Betrayed by Cultural Heritage: Liminality, Ambiguous Sexuality and Ndembu Cultural Change – An African Ecclesia-Ethic of Openness[1]

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Abstract

The article investigates whether there were some ways in which African cultural heritage past may have enabled and enforced different sexual performances, whether normative or 'divergent'. In response I analyse the significance of Ndembu notions of liminality as traditional cultural landscapes for initiating intentional processes of re-creation and redefinition of Ndembu agency and subjectivity. Employing historical approach, I evaluate a wider range of evidence from early cultural anthropologists who researched on the Ndembu people and other related ethnic groups in Zambia to provide an overall conceptual scheme that suggests that the current politicization of homosexuality as 'un-African' in Zambia is a by-product of African epistemic failure to articulate cultural sexualities within the ideological and material legacies of African cultural past. Drawing some examples from Ndembu Mukanda rite of passage for boys, this article sheds light on how traditional liminal imagination functioned as a subverting stage against prevailing social order by engaging with cultural taboos and un-conversional ideas. In these spaces, homosexuality appears to have been one of the instruments of exploration of other forms of sexualities. The resultant knowledge was alternatively interpreted with possibilities to alter social order

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for human progress and cultural transformation. Based on these findings the article proposes an African ecclesia-ethic of openness to enable Christians in Zambia to take a non-foreignization, non-discriminatory and life-affirming public perception of homosexuality as sociohistorical African cultural struggle to construct sexual agency and subjectivity.

Keywords*:* Ndembu, liminality, homosexuality, Africa Ecclesia-ethic of openness

Introduction

In recent times, postcolonial Zambian society has crash-landed into homosexual struggle for rights, an encounter which has resulted in public hate speech in which homosexuality is labelled as 'Satanism', 'deepest level of depravity' or 'scourge' and anti-African traditional heritage[2]. This homophobic discourse aims at justifying suppression and segregation of homosexuality both within the margins and dominant spheres. Homosexuality is criminalised in Zambia and carries with it a minimum sentence of 15 years to life in prison. Respectful public debates on homosexuality are discouraged and anyone who dares to speak about the rights of the homosexuals is harassed and persecuted as the devil for 'inciting' the public to take part in 'satanic and immoral activities' (Mphande 2013). Mamba Writer (2012) writes that the government-owned newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, is replete with homophobic rhetoric. For instance, the current Zambian President Edgar Lungu declared that 'there will be no such discussions on gay rights. That issue is foreign to this country. Those advocating gay rights should go to hell. That is not an issue we will tolerate' (Mamba 2012). The Church is partly responsible for perpetuating the ideology of un-Africanizing homosexuality in Zambia (Kaoma 2012; van Klinken 2013; Van Klinken 2011).

[2] 'Africa' and 'African' in this article refers more specifically to the Ndembu people of Zambia and ethnic groups from which examples are drawn which are specified.

It is important to note that un-Africanized[3] classification of homosexuality is not uniquely Zambian but a phenomenon pervasive in various African countries[4]. Various scholars have grappled with the question of authenticity of the claim that homosexuality is un-African and a foreign phenomenon (Tamale 2013; Lyonga 2014; Aarmo 1999; Epprecht 2005; Epprecht 2008; Spurlin 2013; Abrahams 1997; Dlamini 2006; Cock 2003). Within this approach, this article argues that the question of homosexuality in Zambia invokes an inquiry into the complex cultural past in order to understand the validity of this claim within Zambian context. The argument of the article is that recent essentialist politicisation of homosexuality in Zambia as un-African have not taken into consideration the cultural history of some ethic groups within the country and could be regarded as undermining their cultural heritage. In order to substantiate this assertion, I appeal to the Ndembu notion of liminality as was articulated by one of the pioneering Anthropologists among the Ndembu, Victor Turner (1985; 1974; 1969; 1968; 1967). The aim is to demonstrate how such ritual performances as Mukanda may still hold the clues to African struggle to understand their sexualities in contemporary society.

The following are questions this article seeks to respond to: how did the Ndembu liminality enabled, enforced and maintained diverging sexualities, whether normative or deviant in their society? How did the

[3] A practising sangoma and graduate student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal has published a study which challenges the traditionally-held belief homosexuality is un-African (Mkasi 2014). There is also general mounting literature analysing of anti-homosexual trends in African countries. The aim of this article is not to repeat their perspectives as are beyond its scope (see for example, Tamale 2013; Lyonga 2014; Aarmo 1999; Epprecht 2005; Epprecht 2008; Spurlin2013; Abrahams 1997; Dlamini 2006; Cock 2003).

[4] See for example Vasu Reddy in his article, 'Perverts and sodomites' where he discusses the Hate speech against homosexuality in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Egypt (Reddy 2002).The challenge goes beyond the above mentioned countries as can be deduced from the recent United Nations conference where 17 countries rejected Stealth Homosexual Agenda which almost derailed the adoption of the Addis Ababa Declaration at the close of the African Regional Conference on Population and Development (Oas n.d.)

liminal space as landscapes of subservient knowledge construction contributed to the creation of nonconformist sexualities among the Ndembu people of Zambia? To what extent did the Ndembu people prevent homosexuality as a liminal ritual from crossing liminal borders into structured social order? In what ways can uncovering Ndembu religious traditions of openness to diverse sexualities become an ecclesiological resource for promoting life-giving public perception of the humanity of homosexuals among Zambian Christians? At stake here is not merely a rejection of the claim that homosexuality is un-African and that it is a western ideological imposition but a refusal to allow western elites to ideologically control how Africans understand their sexualities. In what follows, I conceptually frame liminality as traditional African cultural approach to conceptualising sexualities.

Victor Turner and Liminality in Ndembu Initiation

In mid-twentieth century, Victor Turner (1977; 1968) studied the ritual and social processes that occur between separation and reintegration in the cultural process of Ndembu rite of passage. The Ndembu people live in the northwest of Zambia, and many aspects of their culture link rites of passage and social order. Like many African people, the Ndembu culture is embedded in ritual performance which embodies 'the total system of interrelations between groups and persons that make up Ndembu society' (Turner 1977:495)[5]. In his analysis of the ritual, Turner consistently appealed to Arnold van Gennep's 1908 *Rites of Passage* (1960/1908) model. Van Gennep exemplified a three-phased process of ritual of transition from one state to another as shown in figure one below.

[5] In Turner's (1977:183) perspective, the ritual, religious beliefs and symbols are essentially related. This is well captured in his definition of the ritual as 'a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests'. A symbol which can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units is the smallest unit of ritual or a 'storage unit' filled with a vast amount of information (Turner 1968:1-2; 1967:19).

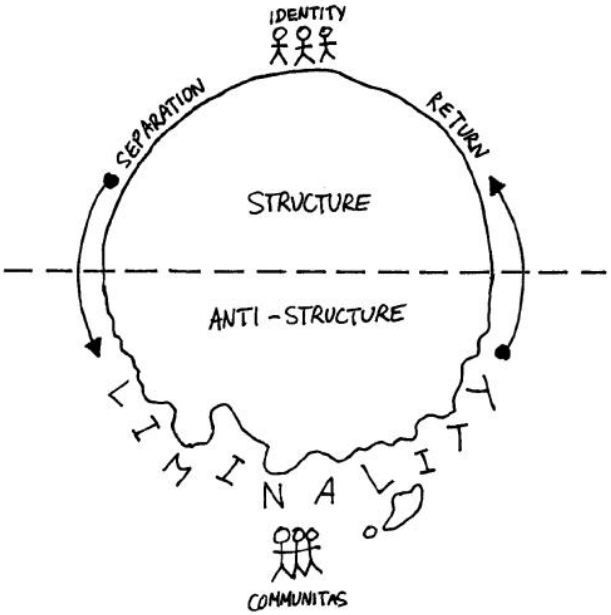

Figure one (adapted from Religion 331, 2015)

Turner (1967: 93ff; 1969: 94ff) witnessed that during ritual performances the initiates are often isolated from social structural spaces and spent a lengthy period in anti-structural spaces traditionally regarded as cocoon stage which Van Gennep classified as liminal state. During this phase, the ritual subjects are at loss for stable points of reference as the established normative are dissolved before the new images and attitudes begin to appear which are neither solid nor reliable as everything at this stage remain fluid and in flux (Stein 1998). They are also given new names to denote their new status as 'no longer/not yet' or both 'dead and living'– 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1969: 95). The 'liminal personae' are neither living nor dead but both living and dead. This is the ambiguity of the anti-structural period. They are considered neither male nor female, deprived of rank, status and property. They are all treated equally as pure spirits or

holistic beings with no hierarchy and only receive instructions from their liminal guardian(s).

They are liberated from conventional social structures with its hierarchic, gender binary and power relations. In the liminal state, these social relationships and the structural elements are dissolved. The significance of liminal experiences partly depends on their difference from social normative realities. In the liminal, power and privilege, status and role, law and institution no longer determine social relations. It is a time outside of time and space outside space or timeless time and spaceless space where alternative identities and subjectivities are constructed and new modalities of liminal relations appear. Turner calls this new model of relationship as *communitas* - characterized by equality, immediacy, and the lack of social ranks and roles. Within the Ndembu culture and many other Zambian cultural traditions, the liminal stage was a crucial context for cultural transformation like the caterpillar metamorphoses in the cocoon before it emerges as butterfly from the sovereignties of liminality. It was the only taboo-less and transgressive space-less space open to any form of experimentation and knowledge construction. Jeffrey Rubenstein (1992: 251) sees the liminal as 'a levelling process that brings about the dissolution of structure, the absence of social distinctions, a homogenization of roles, the disappearance of political allegiance, the breakdown of regular borders and barriers. With the suspension of status distinctions, human beings recognize the core humanity they share'. The struggle of every liminal subject was to realise their humanity – a humanity which was perceived as always becoming. Here it is possible to trace a political journey which affirms human agency and subjectivity as part of social attempt to engage the meaning of human becoming as a historical being with the capacity to transcend social constructions and life-denying social normative. The question is: how did the Ndembu conceptualise sexuality in the liminal space?

Cultural Liminality and Sexual Ambiguity

The purpose of this section is to understand how sexuality was conceptualised within the liminal space. In the description of liminal space of Mukanda initiation rites, Turner noted that Mukanda was intentionally performed to 'make visible (ku-mwekesa) the man in the boy through ritual cleansing of him from 'the dirt of childhood' (Turner 1962: 144). Mukanda is

regarded as disorder phase where sacred and profane were synthesised generating new thought and new custom. As argued above, the liminal subjects were regarded as neither males nor females. There was a cross-sexual identification which likened the Mukanda boys to menstruating women and treated as girls at their first menstruation. Turner (1962: 152) noted that 'the senior official during the seclusion, the leader of the novices' shepherd - the young circumcised men who attend to their needs during that period - and the instructor in tribal mysteries (mpang'u), is entitled *nfumwa tubwiku* or husband of the novices'. He introduces himself as '*Ami nfumwenu, ami nasumbuli anyadi. Ami nukuyilama nakuyitala'* which Turner translates as meaning 'I am your husband, I have married you. I will protect you and look after you' (Turner 1962:151). This translation is supported in Lunda language which is a close dialect to Ndembu and also a Mukanda practicing ethnic group in Zambia. The same phrase in Lunda literally means, 'I, your husband, I who married virgins. I will take care of you and will keep you'. The Ndembu word *mwadi*, is singular for *nyadi* is derived from *kwadika*, a verb which means 'to initiate' or literally 'virgins'. It means to circumcise in the context of Mukanda. The concept of 'mwadi' also refers to the first wife a man marries, and thereafter to the senior wife in the case of polygamous marriage. The concept of 'mwadi' or more precisely 'mwali' is common among Bantu languages in northwest and central part of Zambia and refers to the girl undergoing puberty rites[6]. The emphasis here is that the initiates are regarded and treated in the sense of 'boy-wives'[7] by their instructors and shepherds.

During the stage of healing from their circumcisions, the 'anyadi' wore no clothes and it has been reported that they played copulation with the phalluses of some senior males. The anthropologist, Charles White (1953: 49) who did his research on the circumcision rites of the Luvale ethnic stressed that this kind of mimed copulation was considered as essential for hastening 'healing; the novices also hope that by so doing, their own penises will grow large and strong. The same is done to visitors to the lodge'. Max Gluckman (1963: 147ff), who also researched Mukanda rite among the ethnic groups in

[6] Among the ethnic groups such as the Chokwe, Ila, Luchazi, Mbunda, Luvale, and many others, the initiates are called *mwali*.

[7] This perspective is substantiated by the empirical study done various scholars in the volume edited by Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe (1998).

northwest of Zambia, Chokwe, Luchazi, Lucho, Lunda, and Luvale, supports White's observation that initiates are perceived as 'union of female and male principles' and 'are grouped in pairs as husband and wife'. Gluckman noted that the upsetting of natural order of things within these rites meant that in many of these ethnic groups, during the phase of recovering, the liminal subjects were encouraged to play with the phalluses of the *vilombola* (keeper of the initiation lodge) and *tulombolachika* (initiated assistants of the *vilombola*) (see also Murray n.d.; Browne 1913).

The actual ritual sexual performances as demonstrations were common in many African rites of passage for boys and girls. Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1929: 311) has documented some 'obscenities' which were condemnation as offending 'the moral sense of white men [sic] … stigmatized as being anti-social and are commonly legislated against. They are said to be 'ultra-bestial' or 'too infamous to bear repetition'. This hostile attitude that many early anthropologists portrayed to 'ritual obscenities' appears to be the underlying reason for current resistance by many Africans who have refused to identify African past with certain forms of sexualities which were condemned as 'unnatural' and 'ultra-bestial' and now being promoted as natural and acceptable by the same people. For many Africans, this is self-contradiction and objectionable. However, the fact never be buried, as Evans-Pritchard noted that 'sodomy [sic]', was among the commonest features of boys initiations into manhood and also into secret societies which were imposed upon them. He (1929: 318) further points out that during this period 'each of the initiates has to copulate with another to show how he performs the sex act with a woman'. Such 'practical and theoretical instruction in sexual life', Géza Róheim (1929: 189) noted, are prominent feature not just in boy-initiation but also for girl-initiation ceremonies. The obscenity was part of initiation activities even in girls' puberty rites such as *Chisungu* (The Bemba people) and *Kankanga* (Ndembu) (Evans-Pritchard 1929; Audrey 1982; Rasing 2002; Turner 1987). For example, the wife and colleague of Victor Turner, Edith Turner (1987:60) writing on *Kankanga* among Ndembu, noted that:

> *Kankanga* like the boys in Mukanda was considered as a 'spirit from ancient times', an *ikishi*…She may not name a thing directly-she is a prelapsarian being, as it were, before Adam as we might say, a holistic entity. In seclusion the women attend to her body, which

> flowers at this time; they decorate it, they wet a peeled sweet potato and give her vaginal pleasure; they teach her a highly accomplished belly dance.

The emphasis here is that the contemporary emphasis on one form of sexuality-heterosexuality is not in line with African religio-cultural past. The liminal spaces create room for nonconformist forms of sexualities.

The earliest anthropologists among the Ila-speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia (present Zambia), Edwin Smith and Andrew Dale (1920: 74) noted that:

> Instances of sexual inversion are known, but whether congenital or acquired it is impossible to say. We have known of only one man who dressed always as a woman, did woman's work such as plaiting baskets, and lived and slept among, but not with, the women. This man was a *mwaami* ('a prophet').

The fact that this man was *mwaami* confirms the recent research among the gay Sangomas in KwaZulu-Natal that in cultural liminal, taboos are un-tabooed. Since in African thought, Sangomas or prophets are considered as situated in the liminal spaces, same-sex relationships are not only sources of power but a demonstration of the ambiguous nature of human sexuality (Mkasi 2014). This shows that traditional cultures 'seems to allow unbridled excess, very rituals of rebellion, for the order itself keeps this rebellion within bounds' (Gluckman 1954: 21). Gluckman (1959: 119) rightly argued that:

> These rituals contain the belief that if people perform certain actions they will influence the course of events so that their group be made richer, more prosperous, more successful, and so forth. Some of us therefore call these actions 'ritual', and say that they contain 'mystical notions' - notions that their performance will in some mysterious way affect the course of events. 'Ritual' in this definition is contrasted with 'ceremonial' which consists of similar actions but has no such mystical notions associated with it.

Gluckman has been criticized for failing to give specific ethnographical accounts on the African attitudes toward the so-called 'rituals of rebellion'

(Kuper 1961; Norbeck 1963), nevertheless, his thesis as noted above was already validated with empirical evidence by Victor Turner (1969: 108) who describes the ritual as 'the power of the weak' and currently many scholars including Africans are corroborating this thesis in different ways (Mkasi 2014; Gordon 2003; Shrőter 2004). The underlying issue is that African religious traditions were traditions of openness to other perspectives and sexualities. It also affirms that different forms of sexualities have long existed side by side from antiquity, and each held a distinctive place in cultural tradition and in the process of sociocultural transformation. In addition, the liminal spaces were dynamic spaces of empowerment as they enabled initiates to create counter-heteronormative structures which gave emphasis on the values of justice, equality and appreciation of difference. In so doing, they demonstrated the inadequacy of existing social order and the need for cultural transformation.

The on-going discussion confirms what scholars have observed that 'the ironic truth is that it is not homosexuality that is alien to Africa but the far off lands of Sodom and Gomorrah plus the many other religious depictions of other-sexuality that are often quoted in condemning same-sex relations on the continent' (Tamale 2013: 36). Sylvia Tamale (2013: 36) argues that 'it is not homosexuality that was exported to Africa from Europe but rather legalized homophobia that was exported in the form of Western codified and religious laws'. In order to facilitate the construction of original knowledge that can contribute to such a socio-cultural change, during Mukanda rite many 'Ndembu conventions are consistently violated by means of obscene gestures, homosexuality, and taboos against touching the ground' (Bell1997: 54-55). In addition, sexual encounters with women for the liminal guardian and assistants are strictly prohibited as taboo during this period (Turner 1962).

The fact that there is some evidence of the traces of indigenous homosexual practices among some ethnic groups in Zambia during their Mukanda ceremonies, does not mean that the practice is prevalent throughout Zambia or Africa at large. There is still a need for more empirical studies focusing on the history of each specific ethnic group. Yet, this may prove problematic in contemporary context pervaded with public harassment and persecution of homosexuals. It can also be argued that since homosexuality was regarded as taboo in some structured African societies, that could only imply that the practice was known as only acknowledged cultural aspects

were classified as taboo. But when it comes to the Ndembu, one can argue without fear of contradiction that homosexuality was not a strange phenomenon before colonialism, however differently the notion may have been conceived and classified; the practice was entrenched within their cultural tradition. The acute question that remains unresolved is: to what extent did they manage to patrol the liminal borders so that homosexuality did not find its way into structured society?

On Liminality and Border Patrol

There is no precise answer for the above question but the contention is that there was no way that they could have completely prevented the practice from finding expression in structured social order. They may have tried to suppress it but they could not have completely managed to prevent it from entering the structured society as was discovered by Smith and Dale (1920) among the Ila people. The trouble is that homosexuality within the liminal space acted as powerful cultural practice in which sexual agency and subjectivity was discovered. The identity was uncovered through the process and had potential to challenge the normative contractions of meaning of self and others (Quashie 2004: 78). The religious ritual in which the liminal space is situated does not exist apart from the community but 'exists as such only in virtue of the fact that it serves the interests of the society in which it is preserved' (Post I969: ix), and whatever new knowledge that came out of there was significant for cultural renewal and this was an expectation within Ndembu society as highlighted above. It offered choice and multiplicity by making possible the deconstruction of meaningless constraints of common knowledge. It gave the initiates freedom to break free from and deconstruct the socially constructed identities and reconstruct their own rationally based sexual identities.

While homosexuality might have been suppressed in the community, it nevertheless was an aspect of the culture in transition and it was only a matter of time before it could become an established alternative to heterosexuality. It was inevitable that through the process of re-enacting homosexuality, some initiates could have rediscovered and consciously fashioned their identities in that direction. In this way, while the community could have tried to suppress and repress such identities because of its

overemphasis on procreation, there was always a possibility that in time this sexuality would eventually escape from anti-structural confinement, find its locus for expression within structured societies, begin the process of struggle for recognition and force cultural tradition to reorient into that direction**.** Because of the emphasis placed on liminality as taboo-less subversive space, Ndembu culture unconsciously and consciously depended on liminality for cultural transformation and in this way, the culture has never been static entity but rather dynamic. Ndembu culture has always evolved through 'communal assimilation' of certain aspects of knowledge emerging from the liminal space as perceived adequate to meet the needs of the time. Thus, they are constantly altered and redefined, more or less intentionally, to fit in with the cultural values of the time. Change itself is intrinsically part of Ndembu tradition.

It can be argued therefore that homosexuality as liminal ritual among the Ndembu was an aspect of cultural regeneration and renewal. The new, when it first appears, from the liminal is always profane and dangerous but having taken place, become one of the cultural tenets and inevitably become acceptable. Instead of threatening the wellbeing of the community it becomes part of the common experience upon which the community is founded. Thus, tradition cannot be regarded as a closed system. The Ndembu liminal space was that critical site where new subjectivities and identities were expected to break forth for the cultural regeneration and renewal. This shows that while cultural tradition emerges in the past, is not confined to the past but lived within material realties of the present. The question remains: how is the church in Zambia to respond to the foregoing discussion?

Beyond Tolerance: Toward an African Ecclesia-Ethics of Openness

But what is the forgoing have to do with the church? In other words, what does the Ndembu ethics of openness mean for ecclesiological reflections for the Zambian Church? The concept of 'openness' is also articulated from a Black theological perspective by Roger Sneed (2010) in his *Representations of Homosexuality.* But specifically for this article I take the point of departure from the cultural liminality as an African religious space for enacting cultural transformation and argue for integration of Ndembu religious traditions of

'openness' as an ecclesiological ethical paradigm for Zambian church's response to homosexuality. Many Zambian traditions like the Ndembu, Ila, Bemba, Kunda, Lunda, Luvale and others were centred on religio-ethics of 'openness' which drew form and content from the notion of radical hospitality. I am arguing that if Zambian church would win over the sin of homophobia, a constructive African ecclesia-ethics must begin with epistemic de-linking from rigid Church theologies to embrace African religious traditions of openness which resonates with the incarnation of Jesus as a moment of divine liminality with radical openness to the world.

The contention is that the concept of openness is biblical and grounded in the incarnational-liminality of Jesus – the earthly experiences, mission and work of Jesus. Jesus urged his disciples that 'as the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 20:21). The church participates in this divine mission. It is itself a divine ritual performance in the world. It is meant to be always in the liminal space as divine demonstration of resistance to sin and injustice inherent in human social order; as a locus for creating a counter-world through re-enactment of God's kingdom of openness in the world. The church as divine liminal space was envisioned by Jesus to be the power and weapon of the weak in which all are unqualifiedly welcomed. In the same way that Jesus did not come 'to condemn the world' (John 3:17), in its missional engagement in the world, the church must never become an instrument of condemnation but a space of reconciliation of the estranged. The theology of openness was meant to continue through the church as God's continued incarnation in the world to demonstrate God's big heart for the world – the Creator who becomes a creature (one with creation).

To argue that the church is Jesus' continued incarnation in the world does not mean that the church become less human as its members bear the marks of natural human struggles with sin in the world, but does so with the grace of God. Like in cultural liminality, Jesus' existence in the world was dependent on his antithesis to human sinfulness and social structural order– 'had no sin' (1 Corinthians 5:21), 'without sin' (Hebrews 4:5), 'committed no sin' (1 Peter 2:22), and 'in him no sin' (1 John 5:3). But also in contrast to his heavenly glory as he emptied himself (Philippians 2), 'grew in wisdom and stature' (Luke 2:7), 'was hungry' (Matthew 4:2), 'was sleeping' (Matthew 8:24) and 'died' (1 Corinthians 15:3). In his earthly ministry, Jesus did everything in oppositional to the socio-normative of his day. Ernest van Eck (2009: 2) rightly argues that Jesus' preaching of Kingdom of God should

be understood 'as an imagined 'kingdom' (reality) in which different social relations and power structures operate'. It was a liminal speech with hidden transcript of 'rebellion against prevailing order' as it was directed at neutralising the powers that be and socio-political and economic injustice and inequities. This confirms that Jesus as the incarnational divine 'wisdom from God' (1 Corinthians 1:30. See also Colosians 2:3 – 'in him is hidden all treasures of wisdom'), was envisioned as the new knowledge that often emerge out of the liminal space to filter into human social orders for socio-cultural transformation. The church in the world embodies Jesus, and like incarnate Jesus, it is called to serve the world through openness, understanding and seeing the world openly as Jesus did. The church as ecclesia-ethics of openness means that 'the church is, first of all, an affair of understanding rather than doing' (Hauerwas 1983: 103). In the incarnation of Jesus, the activities of Jesus on earth emerged from 'love and understanding' rather than 'love and understanding' emerging from the activities. It is unfortunate that many times the church has passed judgment on issues which it does not seem to understand adequately. This is a misrepresentation of God who does not require human beings to judge one another (Matthew 7:1-2).

In the context of homosexuality the first question the church must ask is not 'whether homosexuality is sin or not, rather, how do we become human together? The way this question will be interpreted will determine how the church must respond. The demanding task of the church in the world is that in every circumstance try to understand rightly humanity as humanity, faced in the light of church's own sinfulness. The ecclesia-ethics of openness is grounded on a deep appreciation of human life, dignity, and as bearers of the image of God. It calls the church to expanse its response beyond mere tolerance by engaging in public appreciation for difference in human life and activity (Sneed 2010:180). I propose three areas in which ecclesiastical openness can function in the context of homosexuality in Zambia.

First, an African ecclesia-ethic of openness values dialogue and understanding of difference as primarily a human endeavour. The task of the church is one of understanding the differences without ignoring or trivialising them but perceived as site for dialogue. The incarnation was made possible by bringing into dialogue the differences – 'the humanity' and 'the divinity' without mixing or confusing them or making Jesus a dual personality but perfectly co-existing in the one person of Jesus Christ. In this way, the

incarnation is a symbol of the safe space for dialogue of difference. The life of Jesus demonstrates that critical recognition and deep appreciation for the difference is the basis for human fulfilment and flourishing in the world. The 'difference' is always the space of dialogue. Arguably, the church in Zambia has not always played a constructive role in either promoting respectful dialogue on the subject or alternative public perceptions of the humanity of homosexuals. In fact, the church is partly to blame for the negative public image and harassment of homosexuals and misinterpretation of African cultural heritage. It is responsible for perpetuating discrimination against human beings who practice homosexuality. This response is a result of the church's apparent lack of adequate culturally informed theology of human dignity that does not define the dignity and humanity of an individual based on their beliefs and practices but on their inherent value as bearer of the divinity. 'If humanity is regarded as made up of the children of God and God loves all humanity', Marcus Garvey noted, then God is more pleased with the church when it protects all humanity regardless of their beliefs and practices than when it outrages them (Garvey 1967: 61). It is difficult to imagine a minority group whose human dignity is more undermined by the church than that of homosexuals, who are regarded as criminals on the account of their sexual orientations, and whose prospects of living a dignified life is lightly dismissed by Christians in Zambian society.

Second, an African ecclesia-ethic of openness 'relies on a deep appreciation of human worth, value, and action…draws on those categories of human experience that humans hold sacred and of deep and abiding value and meaning' (Sneed 2010: 180). The Christians in Zambia have failed to be God's witnesses to human dignity which does not depend on what an individual does, but on affirmation of human beings as bearers of divine image. Rather, the Christians have sought to confront the moral challenge with no regard for the humanity of homosexuals, and have failed to exhibit this deepest theological conviction that human beings are endowed with divine essence, deserving equal dignity and respect regardless of their background and life-persuasions. The Zambian Christians have failed to shift the debate over homosexuality from focusing on moral practice to the humanity of those involved. They seem to lack adequate theological practice of human dignity that transcends the confinements of ecclesiastical corners to embrace pluralistic society. The issue at stake here is not whether homosexual practice is morally right or wrong but whether the human dignity

of those involved can be adequately preserved without relegating them to harassment and persecution. This is a perspective on which African traditional wisdom was grounded. African traditional religious thought has been classified as humanistic in its conception of reality because its approach to conflict primarily focused on first safeguarding the humanity and dignity of individuals involved in order to maintain intrinsic balance of forces and consequently social wholeness.

Third, an African ecclesia-ethic of openness is grounded on the quest for affirmation of the humanity of homosexuals and their quest to experience the fullness of life as a matter of divine concern. In his public ministry, Jesus did not begin by asking the masses about their beliefs and practices as precondition for ministering to them, rather he unconditionally love them, touched them, healed them, delivered them and feed them. In the same way, theology of openness is inclusive in its approach to the notion of abundant life for all without qualifications. The notion of the fullness of life is rooted in the word *Oikoumenē* a relational, dynamic concept which transcends the ecclesiological relationships to embrace the whole human community and the rest of creation. The church is called to transform the *Oikoumenē* from *oikein* (inhabited earth) into an *oikos* (the living household of God) (Raiser 2002: 840-841).

Implications for the Church in Zambia

The following could be suggested as implications of African ecclesia-ethic of openness for the church in Zambia:

First, there is a need for urgent decolonization of Christian public perception of homosexuality. The church must abandon blame discourse and embrace the cultural origin of homosexuality within Zambian cultural traditions. In the words of Frantz Fanon (1963: 2):

> Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language

> and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men … Decolonization, therefore, implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation.

Second, there is an urgent need for the church to re-humanise homosexuals. According to African thought system, in order for healing to take place in the context of dehumanization it is essential to re-humanise those who have been robbed off their humanity. The re-humanization requires the re-establishment of right relationships. As argued above, the church must function within the paradigm of the incarnation of Jesus which suggests that Jesus not only recognised and affirmed the humanity of others but sought to humanize them first before engaging in dialogue. A good example is the encounter of Jesus with a Samaritan woman in the Gospel according to St. John chapter four. In this chapter, Jesus asked for the water from a woman who was segregated by her people as a prostitute and considered as ethnically unclean by Jewish society. The action of asking for water to drink meant that Jesus recognised and appreciated her for who she was and thereby humanizing her. A conservative Jew would not have dared to ask for water from a Samaritan. The humanization is always the first step before engaging any respectful dialogue. The ethic of appreciation for the difference is not only indispensable but prerequisite for engaging in any respectful and life giving dialogue.

Third, there is an urgent need to reconceptualise the church as a social ethic of unconditional love in the world. The church was created by God to be God's social instrument for manifesting his unconditional love, unconditional acceptance and unconditional appreciation of the world as his good creation. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin understands love as the only power that can unite humankind in freedom:

> Love has always been carefully eliminated from realist and positivist concepts of the world; but sooner or later we shall have to acknowledge that it is the fundamental impulse of Life, or, if you prefer, the one natural medium in which the rising course of evolution can proceed. With love omitted there is truly nothing ahead of us except the forbidding prospect of standardization and enslavement – the doom of ants and termites. It is through love and within love that we must look for the deepening of our deepest self,

> in the life-giving coming together of humankind. Love is the free and imaginative outpouring of the spirit over all unexplored paths. It links those who love in bonds that unite but do not confound, causing them to discover in their mutual contact an exaltation capable, incomparably more than any arrogance of solitude, of arousing in the heart of their being all that they possess of uniqueness and creative power (de Chardin 1964: 54; see also Tillich 1954).

Conclusion

This article demonstrated how the Ndembu people through ritual performance breach through cultural sexual normativity into sexual ambiguity as ways of rediscovering their full humanity. Drawing from Ndembu ritual of Mukanda initiation for boys, this article sheds light on how the liminal imagination as transgressive spaces can create unique tensions with potential to generate non-discriminating and liberating perspectives on human sexuality in African context. I have argued that the current un-Africanization of homosexuality is grounded in epistemic failure to understand the historical and material legacies of African cultural heritage. First, the un-Africanised discourse appears to lack acquaintance with the complexity of cultural liminal imagination within some African cultural traditions. This may have deprived them of vital key to understanding the origin of homosexuality in Africa. Secondly, even those Africans who are familiar with African notions of liminality appear to be struggling to acknowledge the possibility that homosexuality as cultural taboo that became un-tabooed in the liminal spaces could not have been always contained within the liminal spaces but most probably found way into structured social order. The Ndembu ritual thinking suggests that African cultures can no longer be perceived as immutable, unchanging and frozen in the timeless past but as something dynamic and many of social changes taking place are not of alien influence but aspects of African cultures that were inexorably to rapture out of cultural cocoon, acquire viability and exert authority over possible modes of African human being and becoming. The implications of this understanding are that the Church in Zambia should move from discriminatory discourse and foreignization of homosexuality to start raising questions about the possibilities of constructing ecclesia ethic of openness to controversial issues such as homosexuality.

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