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Rethinking Constructions of Difference: Lessons from Lesotho's Chief Mohlomi's Activism against the Gendering of Witchcraft⁸

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Abstract

Discrimination according to gender has been in practice in communities globally since time immemorial. This discrimination has infiltrated all spheres of life including the naming, shaming, blaming, and persecution of deviant people as witches. The phenomenon of witchcraft has historically been negatively skewed towards women, with women's gender and sexual diversity being used against them in accusations of witchcraft. In some modern-day African communities, gender and sexual diversity are still regarded as witchcraft or a result of bewitching. While activism against witchcraft has gathered momentum across Africa, it is worth noting that in Lesotho, such activism began in the precolonial era through the leadership of Chief Mohlomi. In this paper, we explore the understandings and experiences of constructions of difference as witchcraft among the Basotho of Lesotho. Using a qualitative research approach, we employed life-history narratives and focus group discussions to generate data with 10 Basotho men and women aged 70–93 years. We used sankofa theory to frame our analysis of the data, which was done thematically. Drawing on the ethnographic data, we discuss lessons regarding constructions of difference as witchcraft, and Chief Mohlomi's (1720–1815) activism against the discrimination of those labelled as witches. The findings reveal that divergent gender and sexual characteristics and identities were used in labelling certain individuals as witches and unexplainable phenomena as witchcraft. However, the findings also show that Chief Mohlomi set in motion a spirited activism against the persecution of divergent people through his teachings, which led to transformed views on gender and sexual diversity among the Basotho. These findings have implications for an education that embraces diversity in all spheres of life to promote inclusive and sustainable communities.

⁸ Ethical clearance number: H17-EDU-ERE-001.

Keywords: diversity, education, gender, inclusion, sexuality, witchcraft

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Introduction

The gendering of witchcraft is not a new phenomenon in communities across Africa (Dehm & Millbank, 2019; Kgatla, 2020; Okonkwo et al., 2021; Singh & Msuya, 2019). Okonkwo et al. (2021, p. 461) stated that since time immemorial in Africa, witchcraft has always been “skewed towards the female gender.” And, according to Okonkwo et al. (2021, p. 446), African historical scholarship is guilty of peddling “gendered constructs in witchcraft beliefs in African history.” These gendered constructs are largely driven by unequal gender norms that support patriarchy (Khau, 2012; Motalingoane-Khau, 2006). The constructs mostly continue to shape gender-skewed discourses as well as inequalities in witchcraft beliefs across African communities (Okonkwo et al., 2021).

Although instances of female witchcraft accusations and persecution are prevalent in African communities, they are also spread throughout the world including Southeast Asia and Central America (Dehm & Millbank, 2019). These authors further noted that witchcraft-related violence (WRV) has, over the years, become a concern for international human rights organisations and activists. According to Dehm and Millbank (2019), the increasing international concern on WRV has been heightened by reported persecutions and murders directed at LGBTIQ+ communities due to beliefs that they are possessed by demons or bewitched. The increase in international attention to WRV and gender-based violence (GBV) directed at minority groups has been accompanied by a plethora of initiatives that provide rich data resources for exploring the nature of WRV in theory and in practice.

Dehm and Millbank (2019) also stated that global nations have begun initiatives to monitor and criminalise GBV and WRV within their domestic jurisdictions by adopting legislations, policy reforms, and taskforces whose aim is to combat both. In addition to these practical solutions to GBV and WRV, there has been an emergent activist scholarship on gender issues (Morrell & Clowes, 2017), which has seen an increase in the documentation of human rights violations based on GBV and WRV (Dehm & Millbank, 2019). This growth in published works on gender-based violations of human rights has provided an impetus for nations and individuals to act against the stigmatisation and discrimination of people displaying divergent gender and sexual identities (Motalingoane-Khau, 2006). According to Igwe (2020), the nongovernmental sector in the continent of Africa has developed strategies to combat WRV in a bid to reduce related persecutions and deaths. With the world in general, and African countries in particular, working towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, it has become imperative for activists and researchers to find strategies for eradicating all forms of discrimination against women and other minority groups (Khau, 2021).

In this article, we use data from Lesotho to argue that activism and attention to WRV as a form of GBV negatively skewed against deviant women is not new among the Basotho. It began with the activism of Chief Mohlomi who taught about and cautioned communities against discriminating and persecuting those alleged to practise witchcraft during precolonial Southern Africa. To achieve this, we first discuss the gendering of witchcraft in African contexts, and Chief Mohlomi's activism against

human rights violations in communities. This is followed by presenting the sankofa theory as a frame for the study. Then we present and discuss data from ethnographic fieldwork spanning 2017–2019 in Lesotho with 10 Basotho men and women who shared their experiences of constructions of difference in their communities and how modern-day education systems could learn from Chief Mohlomi's example of norm-criticality regarding issues of gender and sexuality.

Gendering of Witchcraft in Africa

The gendering of witchcraft is as old as the history of witchcraft around the world (de Blécourt, 2000; Lorne, 2019). Mohammed (2019) argued that the gendering of witchcraft demonstrates how it is conceptualised and embodied through socially constructed gender lenses. Lorne (2019) and Kounine (2013) argued that the origins of the gendering of witchcraft are contested, and Mohammed (2019) pointed out that it has resulted in gender and sexual dynamics underlying witchcraft accusations that are disproportionately directed at women. Levack (1995) stated that American and European societies have a history of witches during 1400 to 1800, when thousands of women and men alleged to be witches were persecuted and executed.

Although witchcraft accusations have declined in American and European societies, they are still prevalent in African communities (Murray & Wallace, 2013). According to Murray and Wallace (2013), many deviant men and women in Africa still face the reality of being accused of witchcraft at any time. In agreement, Ghorbani (2015) stated that African communities still perpetuate the oppression of women through witchcraft allegations and persecutions. As exemplified by Ngalomba and Harpur (2016), many African women who manage to grow old do not necessarily enjoy a happy long life due to being targeted as witches. Müller and Sanderson (2020) attested to this by saying that there are deep-seated prejudices against elderly and deviant women who get accused of practising witchcraft. The accused often face different forms of abuse including ridiculing, torture, and even death (Bello, 2020; Eboiyehi, 2017; Sambe et al., 2014), with most accusers feeling the need to inflict emotional and physical pain on those accused of witchcraft or being bewitched (Chilimampungwa & Thindwa, 2011).

Ngangah (2020) noted that even though witchcraft beliefs existed in precolonial African societies, there are no written records of the phenomenon due to Africa's overreliance on oral traditions. Ogbomo (2005) also pointed out that despite the lack of written records from precolonial African societies, there is evidence of instances in which deviant individuals were accused and persecuted for allegedly practising witchcraft or being possessed by demons. While both deviant men and women were persecuted, the discourse was negatively skewed against women. This double standard in the accusations and persecutions of women alleged to be witches was predominant in patriarchal communities across the world (Mace, 2018). According to Mace (2018), any woman who did not fit the prevailing femininity scripts was accused of witchcraft. Rowlands (2013) also blamed patriarchy for the unjustified accusations of witchcraft against deviant women in communities, arguing that "as long as the overall power of patriarchy remained firm, ruling male elites could countenance the executions of a minority of men, along with a much greater number of women, in their endeavour to rid society of witches" (p. 449).

Faxneld (2017) and Kgatla (2020) argued that patriarchal communities constructed deviant women and men as rebels against patriarchy and thus legitimised their persecution. There were always more women than men who were alleged to be witches, which Barry et al. (2010, p. 5) labelled, "the making of the female witch." Thus, Hester (2010) confirmed that the gendering of witchcraft is a by-product of patriarchy and a mechanism of social control on women and men whose femininity and masculinity scripts were non-hegemonic.

The construction of deviant men and women as witches predates colonial rule in African countries, including Lesotho. According to Kohnert (2007), the vilification of difference and its construction as witchcraft has been a deeply ingrained belief in African societies and provided a framework for WRV. Rakotsoane (1996) argued that precolonial African communities including the Basotho believed in witchcraft (*boloi*), with widespread WRV and brutal killings of those alleged to be witches (*baloi*). However, Chief Mohlomi played a vital role in educating precolonial Basotho against persecuting those accused of witchcraft, arguing that diversity should be celebrated and not feared or persecuted.

In the next section, we present Chief Mohlomi as a pioneer Mosotho activist against the gendering of witchcraft in precolonial Southern Africa.

Mohlomi's Activism Against the Gendering of Witchcraft in Southern Africa

The belief in witchcraft existed during precolonial Southern Africa among ancient Basotho communities (Moteetee, 2017; Rakotsoane, 1996; Semanya & Letsosa, 2013; Thabede, 2008). These communities viewed witchcraft as an evil and harmful practice against society. Thus, those suspected of being bewitched or practising witchcraft in communities were tortured and eventually killed (Semanya & Letsosa, 2013). According to Semanya and Letsosa (2013), the Basotho believed that witchcraft could bring curses, evil and poverty, or death into people's lives. This, according to Semanya and Letsosa (2013), could explain why Basotho communities responded to witchcraft allegations with contempt and violence towards the accused suspects.

In ancient Basotho culture, unexplainable accidents, untimely human death, unusual illnesses, deviant behaviour, and misfortune were often associated with witchcraft (Letsosa & Semanya, 2011; Moteetee, 2017). Letsosa and Semanya (2011) argued that despite the inevitability of difference or death, the Basotho believed that they could not occur without cause. Hence, witchcraft was blamed for any unexplainable occurrence in their lives. In agreement, Rakotsoane (1996) noted that the Basotho rarely accepted the naturalness of human death and thus blamed it on community members alleged to practice witchcraft. They also blamed witchcraft for any deviant sexual and gender scripts. This created a fertile ground for persecutions of those who deviated from what was prescribed by society. Rakotsoane (1996) attested to this through the Sesotho proverb, "*lekoko la motho ha le thakhisoe faats'e*" [a human skin can never be tanned like that of an animal]. The implication of this proverb is that a human being never dies without cause and that there is always someone responsible for the death. Anything deemed unnatural or unexplainable was blamed on witchcraft.

Ellenberger (1912/1992, p. 267) described the tragedy that faced those convicted of witchcraft as follows: "A person convicted of witchcraft was probably 'eaten up'—that is to say, his property and family were taken from him, and he was driven naked from the community, to live or die, as fate might decree." Ellenberger (1912/1992, p. 267) further pointed out:

That is why a person so accused seldom waited for his trial but fled with such of his belongings as he could get together, with a view to joining some other chief. If . . . caught, his flight would be considered an additional and conclusive proof of his guilt.

Although the belief in the existence of witchcraft engaged precolonial Basotho societies, Gill (1997) noted that there was scepticism against this belief. According to Gill (1997, p. 35), one Mosotho chief was quoted saying, "sorcery only exists in the mouths of those who speak of it. It is no more in the power of man to kill his fellow by mere effect of his will, than it would be to raise him from the dead." This Mosotho chief is believed to have been Mohlomi. It is believed that Mohlomi "was born around 1720 at Fothane near present-day Mashaeng (Fouriesburg) in the Free State province of South Africa

north of Lesotho" (Mofuoa (2021, p. 130). Mohlomi lived at Ngoliloe, which was the headquarters of his chiefdom and became "a place where Mohlomi established his leadership academy" (Mofuoa, 2021, p. 131).

Mohlomi was well known for his admirable and exemplary political leadership (Coplan, 1993; Coplan, & Quinlan, 1997; Eldredge, 2015; Epprecht, 2000; Etherington, 2013; Hincks, 2017; Rosenberg & Weisfelder, 2013). According to Coplan (1993), Mohlomi's chiefdom and leadership were guided by ancestral dreams in which they told him to rule with justice and wisdom. Arbousset and Daumas (1846, pp. 272–275, as quoted in Mofuoa, 2015, p. 104) remarked: "His government was that of a prince distinguished for clemency and wisdom." During his time, Mohlomi eradicated beliefs in witchcraft together with the gendering of the phenomenon through his teachings and activism (Mofuoa, 2021). According to Mokotso (2015), Chief Mohlomi condemned witchcraft allegations and WRV among the Basotho. Although a diviner himself, "Mohlomi did not trust diviners who could supposedly 'smell out' witches (divination called *bonohe*), he made it illegal in his chiefdom to put anyone to death on an accusation of witchcraft" (Hincks, 2017, p. 65). By prohibiting the persecution of suspected witches (Rosenberg & Veisfelder, 2013), Mohlomi became a pioneer Mosotho activist against WRV and the vilification of difference.

Besides his exemplary political leadership, Mohlomi was a renowned diviner, herbalist, prophet, and rainmaker (*morokapula*) with mystical powers (Ellenberger & Macgregor, 1912/1992). These skills allowed him to understand the nuances of using traditional medicines and thus he empathised with those accused of practising witchcraft (Hincks, 2017). According to Hincks (2017, p. 65), Mohlomi differed from "false diviners and prophets" because of his discernment and integrity. He openly spoke against WRV and "rejected the branch of divining medicine known as *bolaoli* and *bonohe*" (Hincks, 2017, p. 65). *Bolaoli* (reading one's life path and occurrences) was commonly used to identify witches through the throwing and reading of animal bones, while *bonohe* (fortune telling, seeing) was used to sniff out witches within the community through a séance. Mohlomi distrusted *bolaoli* and *bonohe* practitioners. He committed to exposing those he suspected of quackery (Hincks, 2017), thus making it illegal in his chiefdom to murder anyone on allegations of witchcraft. He also banned the banishing of alleged witches or the destruction of their property (Hincks, 2017).

Ellenberger (1912/1992) argued that Mohlomi abhorred the harsh societal measures implemented against suspected witches because he believed that such measures were often directed against the weak and vulnerable minorities who were oftentimes falsely accused. To weed out those he suspected of quackery, Mohlomi used to stage situations to test the diviners and seers in his chiefdom. Ellenberger (1912/1992) posited that there was one episode in which Chief Mohlomi hid his shield and called on the seers and diviners to assist him in finding it. During this staged episode, the diviners and seers started pointing out suspects in the yard whom they accused of trying to bewitch the chief by taking away his shield. When the diviners and seers were done with their accusations, Mohlomi retrieved his shield from its hiding place to prove that the divinations and accusations of the diviners and seers were unfounded.

Mohlomi eventually instructed his protégé Moshoeshoe, who became the founder of the Basotho nation, to "never to kill anyone accused of witchcraft" (Gill, 1997, p. 12). Rosenberg and Weisfelder (2013, p. 351) noted that "Mohlomi advised the young Moshoeshoe that if he wished to be a great chief, he needed to help those in need, never kill those accused of witchcraft." Mohlomi also instructed the young Moshoeshoe to distrust witchdoctors (Mangnall, 2018). Moshoeshoe heeded the advice of his teacher and mentor and stood against the killing of alleged witches throughout his life (Thompson, 1975). From the teachings of Chief Mohlomi, the Basotho nation learnt that diversity is natural, and people ought to celebrate diversity instead of pathologising it. Epprecht (2000) noted that Basotho

used the saying, "*Khotso khaitsele ea Moshoeshe* (Peace is Moshoeshe's sister)" to show that they would nurture and protect peace at all costs, like one would protect their sister. The norm-criticality espoused by chief Mohlomi became the foundation of Basotho's education system, but was derailed by the colonial regime (Epprecht, 2000).

Theoretical Framing

To understand the importance of history in shaping the future, we used sankofa theory to make meaning of our data. According to Temple (2010, p. 128), sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana, which comes from the saying "*se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi*." This saying translates to "it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten" or "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind" (Temple, 2010, p. 128). Sekese (2002, p. 170) pointed out that the Basotho have a similar philosophy termed "*thebe e sehelo a holim'a e ngoe*" which could be loosely translated thus "we need to fashion our daily lives on what has worked before." These indigenous philosophies offer a solution for modern-day people in reconstituting their fragmented past (Temple, 2010). They assist in interrogating and reinterpreting the gender inequality and persecution of deviant people in communities. Sankofa offers a process of understanding and critiquing the shaming and blaming of marginalised people in society by interrogating the contexts, perspectives, spaces, and systems that collude to oppress deviant minorities in communities of diverse people.

According to Felder (2019), sankofa acknowledges and centres the experiences of historically marginalised people in multiple contexts and provides an opportunity to go back into history in order to move forward. It allows researchers and communities to touch base with the past to gather the best of what the past has to offer for us to reach our full potential in moving forward. Slater (2019) also pointed out that through sankofa theory, we can reclaim and revive whatever beneficial practices from the past have been forgotten or lost. According to Slater (2019), sankofa wisdom encourages people to understand that the good and the bad of the past have shaped who they have become, and enables them to embrace all their experiences.

Sankofa theory is relevant to this article because we believe that learning from the past is the best way to move forward in terms of embracing and celebrating diversity with the aim of transforming "taken for granted ways of thinking and doing into best practices" (Hervie, 2013, p. 2). The blaming, shaming, silencing, discrimination, and persecution of deviant minorities in society today was created by people and it can be transformed by others who are willing to move forward with best practices learnt from the past (Kissi, 2018).

Methodology

This paper derives from a larger qualitative, ethnographic study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) in Lesotho spanning the period 2017–2019. We used participatory and visual methodologies including drawings, collages, life-history narratives, and focus group conversations with 10 Basotho participants to enable them to share their experiences of the traditional lives and sexuality practices of Basotho. We focus only on the focus group discussions in this article. The use of the qualitative approach was based on the argument that it enables participants to share their lived experiences and reflect on their opinions and interpretations of phenomena in context (de Vos et al., 2014). Our study was grounded in the transformative paradigm, which aims to challenge and deconstruct societal norms (see Taylor & Medina, 2011) towards inclusive societies that embrace and celebrate diversity.

The study was conducted in the village of Qomoqomong in Quthing, a mountainous district in the south of Lesotho because of the researchers' knowledge of the community and ease of access to elderly participants. The village of Qomoqomong was also chosen for its strong ties to traditional Basotho

beliefs and practices, to enable us to understand how the Basotho viewed diversity and deviant behaviour during an age when witchcraft beliefs were rampant. Our aim was to explore participants' experiences regarding deviant behaviour, and how this was dealt with over the years of their lives—in a bid to learn best practices of dealing with diversity in modern-day communities.

After receiving ethical clearance from the university in Eastern Cape, South Africa, we approached the chief of Qomoqomong village who granted us permission to conduct the study in his chiefdom. The chief was helpful in identifying some of his oldest people, whom we could approach for in-depth understanding of the history of the Basotho. Five women and five men agreed to take part in the study, and we presented information to them about the study in Sesotho. The whole research project was conducted in Sesotho and the transcripts of recordings were later translated into English. We were comfortable with conducting the study in Sesotho because the research team consisted of Basotho who were fluent in Sesotho and English. We used pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity.

The Table 1 presents the biographical details of the participants.

Table 1

Biographical Details of the Participants

| Name | Gender | Age | Occupation |
|-------------|---------------|------------|--------------------|
| Khomo | Male | 83 | Retired teacher |
| Tonki | Male | 72 | Musician |
| Tau | Male | 70 | Retired policeman |
| Phiri | Male | 90 | Farmer |
| Nkoe | Male | 93 | Traditional doctor |
| `Mateboho | Female | 85 | Retired shopkeeper |
| `Mantho | Female | 88 | Midwife |
| `Mathoto | Female | 90 | Housewife |
| `Malira | Female | 93 | Retired teacher |
| `Mamosa | Female | 93 | Housewife |

The participants responded to the following question during the focus group discussions: "What are your experiences of the treatment of deviant people among your community?"

The transcribed recordings of the focus group discussions were translated from Sesotho to English and thematically analysed to identify themes (see de Vos et al., 2014). After coding the themes, we identified descriptive categories (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, we rechecked the translations against the transcripts and ensured consistency between the data and themes. Member checking was also used to confirm details and get clarity from participants where needed.

We discuss the major themes produced from the data in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

The two themes that were generated from the data are:

- Deviant behaviour was seen as a sign of witchcraft.
- Understanding diversity can help reduce discrimination and persecution.

Deviant Behaviour Was Seen as a Sign of Witchcraft

In this section, we present the participants' experiences of instances where people displaying deviant personalities or behaviour were labelled as witches and persecuted. The participants narrated what they remembered, and how they had felt during the incidences. Nkoe, being the eldest in the team, spoke freely and opened discussions on any issue. He said:

I remember in my youth there was once a very beautiful lady in our village. She glowed like she was being licked by a snake instead of bathing. . . . She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. The women hated her because we were all charmed by her beauty . . . [giggles]. Out of the blue, we began hearing that she was a witch and that she used witchcraft to charm men to her house so that she could kill them for her witchcraft potions. Before we knew it, she was banished from the village.

The woman in Nkoe's story was persecuted because of her extraordinary beauty, which people considered as unnatural. Presenting a different perspective was `Mamosa who said,

I remember a different one where a very poor old woman was accused of witchcraft because her two children had died in infancy and her husband had left her for another woman. People said she had killed her babies for witchcraft rituals, and she was shunned by almost everyone. Nobody blamed her husband. It broke my heart!

`Mamosa's story attests to what has been argued by Ngalomba and Harpur (2016)—that many old African women do not enjoy a happy long life due to being targeted as witches. Instead of being celebrated for their old age, this is seen as a sign of witchcraft due to what Müller and Sanderson (2020) identified as deep-seated prejudices against elderly women. Thus, older women remain common victims of WRV because of the belief that they know more witchcraft spells than younger women do. They are often blamed for any alleged bad luck in communities.

While `Mamosa and Nkoe presented incidences in which women were alleged to be witches because they were different, `Mamosa alluded to the pain she felt when a woman who had lost everything was persecuted. Agreeing with `Mamosa, `Mantho said,

To think that the woman had lost her children in infancy and she gets blamed for it! People are so cruel . . . if she did not want children she would have stopped after losing the first one. . . . instead of consoling her, she is discriminated against! Sometimes it is hard to be a woman!

`Mantho's words, "sometimes it is hard to be a woman!" are pertinent even today in patriarchal communities where women are subordinated and denied their most basic human rights (Khau, 2021). The belief that babies should not die in infancy forced the community to blame the mother for their death (see Rakotsoane, 1996). This is in line with what was argued by Moteetee (2017)—that the Basotho blamed unexplainable accidents, untimely human death, unusual illnesses, and misfortune on witchcraft. The fact that the woman's husband was never blamed attests to the legacy of a patriarchal gender order in which a man is superior and is never questioned or blamed for any wrongdoing (Khau, 2021). Even though the Basotho knew that death was inevitable, they believed that it could not occur without cause (Letsosa & Semanya, 2011).

In response to `Mantho's comment, Tau said:

People are not cruel. Our beliefs of witchcraft are cruel. Men and women shunned the poor lady because she had lost her babies and called her a witch because they believed in witchcraft. When men banish people from the village, it is the women who ululate and cheer them on. . . . we have learnt to be cruel because of believing in witchcraft, but the belief does not do any good for us!

Tau's argument that women partake in their own subordination is testament to what has been alluded to by Khau (2021), that agents with a vested interest in their subordination see it as normal. The village women who pathologise other women do so because they stand to gain by being seen as performing good womanhood scripts in their society (see Motalingoane-Khau, 2006).

Continuing the discussion, `Malira had this to say:

When I was a new bride, I was told that my neighbour was a witch because she was a great herbalist. I was told to be aware of her and not eat anything from her house. One time when I was alone at home and sick, she gave me a potion that healed me. Where is the witchcraft in that? My in-laws and the villagers hated the woman and she was eventually banished from the village because of her knowledge of herbs. Her house and all belongings were burnt!

In patriarchal communities, women are not expected to surpass men in any skill or capability (Khau, 2021). Thus, the woman with skills in herbal medicines was seen as a threat to men's masculinity and was accused of witchcraft. This is testament to the patriarchal gender order that still prevails in modern-day Lesotho (see Khau, 2021). The experiences shared by these participants show the beliefs that were held by their community regarding deviant behaviour and the gendered constructions of witchcraft. While the victims of the allegations were all women, the accusations against them were based on their deviant characteristics, which positioned them as different.

Phiri presented a different experience, which adds to the array of diverse behaviours construed as witchcraft:

There was this woman called `Mantsoaki in the village. Her traditional beer was the best in the whole neighbourhood. Men would travel from different regions of the district just to get her beer. Soon there were rumours that she used witchcraft to get people to like her beer. It was said that she placed the genitals of a dead woman in the pot in which the brew was sold from, and that she used her underwear to sieve the traditional beer.

Phiri's experience presents a different dimension of witchcraft allegations. While it is still a woman being blamed, female sexuality was linked to the allegations of her witchcraft. She was blamed for using the sexual organs of another woman to attract clients for her traditional brew. The use of her underwear in sieving the brew also provides testament to the powers that were attached to female sexuality among the Basotho. Sekese (2002, p. 102) argued that female sexuality was associated with spiritual powers because "*Molimo o bopa maseea popelong ea mosali* [God creates babies in the womb of a woman]." The belief in the power of female sexual organs has led to massive murders of women in which their sexual organs were chopped off (*liretlo*) to use in witchcraft potions (see Mokotso, 2015). The skill that `Mantsoaki had in brewing traditional beer was belittled by blaming it on witchcraft.

Continuing the sexuality discussion was Tonki who said,

When I was a young man, there was this chap in my village who never had any interest in girls like the rest of us. He was always with his buddy. We then heard that they were staying together in South African mines because life was expensive. . . . however, there were also rumours that they were lovers. When they came home one Christmas, the chief told them to stop their witchcraft, find wives and get married or leave his chiefdom. Their parents believed that they were bewitched for loving each other.

`Mateboho also said,

When we were girls, we used to have mummies and babies. When we were alone, we used to caress, kiss, and fondle each other's genitals; and we enjoyed ourselves. However, we were often told that what we were doing was a sin . . . so we did it in hiding. Anyone who got caught was sent to church for prayers to remove the demons . . . [giggles] . . . but I know some old women who still do it.

Tonki and `Mateboho's stories present divergent sexual identities that were seen as unnatural among the Basotho community and hence were blamed on witchcraft. Despite this belief, homosexuality existed in precolonial Africa, including Lesotho (Epprecht, 2000; Gay, 1986; Kendall, 1999). Blaming homosexuality on witchcraft was boosted by Christian beliefs that labelled it a sin. Challenging this belief, Jeffreys (1991, pp. 299–302) argued that homosexuality is seen as deviant because it poses a threat to heteropatriarchy and its eroticisation of unequal gender power; he posited:

Heterosexual desire is eroticised power difference . . . so heterosexual desire for men is based on eroticising the otherness of women, an otherness, which is based on a difference in power. . . . Women's subordination is sexy for men and for women too.

The belief in the unnaturalness of homosexuality aligns with Reddy's (2005, p. 6) argument that "for the majority of our societies, African homosexuals constitute 'improper' bodies and homosexuality a 'subversive' pleasure." The belief that female bodies were made for men's pleasure, and vice versa, is what makes homosexuality unnatural and tantamount to witchcraft in heteropatriarchal communities.

When asked whether all community members were agreeable to the witchcraft allegations and persecutions, the participants noted that there were several community members who were against the practice. Their responses are presented in the next section.

Understanding Diversity Can Help Reduce Discrimination and Persecution

The discussions regarding the persecutions of people who portrayed deviant scripts highlighted the community's belief in witchcraft and how patriarchy served as a seedbed for such constructions of difference. However, the participants also highlighted that the allegations, although based on beliefs of witchcraft, were not factual. `Malira's story presents how a skilled medicine-woman was alleged to practice witchcraft despite healing people in the community. When questioned further, `Malira said:

After my neighbour was banished from the village, several people started talking about how they had also been healed by her medicines and how they miss having her in the village. Some people even went looking for her in the new village where she was staying to get help.

Continuing the discussion, `Mateboho said:

People act before understanding. . . . If they had tried to understand your neighbour, they would not have accused her of witchcraft. Maybe she would have even taught them the herbs that have medicinal properties. I think people are always afraid of what they do not understand . . . just like the case of `Mantsoaki, they could have asked for her recipe for traditional beer instead of accusing her.

The situation of `Malira's neighbour shows that accepting societal mandates without question can become problematic. People socialised into witchcraft beliefs do not always challenge allegations because they have vested interests in being seen as upstanding community members (see Khau, 2012). Due to women's knowledge of herbs and traditional plants with medicinal properties, women were often accused of using their knowledge for witchcraft (Thabede, 2008). The destruction of property belonging to `Malira's neighbour aligns with Ellenberger's (1912/1992) argument that those convicted of witchcraft had their properties destroyed to rid the community of the last vestiges of witchcraft.

Khomo used Phiri's and Nkoe's examples to highlight the problem of unchallenged beliefs:

`Mantsoaki was skilled in brewing good traditional beer. Instead of people learning from her so that they could acquire the same skills, they accused her of witchcraft. This is still happening today. If people do not understand how one is surviving and making it through tough times, they accuse them of witchcraft; just like in Nkoe's example of the beautiful woman. Who knows if she had a special beauty regime that she could have taught other women?

Tonki continued the discussion, saying:

It is sad that even today people are afraid of those who are different to them. In the past, we taught young boys and girls during the traditional initiation school that everyone has different skills and attributes and should be accepted as such. There was much tolerance back then. These days, our children are taught about diversity in schools, but there is more discrimination against those deemed different. It is time we looked back on ourselves as Basotho. Where did we go wrong?

Nkoe agreed:

During the times of King Moshoeshoe the 1st, there was a reduction in witchcraft-related violence because he was against it as a king. Maybe if the current chiefs spoke out about this issue and condemned it, people would appreciate that we need diversity to prosper as a nation. My medicine teacher used to say to me "U be joale ka Mohlomi, u rate batho boohle. Meriana etla u atlehela [Be like Mohlomi and love all people and your medicines will be successful]".

These discussions bring forth that although the participants' community believed in witchcraft, they were aware that some accusations were unfounded and unfair. During the discussions, they highlighted some benefits that could have befallen the community had it tried to understand the accused before judging them. The references to King Moshoeshoe the 1st and Chief Mohlomi show their eminence among the Basotho regarding their teachings on inclusivity, as attested to by several scholars (see Ellenberger, 1912/1992; Mangnall, 2018; Moteetee, 2017; Rakotsoane, 1996; Thabede, 2008).

During the discussions, the participants in this study became aware that change was necessary. They alluded to a need for more tolerance and acceptance of difference instead of its vilification. Tonki's point, "It is time we looked back on ourselves as Basotho. Where did we go wrong?" is pertinent in rethinking the constructions of difference among the Basotho and the world in general. The fear of difference creates many unnecessary injustices against those deemed different. To highlight this shift Nkoe said:

We are the elders of our community and we know what works and what does not. It is high time that we became actively involved in our children's education to ensure that they do not live in fear of difference, but accept each other as human beings.

Mamosa agreed, saying:

Indeed, King Moshoeshoe the 1st believed in peace and tolerance. Our society can change for the better if we learn from his principles to guide our future generations . . . Sekoele Basotho [let us look back to go forward] . . . I know we can make it if we work together to teach the youth.

The engagement of these participants in these discussions transformed their thinking regarding the constructions of difference in their communities. They agreed that celebrating diversity is what built the Basotho nation of old, and could be used in modern-day education systems to eradicate the vilification of difference. This changed mindset shows the importance of engaging communities in dialogue to rethink their practices and transform their realities.

Conclusion

We have explored the constructions of difference as witchcraft among the Basotho using life-history narratives and focus group discussions. We analysed the data thematically using sankofa theory. The findings reveal the use of divergent gender and sexual characteristics and identities in labelling certain people as witches, and unexplainable phenomena as witchcraft. However, the findings also show that Chief Mohlomi was against the persecution of divergent people through his teachings, which led to transformed views on gender and sexual diversity among the Basotho. These findings are crucial to building an education that embraces diversity to promote inclusive and sustainable communities.

Although modern-day Lesotho is a patriarchal nation, Epprecht (2000) has argued that the gender relations in 19th-century Lesotho portrayed a social presence of independent and powerful women. According to Arndt (2002), African women have always held several reins in community and family life, leading to Stratton (1994, p. 54) writing, "Contrary to what is often thought today, the African woman does not need to be liberated. She has always been free for many thousands of years."

Several African scholars have argued that before colonisation, people were not organised along gender lines, despite the existence of other forms of social inequality (see Nnaemeka, 1998; Oyewumi, 1999). In many African communities, patriarchy came through colonisation and the subsequent state formation and introduction of Islam and Christianity (Stratton, 1994). Thus, applying sankofa theory, we can learn from precolonial Africa that current gender power relations in communities can be reconstructed to build inclusive and sustainable communities that are norm-critical and celebrate diversity. Taken-for-granted constructions of gender and sexual differences can also be deconstructed, leading to communities that do not vilify deviant minorities. Sankofa allows us to interrogate the exclusionary conceptions of difference in modern-day education systems and learn from past experiences of norm-criticality to create inclusive futures.

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