terms of attempting to do supposedly what only the father could do (Divine designation). Secondly, Jesus was seeking to avoid political ideas associated with messiahship where the people were expecting a Messiah who would liberate them from the Roman authority; as a result such claims were bound to be tested under torture and death. This point is also made by O'Neill, that there was a Jewish law which prescribed death for anyone claiming to be the Messiah.³⁴³ However this is the crime that later led him to his death. The Jewish authorities informed Pilate that Jesus was guilty of the capital crime of claiming that he was the Messiah: "We have a law, and according to our law he ought to die because he made himself the son of God" (John 19:7). Thus people would test him by pain of death, hence, one can argue that, aware of the situation, Jesus adopted the secrecy motif. The secrecy motif is evidenced by the commands Jesus gave exhorting demons (Mark 1:25,34); people whom Jesus healed (1:43-45; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26), and the disciples (8:30; 9:9) not to disclose his messianic dignity. The socio-political situation compelled Jesus to command those around him not to disclose his identity, hence the secrecy motif. People knew that Jesus was unique and, keen to find out how much people knew, he asked his own disciples in Mark 8:27-30. For he acted like one, he healed many, fed many, drove out evil spirits but he avoided talking about himself as the messiah. One may want to argue here that it seemed obvious that people knew who Jesus was even though many would not talk about it. The following examples bear witness Mark 1:22-25; 29-32; 6:30-39; 6:13; in this sense, then, the Messianic secret was a public secret. In fact, it can be argued that, Jesus by saying "do not tell people" after healing people he was actually saying go and tell people because he knew rumours spread faster, He was actually whetting people's appetites. In the next section I will attempt to discuss the secrecy ideology as it is related to sexuality starting with the Old Testament.

³⁴³ J. C. O'Neill, *Who Did Jesus Think He Was New York* (Köln: Brill, 1995), 42-54.

6.5 The Sexual Secrecy Theology

Having established the basics of secrecy theology, this following section is an attempt to relate it to sexuality and in doing so to develop what I would refer to as a sexual secrecy theology. The Bible, as one of the sources for Christian ethics, also presents elements that one can argue to be sexual secrecy in nature. From the Old Testament, a number of biblical examples come to mind: In the creation stories God does not seem to make it categorically clear to us what the purposes of creating a man and a woman were. The confusion is not made easy by providing two creation stories Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-25. These chapters were discussed in detail in chapter five but what I want to point out at this stage is that there are complexities and ambiguities that the creation stories present. For instance, the distinction into male and female may suggest a special community between human beings and God (Genesis 1) and a bond between the man and the woman. Another way in which one might understand the purpose of God for creation can be that it was orderly (Genesis 1) and chaotic (Genesis 2). Therefore, such a presentation may be argued to be creating ambiguities with deep-seated meanings that one can argue to be part of a sexual secrecy theme.

Another example from the Old Testament is in relation to the various lies that seemed to have received God's blessings.

For instance, the Egyptian midwives lying to the pharaoh (Exodus 1:18-22) or the tricky deviousness of Miriam and mother in hiding their relationship to Moses, the baby in the bulrushes (Exodus 2:1-10). Following the pharaoh's order to throw all boy babies into the river, they did that but first put him into a basket that would float!³⁴⁴

³⁴⁴ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, 'Reading the Bible from the Low and Outside: Lesbians and Gay People as God's Tricksters', in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds, *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 15-16.

This controversial ethical approach is well demonstrated by Virginia Mollenkott and she calls it a “trickster motif”.³⁴⁵ She argues that lying is sometimes necessary, “that the real world is always more complex than our simple answers, and that the moral certainty that we can truly admire requires us to pay attention to everything that is there.”³⁴⁶ Thus the cost of coming out in some contexts is not ethically justifiable because of the consequences that would follow. Examples such as that of “Abraham’s fooling potentates into thinking his wife was his sister because at the time the charade seemed necessary for survival or the great Trickster’s sending the king of kings to be born in a lowly stable.”³⁴⁷ “Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, ‘She is my sister.’ Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.” (Genesis 20:1). Abraham denied because of the consequences he envisaged if he were to acknowledge being married. “Abimelech asked Abraham, ‘What was your reason for doing this?’ Abraham replied, ‘I said to myself, “There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.”’” (Genesis 20: 11) The same can be said of Rahab when she was asked if she had seen any spies. She denied seeing them even though she had offered the men a place of hiding. Therefore the Old Testament presents us with the basics of what may constitute a sexual secret motif. Another example of sexual secrecy can be that of Moses - when he was young his mother had to hide him from Pharaoh because he was hunting down male children: Exodus 1:15-18; 2:1-4. One more example is that of David and Jonathan who are referred to just as good friends because Jonathan’s father Saul seeks to kill David: 1Samuel 20:1-11; 16. The point being made here is that at times

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁴⁶ Robin W. Lovin, ‘Bonheoffer’s Ethics: A Complex Obedience,’ *Christian Century*, April 26 1995, 446-447.

³⁴⁷ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. ‘Reading the Bible from the Low and Outside: Lesbians and Gay People as God’s Tricksters’, in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds, *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 16. Mollenkott went to explain that these qualities are necessary of any person or group which is denied social power and has to achieve it in ways other than those that the system allows.

people are forced by circumstances such as being labelled as people with no rights, so that coming out would cost them their job, make them an object of ridicule or worse.

From the New Testament Jesus serves as an example. Firstly, in the previous chapter it was explained that Jesus' teaching on sexual relationships is heterosexual and for homosexuals He appears to have said nothing. Secondly, there are so many things Jesus talked about, but when it came to the issue of his own sexuality, he said almost nothing. Nevertheless, my point of departure here is that all human beings are sexual beings. If Jesus was truly human then he obviously had a certain sexual orientation which is not portrayed very clearly in any of the Gospels. How Jesus expressed or did not express his feelings is a matter of debate because he maintained silence throughout His ministry. Therefore, to claim that Jesus advocated for heterosexuality as the norm for sexual relationships is pretty much an argument from silence and it does not seem to hold much water. To also argue that He was bisexual or homosexual when He never mentioned anything along those lines also seems to be far fetched. Anyway, Jesus could have been one of the following options:

First, was He heterosexual and with maybe Mary Magdalen as his wife (Mark 15:40,47; 16:1,9; Luke 8:1-3). Surely one can argue that there could have been something going on between Mary and Jesus, for Jesus is said to have wept when He learned about the death of Mary's brother. There are a number of reasons that can be argued as pointing to a very close relationship between Jesus and Mary. Mary was there when Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:40; Matt 27:62), she followed to see where they were going to bury Jesus (Mark 15: 47) and after the resurrection Jesus appeared first to Mary (Mark 16:1).

Secondly, the Gospels also gives us another impression that maybe Jesus opted for celibacy so as to devote His time to the ministry of God. At one point discussing on marriage He explained that “For while some are incapable of marriage because they were born so, or were made so by men, there are others who have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 19:12). Other verses where Jesus echoed the same sentiments are Luke 18:28-30 and Mark 10:20-21. The superiority of celibacy for those who want to devote their life to God’s Kingdom was later confirmed by Paul when he emphasised that celibacy is a superior state of life (1Corinthians 7:7-8; 7:32-35). At this point however, one may wonder why, if Jesus had opted for celibacy, Paul did not refer to Jesus’ example. Surely Paul would have said something about it or better still, instead of saying be like me (Paul) in 1Corinthians 7:7, he could have said be like Christ. Nevertheless, celibacy could have been an option that Jesus chose in order to concentrate on the mission at hand.

Thirdly, was Jesus gay with most probably John as his partner? (John 7: 20-25). It seems most likely that Jesus’ sexuality was outside society’s norms, hence the secrecy from both Jesus himself and the Gospel writers. Analysed from the Gospel writers’ angle, one can argue that all the biblical authors were doing was to keep up appearances by avoiding washing what that could have considered to be ‘dirty linen’ in public since both the biblical community and the Church leaders who were responsible for the canonisation of the Bible were there to propagate patriarchal models. The fact that they did not write about homosexuality does not imply that they did not know about it because, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, especially from the Old Testament, these are the relationships that are underplayed, therefore, the case of Jesus comes as no surprise.

Nevertheless, one can still go on to argue that faced with such a hetero-patriarchal environment, and in order to divert people's attention, Jesus surrounded himself with an all male company, thus his disciples. "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alpheus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor." (Luke 6:12-16). Since this was a hetero-patriarchal society, no eyebrows were raised because it was the expected social norm for men to spend time in the company of other men. However, paradoxically, it is much easier to have homosexual relationships in such groupings, especially where men are concerned because men seem to be more discreet by nature while women are known to be great gossipers. Not that there is anything wrong with gossiping; after all, Jesus himself revealed himself to women first because he knew they would spread the news irrespective of the tense political situation! (Mark 16: 1-9).

Furthermore, to obstruct people's attention from his sexual life, Jesus always included two other disciples, Peter and James, when they went on an errand. This is reflected in Matthew 17: 1 where it is written: "After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves." Another example is Mark 14: 32-33 "They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled." The patriarchal social setup, just as with the Shona, provided a convenient platform for same sex relationships in the gender-centred grouping. Even the synagogues, where men and women sit separately, also reflect the worshipping seating arrangements in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe.

Fourthly, no-one knows Jesus' sexuality. This is because Jesus' sexuality is not clearly explained, in all the Gospels; it seems to be a subject area very cautiously treated. The major question here seems to be: Why would Jesus be silent about his sexuality if he was heterosexual since this was a patriarchal society? Surely if he was married they would have proudly showed off his children as descendants of Christ. A couple of reasons here spring to mind:

Firstly, maybe the crux of this matter lies in the fact that Gospels seem to be more theologies than historiographies; any history in the Gospels seem to be subservient to a theological interest. For example the historical background in the Gospel of Luke 1-2, seems to serve the purpose of giving the theological background of the virgin birth of Jesus. In this view then, one may argue that emphasising on Jesus' sexual history would have maybe diverted the authors' purposes.

Secondly, understood within the social-cultural environment of his time, Jesus did not opt for the secrecy motif only where his messianic nature was concerned but also regarding his sexuality. In other words, I would like to argue that, it seems, there are themes that Jesus appeared to have opted for in His ministry and sexual secrecy appears to be one of them. That is, it comes as a package of Christological themes which has to be understood in this way; that Jesus' sexuality was shrouded in a mystery of secrecy from the time of his birth up to the end of his life. Let me attempt to demonstrate my point here: Firstly, one can argue that Jesus' conception was secretive in nature (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke: 1:28-38). Then further on when Jesus was born his parents had to escape to a different city to protect their son from king Herod who was after all boy children, (Matthew 2: 13-15; 16). That is, from the time of

his birth, he had to maintain a low profile for his own safety. Since Jesus was also born into such “militarised society under Roman occupation, where anyone who stood up for their rights quickly find their way to the torturers and death on the cross...”³⁴⁸ in other words the socio-political environment may have called for a secretive approach. Another reason that might have called for secrecy was the socio-cultural perspective of Jesus’ community.

In the biblical community, just like the Shona, there is an extent to which sex is associated with all things dirty. It seems so ironic for a society that advocates the propagation of children. Sexual feelings are said not only to be vaguely shameful but also morally suspect. I recall in one of my group interview sessions one lady was elaborating on her comment when she pronounced that there are some things that Shona do not do and kissing in public is one of them. She went on to say that “Only prostitutes do such things. Kissing is for the bedroom, out of your children’s sight. The only time it is acceptable is on your wedding day when the minister pronounces that ‘You may kiss the bride’.”³⁴⁹ Another one had to add “Surely one can not kiss in public because *ambuya* (mother in law) or *tsano* (brother in law) may see you and that can cause a lot of embarrassment.”³⁵⁰ Therefore, the concept of sexual secrecy as portrayed in the Gospels seems to be in line with the Shona perspective on sexual morality. The need to deny Jesus’ sexual feelings reflects not so much the Church doctrine, but the Shona attitude to the whole concept of sex. Given the heritage of negative attitudes about sex – that sex is dirty, it becomes very difficult then to comprehend Jesus having any sexual feelings, worse still of a homosexual nature. They do talk about God only as the source of human sexuality in a tamed, idealised sexuality. For example, presenting God, as creating man and a woman; presenting God as commanding humanity to procreate; and presenting

³⁴⁸ John J. McNeill, *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families and Friends* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1996.) p

³⁴⁹ Interviews, January, 2004.

³⁵⁰ Interviews January, 2004.

Jesus as blessing a heterosexual wedding. Such a presentation meets the criteria of an ideal hetero-patriarchal sexual concept. Therefore, to talk about Jesus as a sexual being becomes anathema, and an abomination, hence the secrecy.

Another reason for Jesus to maintain secrecy could have been that He knew that an opportune time would come when bisexuality or homosexuality would be an issue that needs to be addressed. When Jesus started his ministry, He abolished some things that were no longer practical during that time and He was loud and clear about His position. Hence His announcements “You have heard it said, but now I say” (Matthew 5:38-48). My argument here is that Jesus did not address issues such as homosexuality because since he was in the Father and the Father was in him, He knew all the complexities and the chaotic nature of human sexuality. It was not yet time to dwell on the subject but the time will (or has) come. We have other subjects that Jesus openly explained that it was not time for: “Then John's disciples came and asked him, ‘How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’” (Matthew 9:14-15) He chose not to address what is now an issue (homosexuality) because it was not an issue then, not because there were no such people at the time. Jesus envisaged a paradigm shift since he was also representing a different paradigm from the one before him, which is the one represented by God the Father. Therefore, for him the time would come for a sexual revolution, and God, the Holy Spirit would be there to help to clarify the truth. Just as He refused to have His disciples fast, arguing that it was not yet time, they will fast when he has gone, He maintained a silence on homosexuality as well as His own sexuality. One can argue then that the secrecy behind Jesus’ approach to sexuality was in line with his basic principal approach to ministry, namely there is a time for everything. As

such, He maintained the messianic secret until an opportune time, as any earlier revelations were tantamount to him losing his life and the same approach was applied to the issue of homosexuality as well as His own sexuality. This calls to mind one of His responses when He was said to be tempted by the devil, He was asked to throw himself down (Matthew 4:5-7) “You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.” The same can be said about his sexuality; to come-out, that is if He was gay, would be like putting the Lord your God to test. Therefore, knowing his socio-cultural environment, sexual secrecy was the best option even though the social systems appeared to be conducive for same sex relationships to go on with no eyebrows raised.

Whilst one of my arguments is that there is significant evidence to suggest that Jesus could have been queer throughout his ministry, Robert Goss would like to argue that Christ became queer at Easter when he identified himself with the sexually oppressed.

Jesus died in solidarity with gay men and lesbians. His death became a no to closeted existence, to gay/lesbian invisibility and homophobic violence. The cross has terrorised gay men and lesbians. It has been a symbol of lethal sexual oppression, but Jesus death shapes the cross into a symbol of struggle for queer liberation. From the perspective of Easter, God takes the place of the oppressed Jesus on the cross. God identifies with the suffering and death of Jesus at the hands of a political system of oppression. For gay and lesbian Christians, Easter becomes the event at which God says no to homophobic violence and sexual oppression.³⁵¹

Nevertheless, even if he revealed that he was queer at Easter it does not dismiss the fact that he was discreet about his sexuality during the period of his ministry. On the other hand, it is also possible that Jesus did say something about homosexuality but that this was edited out by the patriarchal Gospel authors. As sexuality is part of God’s creation since “through Him God made all things, not one thing in all creation was made without Him” (John 1:3),

³⁵¹ Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 83-84.

therefore, it is illogical to separate Christian faith and sexuality, for they all work together as part of the holistic approach to the whole person.

On the whole, the phenomenon of homosexuality presents us with a challenge to view not only sexuality, but to have a better understanding of the whole concept of human creation. Thus, to understand human beings as created not as straightforward men and women with the purpose of procreation, as it is traditionally presented, but as part of an orderly as well as chaotic creation, thus in such a manner bringing out the uniqueness of God, his secrecy. God's creative process and revelation does not seem to be a once and for all event but a past-present-continuous plan of which sex and sexuality issues as we know them today were not revealed completely in the initial stages of creation, not even when God revealed himself through Jesus, but through the continuous work of God through the Holy Spirit, and we are to expect more revelations in future. Thus the phenomenon of homosexuality as we know it today presents a challenge of how much we understand about God and His creative activities.

6.6 The Church and Homosexuality: Theology of Sexual Secrecy

To come up with a theme of sexual secrecy where the Church's approach to homosexuality is concerned does not mean to say that that is what the Church is advocating, because, as has been discussed, the Church says almost nothing. It is from this nothingness that the sexual secrecy theology springs. The question one might ask at this point is whether sexual secrecy theology is the right approach in a contemporary Methodist Church in Zimbabwe? This kind of question is difficult to respond to because to start with, what and who makes a theology right? The use of the word 'right' itself seems to be ambiguous. One would assume that maybe it is not so complicated because the answer lies in Jesus Christ who is the head of the Church. But it has already been discussed above that the historicity of Jesus' sexuality, His

model of sexuality and His teaching on homosexuality are not made clear to us in the Gospels. If Jesus was truly human and truly divine, one would expect to have the sexual aspect of His humanity portrayed. In addition to what I have already mentioned above in relation to Jesus and His sexuality I would like to elaborate again on a few points just to explain the problems related to this section. The premise of the argument I am trying to develop here is that Jesus, who is the head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18); the vine and we are the branches (John 15:1-6); and the Church as the bride (Revelations 21: 2, 9) implying that Christ is the bridegroom, have a clear, biological human reality, thus an intimate relationship in which one cannot do without the other. The relationship between Christ and the Church is mysteriously connected such that for those who are not in the Church it is extremely difficult to explain or even to understand. The implication of using biological metaphors to explain Christ's relationship with the Church is very significant to this discussion. One of the reasons for using biological metaphors was to illustrate that first and foremost, the subject of sex and sexuality seem to be understood initially from a biological perspective. That would mean for instance, Christ as the head of the Church is the source of the whole body's (the Church/community of sinners) nourishment and proper functioning. This image of Christ when applied to the concept of sexuality would imply that God intends the Church to be a community of Christlike maturity, following Jesus Christ's approach to sexuality. This brings us to another question: What is Jesus' approach to sexuality? You will notice that if I try to respond to this question it is most likely going to prompt me to go back from where I started in this chapter and so the circle goes on and on. It all comes down to how we interpret what the Gospels say and did not say. It appears, the significant point to note in analysing the issue of Jesus, sexuality and the Church is that it seems that the Jesus whom we are presented with in the Gospels is a well-polished person reflecting the cultural insights and limitation within the biblical writers. It reflects their

aspirations of what it means to be both human and divine, and as a result whatever is in conflict with our own assumptions is left out. As reflected in the Gospels, a significant part of Jesus' jigsaw puzzle is missing in terms of Jesus Christology and until that part is identified our approach to homosexuality remains an aspect of God's mercy. One of Jesus' Christological titles is the 'son of man', which is an affirmation of the humanity of Christ.³⁵² To deny Jesus' sexuality is in a way to affirm that the sexual aspect of humanity is evil, which seems to be a theological disaster and contradicts God himself. Because the Gospels avoided Jesus' personal life one cannot help but wonder if maybe, Jesus is human in every respect apart from being sexual as He was like human beings in every respect apart from sin. The problem of giving us elaborate passages of Jesus' suffering and almost nothing on his sexual aspect leaves one to wonder whether pain and suffering brings one closer to the Divine than being a sexual being. If sexuality is that bad, then why did God create it in the first place? The concept appears oppressive only when understood as if it were to be taken as revelation of the full and literal God-willed way of being human. The answer, for me lies in the sexual secretiveness of God. Thus, God created humans as sexual beings (relating to instincts and activities connected with physical contact between individuals) as well as spiritual beings (affecting the human spirit as opposed to material or physical things) of which both aspects can be said to be hidden. The ethical approach to the subject depends upon each particular context. Jesus as the head of the Church set an example but note should be taken that "Christological debates of the early Church took place largely in the eastern Mediterranean world, and were conducted in Greek language and often in the light of the presuppositions of major Greek schools of philosophy."³⁵³

³⁵² McGrath pointed out that there are a number of views concerning this title, it does not command universal assent. Nevertheless, my point here is not really to go into the debate about the title but just to point out that Jesus besides being truly divine was also truly human in every sense. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 278.

³⁵³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 18.

At the beginning of this section I had posed a question, asking if sexual secrecy theology is the right theology as is reflected in the Church's approach to homosexuality. 'Right', in this instance is implied to mean "virtuous, moral, honourable, honest, good."³⁵⁴ I have already pointed out that there are limitations to use the word right but I have chosen the word because for me it seems to describe my theme and fit in well with the context under study as far as the Church's approach to homosexuality is concerned. It is a theological theme drawn from what the Church does not say, what it does not show, one can even refer to as the Church's limitations. The peripheries are being made the centre. A theology from beyond the margins. A theology that seems to be springing from beyond the compact and seemingly strictly guided structures, a theology that is concerned with not what the Church really teaches but looks beyond at what it does not teach, a non-discourse theology. For Christ the head of the Church said almost nothing and as for his own sexuality all people do is come up with theories since there is no evidence to prove the historicity of His sexuality, it was all hidden, hence sexual secrecy theology. What is right then as for the Methodist Church and homosexuality in Zimbabwe? To learn from Jesus Christ since we are only branches and He is the vine (John 15:5). "Christian theology insists that the values that are determinative for Christians are expressed and consummated in a person, Jesus Christ. He provides in himself the values by which Christians should live, the criteria by which they should assess every situation and the guidelines to direct their paths through the world."³⁵⁵

6.7 CONCLUSION

Sexual secrecy theology has its roots both in the Bible and in Shona tradition. Therefore, we can conclude that silence, hiddenness or secrecy as a theological approach to sexuality can be

³⁵⁴ Cathrine Soanes, Maurice Waite, Sara Hawker, *The Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Wordpower Guide* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 1113.

³⁵⁵ John Stacy, *Groundwork of Theology* (London: Epworth Press, 1977), 33.

traced back to Old Testament times, advocated by significant historical figures, including Jesus, as reflected in the New Testament and subsequently, the Church in Zimbabwe. It is embedded within the structures that are meant to guard against sexuality, be it in society, the Church or the Bible. The secrecy motif comes about as an aspect of virtue as well as fear. It is a virtue because sexual practices are considered as very religious and intrusive in this respect public sexual conduct or discourse is deemed as immoral. It also involves a fear of the religious significance associated with sexuality as well as the socio-political implications that may be aroused.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this work I have attempted to discuss some of the pernicious myths that inform the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's attitude to homosexuality: that there are no gays and lesbians among the Shona; that homosexuality is a foreign phenomenon; that God forbids the practice of homosexuality. For these reasons all gays and lesbians are supposedly presumed to be in some sort of conspiracy together because, it is assumed, they all chose to be homosexuals; they are all paedophiles and child molesters; therefore they are all sinners. As if to justify these myths or stereotypes, there are occasional events that seem to happen in certain parts of the country like in the example of the street kids such as Todini given in chapter three. Such a scenario is just oversimplified anecdotal evidence used to support people's prejudice. The reality is that the Church's teaching today seems not to be in continuity with contemporary social and cultural realities; the reality being that there are self-professed gays and lesbians; that there are formal gay and lesbian organisations such as GALZ; that it is becoming harder to talk of a particular people's culture in isolation in a world where many cultures are coming face to face and influencing each other.

It has been established that among the Shona homosexuality as a sexual practice has been going on even before the colonial period. However, even up to today, such practices are deemed to be shameful and immoral, therefore unacceptable and should never be seen or mentioned in public; consequently they are swept under the carpet of social systems. Families will do whatever it takes to get individuals who show signs of not conforming to the prescribed sexual norms into marriage in order to keep up with social expectations.

Nevertheless, it remains a fact that among the Shona there were some individuals whose sexual preference was and still is for those of their own sex. To this end then homosexual practice is as indigenous as it comes, and is a historical sexual practice in Zimbabwe. Following this line of thought then, homosexual relationships existed among the Shona but it seems one of the underlying problems emanates from the fact that the culture does not seem to have a moral equivalent that celebrates the practice. For instance, one can say the moral basis for heterosexuals is marriage but for homosexuals in Zimbabwe marriage does seem to be problematic. What I mean here is that it seems assuming same sex relationships to be marriages may be making

too much of a challenge when they use traditional terms to affirm a non-traditional lifestyle... a red flag comes up when they use the term “marriage” because marriage in traditional sense has been different than two men or two women forming a relationship... that word marriage it elicits, it invites, it conjures up problems for people.³⁵⁶

For this reason, homosexuality has always existed on the peripheries of Shona society. These were relationships the society would rather not talk about and therefore pretend they do not exist. Urbanisation did not prompt homosexual practice in any way but only disrupted the traditional social networks and created new dimensions of systems which were more favourable for homosexual practice, while at the same time exposing what lies underneath the social sexual fabrics. In other words, it is not reasonable to argue that homosexuality as a sexual practice came from the West because there were people known to engage in such practices prior to colonialism. If anything in this regard, what colonialism brought was urbanisation with its developments that culminated with the breakdown of traditional social support systems and consequently exposing some practices the traditional society would rather keep out of public eye, such as homosexual practice. Therefore, to deny homosexual

³⁵⁶ Gary David Comstock, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations* (Kentucky: Westminster Knox Press, 2001), 39.

existence and attribute the practice to the West does not seem to hold water any more. It comes across as a mere desperate attempt to cling on to a fast disappearing culture and its traditions. The fact that gays and lesbians now have an organised identifiable group speaks volumes even though they are not given any voice in the society of which they are members. The reality is clear enough and it cannot be hidden or talked out of existence.

In addition, unprecedented developments within society have made the subject of sex and sexuality a lot easier to talk about, with most men in the cities and women in the villages. The influences of traditional villages on the individual have been largely watered down, initially because of urbanisation. Of late there have been massive emigration and immigration which has seen lots of people coming and going out of the country. The influence of such a subsequent interaction of cultures cannot be overlooked, and a Church that does not take that cultural upheaval into consideration with its theological approach is not being true to its mission. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that even though there has been a paradigm shift, the main concept of African sexuality still stands unshaken by the cultural waves thereby creating a push and pull factor between what seems to represent tradition (marriage) and what seems to represent modernity (supposedly homosexuality). It is like two rival camps representing different epochs of life. It is without doubt that the challenges faced by gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe today reflect a lot of complex issues. It is my aim in this concluding chapter to draw, highlight and summarise the key aspects that seem to be the real issues from an African perspective of sexuality and come up with the main findings as they pertain to the issues related to homosexuality.

7.2 The Church and Homosexuality: A Patriarchal Phallogentric Ecclesiological Model

This work has identified that the main reason why the Church seem to have a negative attitude to homosexuality lies in the Shona concept of sex and sexuality, which is primarily marriage with the main purpose of having children. I would like to suggest that this approach reflects a historical construction of sexuality that embodies hidden strategies of male power. The premise of this conclusion lies in the fact that the Church presents us with a clear, definite and precise model of sexuality that it adheres to, and it patterns its Christian education in such a manner that all members neatly fit into this model. There are specific gender-centred Christian education groups which start from a very tender age of six years with each gender groomed to take note of their roles. Since these roles mirror so much of the social context, there are distinct hierarchies to be maintained. Such hierarchies, just as in Shona society, have the men on top; as such the Christian education system does very little to disguise this phallogentric approach. A phallogentric approach finds it very difficult to accommodate any sexual practices that seem to undermine male dominance.

In a phallogentric approach all the systems are patterned to reinforce this domination hence the difference in dynamics of the subject areas between girls and boys. For the girls their main taught areas are aligned to ‘caring’ duties such as housekeeping and preparing oneself for the married life. The physical preparations include physical ordeals such as pulling one’s labia minora to be at least six inches long. This is such a gruesome exercise for the girl in an effort to get herself ready to please her future husband. One of the main duties for the elected elder women of the Church is to encourage girls to start this at a very tender age since it is a long process that takes years of concentration. For girls who seem to show no signs of interest in this, the warning was always that their husbands would leave them for other

women. What little girl would wish for such an unpleasant future? It is clear here to see how manipulative the phallogocentric dynamics really are. The girl child does not live for herself but for the men. Psychologically she is made to prepare herself physically for the men, she is married to bear children for the men, when she is married she leaves her parents' home to spend her life with her husband's family and in addition she is called by her husband's name; the children she gives birth to officially belong to her husband, and in addition it is mainly the boy child that seems to be valued more because the family name has to go on and so the phallogocentric cycle continues.

As for the boys, their Christian education has to do more with being family providers, as is reflected in chapter four. The aspect of providing stretches to even meaning providing the seed from which children are born. It is within this understanding that the children can never belong to a woman since the woman carries no seed. Furthermore, the 'wasting' of this seed is not lightly taken unless it is within an educational setting such as 'seed testing'. As explained in earlier chapters seed testing is normally encouraged among boys so that if any problem is detected at an early stage it can be rectified to enable him to have children. Almost the same seed testing methods were used in the Church as were used back in the villages, thus dropping semen in a container of water; if it floats then the individual would be advised to get some remedies and 'the blessed ones' are those with semen that sink.

This is a patriarchal model, determined by men and set to satisfy the men's egos. Therefore, since in gay sexual practices no procreation is realised, seeds are supposedly wasted consequently demeaning the male gender. Furthermore, because of the Shona obsession with keeping the family name going there is a religious significance attached to the male seed (sperm). To elaborate a bit more, the Shona cosmological world attaches a religious

significance to the whole concept of sex and sexuality to the extent that one feels obliged not only to participate and make a contribution for the continuation of the cycle but also to avoid the disruption of the cycle. The living are believed to be blessed by the dead (ancestors) in their sexual life; children are supposedly the signs of being blessed and not getting married as well as childlessness as a curse. As a result, such a belief mounts pressure on its adherents to get married and have children to avoid being labelled as cursed. While this may have long lasting psychological effects on every member of the society it is the men who apply more pressure around the need for a male child because they need the family name to live on. The whole concept of sexuality seems to be determined by men to the extent that in the case of a wife failing to give her husband a boy child the man has the prerogative of marrying other wives in his search for a boy, and in most cases the wife is apportioned the blame.

Because the sources from which the Church draws its theological approaches are primarily the people's culture as well as the Bible, one can argue that the pastoral approach of the Church is patterned along heterosexual phallogentric models designed to serve archaic patriarchal prerogatives hallowed by tradition. To this end one can conclude that to a large extent theological ideas of sexuality depend upon socially constructed patterns of meaning.

7.2.1 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: Sexuality is Functional

It has been noted in earlier chapters that the reason behind the need for children is that the Shona seem to have a functional approach to sexuality. In contrast, in the West, sexual relationships are not functional but they seem to be more based on love, not implying that in Shona sexual relationships there is no love, but the way Africans and the West express love seems to differ in a number of ways. For instance, while for the Shona love is functional and privately expressed for the West it has to do with how much one feels for the other and can

be openly expressed between partners. To elaborate a bit more, for the Shona a man is said to love his wife if he provides for her and as proof, the wife should be seen to be robust, plump and chubby; this is a sign of good living which will make her people very happy that their daughter is being looked after well. Also for the Shona as explained in the previous chapter, public romantic gestures only incite public ridicule for people tend to take it upon themselves to reprimand those concerned and this can range from name calling to physical attacks. It is accepted that people do not kiss and cuddle in public because supposedly that is for people of a certain moral standard which is not to be tolerated. However, for the West it seems to be of no great deal to engage in such public romantic gestures and, also robustness, plumpness and chubbiness are not seen as anywhere near sexiness or good living but are associated with obesity and psychological problems. Thus, while for the Shona the bigger the better in the West it seems the skinnier the better. It is true then for one to conclude that what may be normal to one culture may be viewed as unnatural in other cultures. In this way then, the African approach does seem to make sense, understood from their functional point of view.

The most obvious pointer to the functional approach of the Shona is their emphasis on children. Their ongoing interaction with people from other cultures did less to reduce the importance placed on reproductive roles. That is, procreation and motherhood is still very much central to stereotypes of femininity, while fatherhood is of uttermost importance for masculinity. This is one of the basis from which the people's attitude to homosexuality springs. Because this point has already been explained in previous chapters I am not going to elaborate any more at this point. However, it is important to emphasise that in the Shona culture the honour of becoming a spirit medium is only achieved if a person dies as a parent, that is one must have been a mother or a father during your lifetime in order to to be honoured as a spirit medium after death. The idea that one would be revered even after death

places pressure on people to rally behind and strive to keep up with the cultural expectations, in this case marriage and children (preferably boys) who will carry the family name hence the functional approach and its phallogentric nature.

7.2.2 A Patriarchal Phallogentric Approach: Sexuality is Marriage Bound

It has to be noted that even though there have been significant changes in traditional Shona ways of life there are some values which are still central to the people as far as marriage is concerned. For example, people still have to pay *roora* for marriage, even when they are living away from home.³⁵⁷ *Roora* still maintains its original purpose, to seal a marriage relationship between two marrying families and for the womb that would produce children for the husband. This creates a challenge for homosexual relationships, that is if they are to be understood as marriages. As outlined in chapter two, it is primarily *roora* that gives Shona marriages their moral worth. That is, even if a man and a woman decides to live together with no *roora* paid their relationship is not considered as marriage, it is regarded as immoral; only after *roora* payment can a marriage relationship be considered as moral. The title of husband or wife is assumed only after *roora* has been paid, that is, for the Shona one is never referred to as a husband before *roora* payment but a *chikomba*. This word carries with it derogatory, insulting and humiliating connotations intentionally intended to instil an element of embarrassment to anyone concerned. As for a woman who lives with a man with no *roora* paid for is referred to as *arikubika mapoto* (which means she is co-habiting), she is not a wife. If anything happens to her such as illness or death, her family will demand full payment of *roora* before they bless her burial. Understood properly, even though a couple can assume the title of father and mother first before marriage, they would have no respect from the

³⁵⁷ When it comes to marriage most Zimbabweans would still go back home to their families to pay *roora* if they happen to get married while living outside the country. It is a shame for a man to live with a woman when no lobola has been paid, that is if the woman is also from Zimbabwe. For a woman to stay with a man who has not yet paid lobola is most degrading. Therefore lobola still remains a central part of Shona marriages.

society, they are frowned at because what is expected first is for them to be husband and wife, which is achieved by *roora* payment. It is only after *roora* payment that a man and a woman can be pronounced as married. Therefore, the question that springs to mind in relation to gay and lesbian relationships in this context is whether they can be marriages? Is it ethically justifiable for same sex relationships to be referred to as marriages in this context? Is it applicable to pay *roora* for a gay or lesbian relationship? One may wonder if the gay people in this community are prepared to go through this marriage process as a way of trying to make their relationships acceptable, bearing in mind what the process of marriage payment involves as explained in chapter two. Even though the concept of *roora* has turned into an almost money economy, it is not a matter sending a cheque or asking the parents how much they would charge. It is a process that involves the whole extended family and is not a one day event but the moral value of it is earned after a number of years involving a series of negotiations. That is, the process involves introducing their partners to uncles (*sekuru*) and aunties (*vanatete*) first for their approval; then proceeding to pay *roora* (bride price). A few but crucial areas here may need to be addressed such as on the payment of *roora* an agreement has to be reached between the partners on who should be the 'wife' since *roora* is paid by the bridegroom to the bride to be. Such an approach would bring a whole new dimension to the concept of *roora* and marriage as it is understood by the Shona. The question that one may now ask is, if Shona gays and lesbians consider their relationships as marriages or something else. If they do consider their relationships to be marriages, are they prepared to go through the whole marriage process, as it is understood among their own people? Is the Shona community prepared to change their perception of marriage so that gays and lesbians can be accommodated? These are the real questions that underlie any debate about homosexuality in an African context.

There is no doubt that there is ongoing endless and heated debate among scholars from both the field of theology as well as other disciplines as to whether same-sex relationships should be considered as marriage or whether full status should be given to them as is accorded in heterosexual relationships.

7.2.3 A Patriarchal Phallocentric Approach: Sexuality is Hierarchical

Despite all the changes that have been discussed in chapter three of this work, the Shona are still very much a male dominated traditional hierarchical society. As a result most aspects of their life are in the form of a hierarchy; this includes sexual relationships. In this model marriage is the acceptable model for sexual relationships. A partner is found for reproductive purposes and all other qualities are secondary. Love is understood in terms of the expected roles of the husband and wife. A husband loves his wife if he is seen to work hard to provide for the family when he comes home he puts his feet up and his wife waits upon him. The wife loves him if she waits upon the husband in every way as well as the family, she is also to provide him with enough sex or else she is the one to blame if the husband decides to be unfaithful (have mistresses). In the case of a husband engaging in an extramarital affair, in most instances it is assumed to be the woman's fault and she is always to blame for not providing enough sex. For the wife, she is expected to remain faithful to the husband but it is never a big issue if the husband sleeps around because men supposedly cannot help it.

Stephens observes that, in an intensive cross-cultural analysis of sexual practices in general, female sexual behaviour tends to be most greatly restricted in societies characterised by the

hierarchical dominance of relations between members of that society.³⁵⁸ Women are subordinated to the political as well as economic control of men. In contrast, societies with generally permissive sex norms tend to be characterised by relatively equal male – female power relations. It becomes less necessary for women to bargain their sexual attractiveness for economic rewards. Therefore, female sexuality become free from economic dependence upon men and can be guided by other consideration. In this respect the hierarchy may not be eliminated but it is reduced to a certain extent. Analysed from a hierarchical perspective it can be argued therefore that, once a society assumes this lenient and autonomous state of affairs for the sexes, then homosexual practice becomes less of an issue because everyone is almost on the same level. This can be evidenced by what we learned from chapter three and four where the disruption of traditional village social systems and the introduction of city life and mission homes precipitated by human rights organisations seemed to have given ‘rise’ to the practice of homosexuality. I am not saying that homosexuality was at that point acceptable in Zimbabwe but I am arguing that the disruption of traditional systems removed the grip of significant authority consequently creating more lenient environments conducive for homosexual practice. It was this state of lenience both in the villages and cities that precipitated an eased homosexual practice.

7.2.4 A Patriarchal Phallocentric Approach: A Selective Hermeneutics

In chapter one it was discussed that one of the reasons raised for the Church’s attitude to homosexuality was that God forbids. However in chapter five a critical analysis of the major verses used to justify such claims identified the limitations in the approach used by the Church in their use of the Bible, the major one being selective literal interpretation of the

³⁵⁸ William N. Stephens, “A Cross-Cultural study of modesty and Obscenity,” *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, vol. IX, 405-51. (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1971).

Bible. Because, read from this perspective, the Bible seems to condemn homosexuality. The first dilemma then that gays and lesbians have is that they seem to be excluded from the biblical concept of sexuality, as a result being out of God's creative plan and meaning that homosexuality is synonymous to sin. Hence arguably, the Church cannot be seen to condone what God has condemned. The problem with this exclusion, logical though it might seem, is that inappropriate tools are being used in interpreting the texts in question. A literal reading of the Bible presents problem both for the Church and for homosexuals. As for the Church it is a too simplistic approach that does not involve any critical thinking resulting in what appears to be unrealistic conclusions. For gays and lesbians they have to work extra hard to prove that they are 'also men' of like nature to anyone else and part of God's creative plan. Therefore, for a faithful reinterpretation of sex, the Church needs to stop using the literal method of reading the Bible and engage in a serious historical critical method as a 'corrective lens' in reading the Bible. The historical critical method as a corrective lens will help to understand biblical passages on sexuality and consequently homosexuality in their original historical context. It will also help to evaluate the evidence with an open and honest mind. In doing so, a sound theology is build up that goes beyond the mere repetition of the Church's traditions and statements of faith. This is a painstaking approach that is bound to create stirs both within the Church and in society but will definitely challenge the Church to give a clear, elaborate and qualified position on homosexuality. Even though the position of the Church is a resounding 'no', judging from the interviews, the problem is that the policy document of the Church includes homosexuality among other aspects unacceptable by the Church. The Church writes more about issues related to heterosexuality giving the impression that everyone in the Church is heterosexual. However, what I also wish to highlight here is that this ideology of elevating one sexual orientation over the other is all part of the patriarchal phallogocentric approach that seems to have its roots within the Israelite community who are

best known for propagating a theme of chosenness. This was a society obsessed with a ‘chosenness motif’ in most aspects of their life. For example, in the case of sexes, males were considered superior to females, disabled persons were less human beings, as for animals some were declared dirty and some clean, as for days of the week, the Sabbath was holier than the rest. Included in the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments is a strand which establishes one people as chosen people. Thus, the logic of the early Israelites as God’s chosen people became a justification for their conquering people in the land they viewed as the Promised Land promised to them by God as a reward for their faithfulness as a people of God. It needs to be admitted that the biblical story is presented concentrating mainly on God’s dialogue with just one people, the people of Israel, and through Christ, with the early Church. It tells us little about the way in which other peoples, living in other cultures and epochs were challenged by God and how they responded. From such a presentation can one then argue that: Israel is the only people God prefers and everyone else is doomed for hell? That God prefers the male gender to the female? That, because Jesus blessed the wedding, then those who do not wed fall short of the glory of God? That, because Jesus was baptised in the river Jordan, then, the river Jordan is blessed more than the Limpopo in Zimbabwe or any other river for that matter? That the social systems from which the Bible was written only approved of heterosexuals then homosexuals are not part of God’s divine plan? Probably not, since such conclusions seem to defeat God himself since God created all human beings in his own image and “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31a). Therefore, the silence of the Bible on such issues makes it difficult and risky to reflect theologically about God and not only people of other faiths but also homosexuals.

For me, it seems that it was through this obsession with divinely designating one aspect over the other that homosexuality found its place at the peripheries of the biblical society’s

concept of sexuality. The result of the literal use of the Bible is a justification for the self-serving adoption of one group as superior to another (Jews versus Gentiles); one religion versus the other (Christians versus Moslems); one gender better than the other (men versus women); one age group versus another (young versus the old); fertility as a sign of God's blessings and infertility as a curse, so the list goes on. Statements such as Paul's to the Corinthians exemplify this view: "As in the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the Church" (1Corinthians 14: 34-35).

The consequence of such an approach is evidenced by the hatred, division and superiority complexes in the world today among people of all nations and in all nations. For instance, 'us' the Shonas and 'them' the Ndebeles. Even in the Church, there is a division between 'us and them', for instance; 'us' the full members and 'them' the 'on-trials', and there is an over emphasis through Church structures as well as its organisations to exclude on-trial members from participating in sacraments such as Holy Communion until such a time they become like 'them'. What is more, when it comes to the issue of homosexuality in such a hetero-patriarchal context, "queer people are distinctly 'other' and distinctly secondary, forced to compete uphill on a slanted playing field."³⁵⁹ In other words it can be argued that the attitude of homophobia that is highly prevalent in Zimbabwe seem to have its genesis in (a particular reading of) the Bible. The dilemma of homosexuals then in this context is of being victims of the biblical concept of chosenness. This is drawn from the presumed understanding that there is a God-chosen sexuality and that that sexuality is apparently heterosexuality.

³⁵⁹ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, 'Reading the Bible from the Low and Outside: Lesbians and Gay People of God's Tricksters' in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000),19.

It is this apparently biblically rooted kind of ideology that segregates people according to their race, gender and physical status that seemed to have encouraged the Christians to think that there are some sexual orientations that are divinely designated and others that are to be relegated to the peripheries of the society and Church. A good example to support this point can be the case of the late Sakuso Nyati who was both a government official and an Ordained Methodist minister³⁶⁰. Despite working so hard for the State and Church, he was stripped of his government credentials because he was accused of committing homosexual acts and, as if this was not enough, the Church renounced and abandoned him as a minister. Regardless of the fact that Sakuso Nyati had been a mature, respected person, and a deeply committed Christian, the Church chose to dump him because he had fallen from God's glory and was not worthy to be counted among the 'chosen ones' any more because he had been found 'guilty' of sodomy. A number of questions spring to mind here. For instance, in the Methodist Church we believe individuals are called to the ministry by God, but then when the Church stops an individual from serving, what implications does it have on the calling or ordination? Is it that the individual's call has expired? What and who should determine the expiry status? Do individual ministers and the Church have the same perception of ordination as enumerated in the Standing Orders? If ministers are called to the ministry by God, who is to rebuke those whom God has chosen? Is the Church always right in its moral judgements? This work is not meant to address all these questions, but only serves to stimulate the mind.

One can only imagine what can happen when a people either accept, or find themselves powerless to oppose bureaucracies and dogmas imposed upon them. The acrimony and brutality that characterise the approaches to homosexuality can here be attributed to the fact

³⁶⁰ Sakuso Nyati is a pseudonym, used in an attempt to protect the identity of the person. Nevertheless, it is mainly the pastoral responsibilities of the Church that I am attempting to critique here, and his story serves as an illustration.

that homosexual relationships are not explicitly included within the biblical presentation of sexuality. It is this seeming exclusion from the Divine plan of sexuality that leads gays and lesbians to be labelled as sinners whose sins can only be justified through repentance, by 'renouncing' being gay or lesbian and getting married, which taken as proof for being straight!

I argued in the previous chapter that Jesus' own sexuality is never talked about. I recall some Methodist ministers in my interviews who got really upset and infuriated by Jesus' name being brought into discussions about sexuality, and more so into those about homosexuality because there is this resounding 'God forbids' attitude. Supposedly, sex talk is dirty and only those of a base mind participate in such discussions. The idea of Jesus and sex seems to be beyond a Christian imagination. But if Jesus was human, why deny him something he rightfully deserves? To bring in Jesus in a discussion about homosexuality was seen by the respondents to be like humiliating Jesus, the Christian faith and the Church.

7.2.5 A Patriarchal Phallocentric Approach: Traditional Models Apply

Even though we noted from previous chapters the developments and impact of modernisation on the traditional Shona, to date life is still very much moulded by tradition. To clarify this point a number of aspects can here be noted: (1) family ties are still dominant, (2) one is still addressed by one's surname or family name, (3) most aspects of life are still predetermined and decreed, no major individual decisions are implemented without the family's blessings, (4) the values of society are paramount, placed higher than the individual values. Hence, the dilemma of a homosexual in such a context is that they seem to go against most of the values that their society stands for.

Having said that, it seems, by emphasising on the implementation of traditional models, in its approach to sexuality the Church is using 'old wine skins to keep new wine'. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." (Matthew 9: 16-17)

7.3 THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY: SHONA SEXUAL THEOLOGY

This thesis reflects on the specific sexual cultural values and ethical convictions of the Shona from which the Church draws its theological approaches. Firstly, it has been established in this work that among the Shona the most significantly outstanding element in the understanding of the concept of sexuality is marriage as a relationship for a man and a woman. It is basically understood as a union to create children, a contract of necessity. Marriage is functional hence the aspect of motherhood and fatherhood is revered more compared to that of husband and wife. While traditional habits may have been considerably eroded by modernisation, marriage remains the standard for sexual relationships. In other words, the fundamental aspects of African sexuality seem to have withstood the waves of socio-cultural changes and therefore marriage and procreation still remain the standard for sexual relationships. As has been discussed in earlier chapters, for the Shona it is a man who marries not a woman. A woman gets married and the relationship is sealed by *roora* payment. It is the woman who has *roora* paid for by the man. That is, the concept of *roora* is primarily for the womb that will bear him children.

From an African perspective, within the sexual cosmology a functional religious significance is attached to sexuality hence procreation comes not as an option but a necessity. From an African point of view, sexuality is a means of ensuring the continuation of the cosmological cycle for every being, dead (if they have been a parent) or alive, contributes to the wellbeing of their own. It is obvious then that procreation is the central and primary goal of African sexual relationships. Sexual relationships that do not have any prospects of giving children seem to leave much to be desired. Therefore, although same-sex relationships are relatively well known, one of the main reasons the society seem to frown upon gays and lesbians is that because no children are realised, they are assumed not to contribute to the social-cultural cosmos.

As discussed in chapter four, the premise from which marriages are blessed in the Church depends upon one having undertaken the traditional marriage first, in other words mainly the payment of *roora*. By assuming such an approach what the Church is actually saying is that the people's culture comes first in their theological considerations. Because in other cultures marriages are not sealed by *roora* and furthermore, some countries have gone as far as accepting same sex relationships as marriages, one can then argue that sexual concepts are contextual. If sexual perspectives are contextual then there can be no universal ethical approach related to either marriage or homosexuality. In this respect then, for the Shona, while the moral equivalent of heterosexual relationships is marriage the Shona do not seem to have a moral equivalent for homosexual relationships, hence there is an area of contention.

Even though both the colonial and the missionary era disrupted the traditional family setup, the core sexual concepts are still very significant even up to this day. Thus, for the Shona in spite of the changing ethos, marriage remains traditional, phallocentric, hierarchical and

functional. However, for the Church, what matters is to recognise that heterosexual and homosexual, God created them all. To date, the approach employed by the Church has been pretty much dominated by presuppositions. These presuppositions are reflected in how people cite Bible verses to support their views on homosexuality. The challenge for the Church therefore, is to engage with the Bible in such a way they can assess the nature of their presuppositions and identify prejudices. In so doing the Church can discern the grounds on which moral teaching is given, with the context which has shaped each text being used to determine an appropriate approach. The Bible is still very much the primary pillar of Christian ethics. However, as discussed in chapter five certain readings of the Bible have clearly become immoral due to societal changes, and are therefore no longer in use today. The same can be said of some of the traditional socio-cultural approaches. For instance, there was a time when it was fashionable to wear *nhembe* (a small piece of material made out of animal skin to cover the lower private parts of the body) and women never bothered to cover their breasts. Not long ago giving birth to twins used to be believed to be a bad omen (*mashura*) and as a result twins were killed soon after birth but now it is a criminal offence for anyone who attempts to kill. Even though it is not an issue for women to breastfeed in public it is now offensive not cover one's breasts in public. There was a time when polygamy was fashionable and a man would brag about having many wives, but now that custom is quickly fading, these days it is seen as more of a burden because the money economy has overtaken the traditional agricultural economy. Large families used to be the pride of villages but nowadays there has been a drastic reduction in the number of children per family. Therefore, coming back to the issue of the use of the Bible to determine moral theology, there is need to apply correct hermeneutical tools to determine how far particular texts can become a meaningful and authentic witness to the grounding of values today. In doing so, it is also the task of theology to be intimately related to other disciplines of human sciences since

theology does not have enough tools to understand the physical and psychological nature of humanity.

Furthermore, as has been noted in previous chapters, in the face of the realities of life, Christian ethics does not depend entirely on rules such as stipulated in the Standing Orders (The Church's book of polices and procedures), not even surely those stated in the Bible. Our own moral experience is unique, contextual and also too rich to define morality as a simple set of rules. Yes, the Bible remains the primary informative factor in doing theology but to take the Bible as a sexual highway code is just simplistic theologising. To me, that comes across as playing God. Christian ethics is concerned with promoting community. It is concerned also with injustices in society: not simply to condemn, but to work for the conditions which will support meaningful life and hope. It is concerned with understanding and accepting, with caring for the victims of life's harshness with conciliation and reconciliation and to the recognition of individual differences.³⁶¹ There is a need for the Church to rethink its approach to homosexuality, a need to change; if not for the gays and lesbians of Zimbabwe, why not for the purpose of delivering sound contemporary theological approaches.

Nevertheless, the challenge for the Church is to be true to its calling, implementing the appropriate tools to discern its moral duty. For the Church to remain contemporary, it needs to move with the times and adjust quickly enough so as to be constructively useful and relevant in situations of rapid social change. This calls for the Church's full engagement and interaction with other human sciences and a constant evaluation of its approaches in light of contemporary knowledge, through further training of its ministers and those who run

³⁶¹ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 62-71.

Christian education in the Church such as lay trainers in liaison with relevant organisations such as GALZ. The challenge for the Church is not to reinforce stereotypes but instead to explicitly set homosexuality within the context of Christian ethics, thus working to break down barriers. As in the phenomenology of religion, where we study other people's religions, an appropriate approach calls for those involved to perform epoche: a restraint or suspension of our presuppositions and judgement. Epoche introduces the capacity to see objectively the essence of the phenomenon and also addresses the issue of subjectivity of perception and reflection. It is an approach that requires a willingness to grow in self awareness, in sensitivity to others, in the understanding of historical and social or cultural realities and above all in openness to the many dimensions of human life that God reveals at his opportune time. Of course, this approach has its own limitations such as: how realistic is it for someone to practise epoche? The approach appears so good in principle but to exercise it is always difficult because humanity is judgemental by nature. Nevertheless, what is important to note in performing epoche is the approach that the one who is supposedly under study is always right because they know best about themselves. In this case then, my point is that those whose opinion ought to be considered are gays and lesbians themselves.

7.4 CONCLUSION

It is uncertain how the social life of homosexual men and women is likely to develop in Zimbabwe. Until now they have experienced only a few years of public history but are thoroughly frustrated in all their attempts and the approach of the Church can at best be described as nostalgic, evocative and wistful. Homosexuality as we know it today is challenging the Church in Zimbabwe to rethink its theological approaches to sexuality. As Paul puts it, our knowledge at best is imperfect (1Cor13:9), it is hypocrisy then for a Church

to claim a monopoly of the truth, there must always be openness to insights within every generation. It provides a good reason for the Church to

be willing to step outside the bounds of our comfort and into the realm of God's creation. We must be willing to follow Christ into the places that make us uncomfortable, places that we never imagined going.³⁶²

The challenge for the Church is to participate in actions that will break especially the cycle of gay and lesbian abuse, to walk with the victims and to confront what we would rather avoid. This carries with it the pastoral duty to be active in protecting those who are victimised, since it is sadly true that members of the gay and lesbian community are often verbally abused and made the targets of humiliation. The Church is challenged to critically analyse its socio-theological approaches to sexuality. The Church needs to engage some serious thought into the effects her approach has to on all concerned, more so, where human beings are concerned. The debate on homosexuality is about God and human rights, it is about God and the marginalised. Jesus' ministry was concerned with breaking barriers humans put up against each other. There is a need for the Church to facilitate a discourse on sexuality in which gays and lesbians should be a part. The idea of participation by qualification honestly needs to be revised before a meaningful discourse can take place. Any discourse on sexuality in which the voice of gays and lesbians is not heard is an unequal discourse because it portrays an assumed superiority of knowledge by the Church. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is other people's lives being tossed left, right and centre. Why not let the individuals concerned lead the debates that concern them and determine their own destiny? For a well balanced approach to the issue of homosexuality the Church needs the contribution of gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe, because in reality up to this stage everyone else has been speaking for them. There is need for an open contribution from gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe for

³⁶² Justin Tanis 'Eating the Crumbs that Fall from the Table: Trusting the Abundance of God' in Robert E Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 45.

which the Church can provide the appropriate context to facilitate such discourse. This contribution may operate as a corrective of the misconceptions surrounding homosexuality in this context, and develop awareness as well as open up new avenues for exploring African sexuality at large. To continue propagating a theology of sexual silence where homosexuality is concerned does not seem to hold much water now that there is a known well organised group of gays and lesbians in the country. Today the Church is faced with a modest task: to recognise and acknowledge the emergence of a new situation that should lead to a broad ecclesial awareness of sexuality.

It is certain that attitudes towards change in any society fall within a broad spectrum. While one extreme of the spectrum may oppose all transformation under any circumstances and cherishes a return to the past, insisting that the achievements of the past are better than any possible future proposals, the other opposite extreme may support and advocate immediate change at any cost. These extremes are imminent once the debate kicks off. Whatever direction the debate may fall, the bottom line is that, it is a human right to be accorded the opportunity to openly debate or share an opinion on issues that are pertinent to one's life.

What the Church also needs is more comparative academic work to broaden knowledge on human sexuality. In doing so the Church needs to work with a broad perspective that subjects what is regarded as the norm to a critical evaluation as an attempt to present a more progressive alternative in the face of new evidence from other related scientific studies as well as social changes. It is a reality now that one need to think twice before making claims such as "this is not part of Shona culture", because the interaction of cultures is increasing by the day, and as a result claiming or denying the monopoly of anything has too many limitations, and seems to be an over-simplistic approach. It is a reality that traditional villages

are fast disappearing, and with city life becoming more fashionable there are some elements of traditional lifestyles that are no longer practical. Of late the country have seen lots of people emigrating to different countries; such an upheaval and cultural overhaul is bound to give a people a new face. However, it is also a reality that there are some elements of the culture's sexual concepts that up to this day have survived the storms, of which the concept of Shona marriages coupled with its primary purpose of procreation is a typical example, hence the phallogocentric model elaborated above.

In conclusion I would like to quote Wogaman's remarks in his book *A Christian Method to Moral Judgement*, "We live at an awkward but exciting juncture of human history. None of us should claim too much for our own wisdom. All of us should confront our sensibilities humbly and diligently, hoping that by our faithfulness the next generation will have more to work with and a better society to live in."³⁶³ The understanding of homosexuality among the Shona is going to be a long drawn out process which requires the cooperation of not only the Church but the whole community of which the Church is a member. Because the reality is that gays and lesbians may not wish to be what they are, but they have to be because that is what they are, and therefore they are. In this respect then, the Church must get real and get used to it because this is real contemporary challenge that can no longer remain behind social or ecclesiastical doors. The challenge for the Church is to boldly face up to the related socio-theological challenges if it does not want to live in an imaginary world. The phenomenon of homosexuality, complex as it is, and with its many consequences for social, cultural and ecclesial life requires the Church's attentive study, active concern and honest, theologically well-informed discourse. Advocating for a secrecy model does not seem to hold water any more. There is every indication that the coming years will provide us with very different

³⁶³ J. Philip Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgement* (London: SCM Press, 1976), xi.

exciting and challenging ways of viewing sexuality as well as the Church, in ways that are quite different from those that we have been accustomed to in the past or today. The same should apply to our theological approaches if they are to remain relevant for every generation; in doing so the Church of God marches on.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is in two parts. In Section A you are given two alternatives to choose from. Can you please circle your answer? In Section B can you please give short written responses? Please note that you can use additional paper if the space provided is not enough. Also, please note that you do not have to write your name.

SECTION A

(Delete as appropriate).

1. Homosexuality is by choice. Yes/No.
2. Does the Church have homosexuals in their congregations? Yes/No
3. Can homosexuals be members of your Church? Yes/No.
4. Do you know a Church member who is gay/lesbian? Yes/No.
5. Do you know any person outside the Church who is gay/lesbian? Yes/No
6. Do you think there is a possibility of change in homosexual orientation? Yes/No.
7. Do you think homosexuality is part of Shona culture Yes/No.
8. Can homosexuality be associated with a particular culture? Yes/No.
9. Does God accept homosexual relationships? Yes/No.
10. Does the Bible condemn homosexuality? Yes/No.
11. Can a homosexual person be a Christian? Yes or No.
12. Can homosexual relationships be marriages? Yes/No.
13. Is a homosexual a sinner? Yes/No.
14. Is homosexuality foreign? Yes/No.
15. Did you think gays and lesbians were created by God? Yes/No.

SECTION B

1) What is your understanding of homosexuality?

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.....

2) Do you understand homosexuality to be an individual choice or a given. Why do you say so?

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.....
.....

3) Is homosexual practice indigenous or foreign? Why do you say so?

.....
.....

4) What is the Church's teaching on sexuality?

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5) What are the sources for the Church's Christian education on sexuality?

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6) What is the Church's approach to homosexuality?

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7) What is the place of gays and lesbians in the Church's life?

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8) Is Homosexuality synonymous to sin? Why do you say so?.....

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.....
.....

9) What does the Bible teach on homosexuality?

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.....

10) Do you think the Church's approach is the right one? Why?

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.....
.....

11) Do you think a homosexual person have any contribution in Church or society? Why do you say so? Please, elaborate.

.....
.....

12) Can a homosexual be a Christian? Please briefly explain why you say so.

APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONS FOR GOSSIP

The following questions were not handed over to participants but were used just as a guide by myself.

1. Have any of you ever met a homosexual?
2. Are there gays and lesbians in the village?
3. Are any of you related to someone who is gay or lesbian?
4. Is any one of you gay or lesbian?
5. What does a homosexual look like?
6. Is it true that there are no homosexuals among the Shona people?
7. Do you think gays and lesbians are cursed?
8. Can you tell the difference between a homosexual and a heterosexual?
9. What is your opinion on society's attitude to gays and lesbians?
10. Are there any consequences for those who admit to being gay or lesbian?
11. What are the consequences for those who admit to being gay or lesbian?
12. What is your opinion on those consequences?
13. What are the social expectations of a girl child?
14. What is your opinion on those expectations?
15. Why is it a women's responsibility to do chores like fetching water, fetching firewood, going to the river to do washing and cooking?
16. Do you enjoy labouring for your men?

APPENDIX 3

QUESTIONEER FOR GAYS/LESBIANS

Your response is confidential. Names are not necessary unless you request.

Thank you for taking time to respond to my questionnaire. You can send it by attachment my email address is [REDACTED].

Your Name (optional): Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss.....

1- When did you start to realise that you are gay/lesbian?

.....
.....

2- Do you understand homosexuality to be an individual choice or a given? Why do you say so?

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.....

3- Would you say you were influenced to be gay? If yes, when and by who? If no, may you please explain why you say so.

.....
.....

4- From your experience do you feel the society accept you? Yes/No. Why do you say so

.....
.....

5- Are you now in the open or still keeping it to yourself? If no, why; if yes, how did your family receive the news?

.....
.....

6- Do you talk about your sexual relationships with your friends, family, work, church etc? If yes, what kind of response do you get and how does that make you feel? If no, why not?

.....
.....

7- In your own opinion do you think our people in general know exactly what being gay or lesbian is?

.....
.....

8- Your gay or lesbian relationship do you consider it as a marriage (did you pay *roora* for your partner). Also before the ‘marriage’ how did you address your partner, if you are gay do you refer to him as your boyfriend – *mukomana wako*; and if you are a lesbian – do you refer to her as your girlfriend – *musikana wako*?

.....
.....

9- What challenges (if any) does our culture pose on homosexual relationships?

.....
.....

10- From your own point of view what is the underlying problems in relation to the society’s and the church’s attitude.

.....
.....

11- What can be done to help solve the problem, if there is a problem?

.....
.....

12- Do you feel the church is giving enough support, is yes how; if no why?

.....
.....

13- Is there anything else that you feel the church should be doing in relation to homosexuality in Zimbabwe?

.....
.....

14- Are you a Church member? Yes/No If yes which Church do you belong to (optional)?

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.....

15- Do you consider yourself to a Christian?

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.....

16- Do you have anything else to add, if so please feel free to give your opinion? Please write on an extra sheet if necessary.

.....
.....
.....

THANK YOU

APPENDIX 4

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

Questions designed for interviews and questionnaires were the same.

- 1) What is your understanding of homosexuality?
- 2) Do you understand homosexuality to be an individual choice or a given. Why do you say so?
- 3) Is homosexual practice in Zimbabwe indigenous or foreign? Why do you say so?
- 4) What is your church's teaching on sexuality?
- 5) What are the sources for the church's Christian education on sexuality?
- 6) What is the church's approach to homosexuality?
- 7) What is the place of gays and lesbians in the church's life?
- 8) Is Homosexuality synonymous to sin? Why do you say so?
- 9) In brief what is your understanding on what the Bible say about homosexuality?
- 10) Do you think the church's approach is the right one? Why? Yes/No
- 11) Do you think a homosexual person have any contribution in church or society? Why do you say so? Please, elaborate.
- 12) Can a homosexual be a Christian? Please briefly explain why you say so.
- 13) Do you think there is a possibility of change from being a homosexual to be straight? How?
- 14) Can homosexual relationships be marriages? Please explain why you say so.
- 15) From the following three words, may you please pick one that you think best describe homosexuality in Zimbabwe and briefly explain why:

A Problem

An Opportunity;

A Blessing;

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