

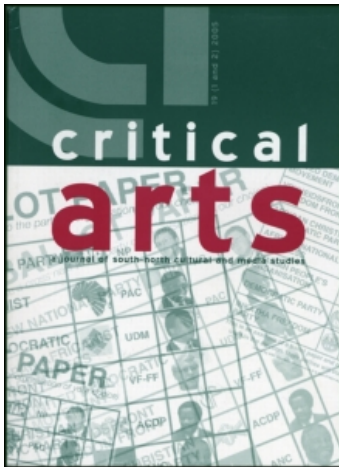
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Reclaiming space: African women's use of the media as a platform to contest patriarchal representations of African culture - womanists' perspectives

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Reclaiming space: African women's use of the media as a platform to contest patriarchal representations of African culture – womanists' perspectives

Simphiwe Sesanti

Abstract

In 2005, the Deputy President of the African National Congress (ANC), Jacob Zuma, was charged with raping his late comrade's daughter. Outside the court, his supporters carried placards and screamed 'Burn the bitch'. Inside the court, Zuma's legal team cross-examined the rape complainant on her sexual history. In 2006, former ANC Parliamentary Chief Whip, Mbulelelo Goniwe, reportedly asked a 21-year-old administrative assistant, who had been requested to help prepare meals at Goniwe's birthday party, to stay after the event to provide sexual favours at Goniwe's home. When she refused, Goniwe reportedly said that he thought she was 'a real Xhosa girl' and asked her how she could resist the advances of her chief whip. Media coverage of these incidents put issues of culture and gender at the centre of attention. While debates on African culture in the media are nothing new, what was strikingly unique about these two particular cases was the emergence of strong African women's voices, in a space traditionally dominated by African men. This article seeks to examine how the entrance of women into traditionally male-dominated media spaces made a difference in terms of enlightening and educating media consumers about African culture.

Keywords: African culture, Afrocentricity, feminism, media and patriarchy, womanism

Introduction

Research indicates that traditionally, in Africa, the mass media, which have the potential to change people's perceptions, have either sidelined women's issues

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or stereotyped them through content and images, making it impossible to change perspectives, especially with regard to the violation of women's rights (Okello-Orlale 2006: 49). Instead of giving a platform to women to articulate their frustrations and aspirations, the 'media continues to be dominated by men and male values' (ibid.:54). Unless or until women are given access to the media to express themselves freely, the struggle against the violation of women's rights will continue to be constrained.

While acknowledging Okello-Orlale's picture of women's representation in the media as being undesirable, there are indications that women are not sitting back and folding their arms but resisting and challenging the media's domination by men and male values. This reclaiming of media space manifested itself during the coverage of the Zuma and Goniwe cases. While there were many women's voices that confronted the contentious issues surrounding the cases through the media, of particular interest were the opinion pieces written by African women which engaged with the discourse from African cultural perspectives.

The selection of and interest in African cultural perspectives is informed by the observation made by women's rights activists, as will be shown later, that this is one area amongst African communities that has been the monopoly of the male species. Developments suggest that relegating women to the rear, where cultural issues are concerned, may be something of the past. Women writers Nomboniso Gasa and Vuyo Sokupa put pen to paper to interrogate these issues on the basis of African cultural values when the Zuma and Goniwe cases made media headlines. The contribution by Gasa (2006: 23), a feminist,¹ gender activist and political analyst, was in the form of an opinion piece in the *Mail & Guardian*. The contribution by Sokupa (2006: 39), a feminist² and *Mail & Guardian* journalist (at the time of writing her piece), was in the form of a comment and analysis piece. In 2007, Mmatshilo Motsei dedicated a full book, *The kanga and the kangaroo court – reflections on the rape trial of Jacob Zuma* to the issues at hand. The uniqueness of the two opinion pieces by Gasa and Sokupa, and Motsei's book, lies in the fact that they engaged Zuma and Goniwe's claims, using the very same Xhosa/Zulu cultures as instruments of analysis. In using their commentaries as a point of departure, a content and conceptual analysis will be applied with the aim of demonstrating how these articles, written by African women, have helped to contribute to the struggle for women's rights. Their contribution will be measured against the theoretical framework of womanism, a feminist theory that emphasises a cognisance of colour and culture in the struggle for women's rights (Enns 2004: 204).

It needs to be pointed out from the onset that feminists advocate for the extension of media space to all women – not only to feminists. Feminists/womanists' calls are not blind to the fact that not all women support the calls for equality between women and men. In this regard, Motsei (2007: 29) notes: 'Not all men are gender insensitive. Similarly, not all women are gender conscious.' Alluding to this point, McFadden (1995: 44) observes that some women have, through their writings,

stood up to feminist writers, supporting 'undemocratic and selfish position(s) taken by ... men'. About such women, McFadden (ibid.) notes that they are "'women" in the most traditional and male-defined sense'. Calls for the extension of media platforms to women of whatever persuasion are informed by the reality that even within the feminist/womanist schools of thought there is no linear approach, but rather differences and contradictions in their approaches. As Abrahams (2001: 72) notes, 'while womanists share a starting point, often you will find that womanists do not agree either in their theoretical conclusions or in their preferred course of action.'

While the term 'African' is defined in many ways, one of them being 'any person, male or female, who has the legal citizenship of a nation located on the African continent' (Kolawale 2002: 96), this article uses 'African' to refer to black Africans of the continent. Accordingly, the definition of the term 'African culture' in this article will be linked to this definition of an African. It will be noted that, in some cases, ethnic labels such as Xhosa, Zulu, Venda have been used instead of 'African'. These are not one and the same. In many writings that deal with African culture, what is 'African' has often been misappropriated for one ethnic group or another. Caution has been exercised in this article not to reverse this trend by imposing what is exclusively ethnic on collective Africanness. Having defined culture, this article proceeds to examine the historical status of African women within African cultural settings. This section is then linked to womanism and its claims for the struggle for women's contestations in the public sphere. This is followed by Gasa and Sokupa's commentaries, and an examination of their claims within the context of African culture.

Defining 'culture', with a particular reference to African culture

Culture is defined as a 'product of a people's history' embodying 'a whole set of values by which a people view themselves and their place in time and space' (Wa Thiong'o 1993: 42). It is 'the totalization of the historical, artistic, economic, and spiritual aspects of a people's lifestyle' (Asante 2003: 134). Culture is also regarded as 'the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence it exerts on the evolution of relations between man and his environment and among men or human groups within a society, as well as between different societies' (Cabral 1979: 141).

The reference to 'history' is a strong denominator in all these definitions of culture. This means that discussions about culture – in this case African culture – will be inadequate and incomplete without referring to African history. On the relationship between African culture and history, Kunene (1982: xii) observes: 'Our perspectives are therefore philosophically deeply anchored in the past, which is the *sine qua non* of our present.' Kunene's contention finds resonance in Callinicos's (1996: 92) assertion that 'identity and culture emanate from our

past'. When dealing with the history of a people or their culture, the task becomes incomplete without making reference to the language of the people whose culture is being discussed. That is because, as Wa Thiong'o (1994: 59) observes, a people's 'language becomes the memory bank of their collective struggles over a period of time'. Elsewhere, Wa Thiong'o (1993: 32) describes African languages as 'our own mirrors in which to observe ourselves and our enemies'.

A number of aspects need to be considered when dealing with issues of culture. As Kruger (2004: 10) notes, the 'first difficulty we have to contend with is that cultures offer something of a moving target. They are always changing under the influence of other cultures, economic circumstances, technological development and much else.' This point is alluded to by Mugo (1999: 214) when she observes that 'culture is always dynamic and never static', and Callinicos (1996: 93) when she observes: 'Societies have never been frozen in time.'

While not denying the fact that culture is dynamic, some scholars insist that certain fundamental aspects of African culture have defied changes and the passage of time. Elucidating this point, Nhlapho (2000: 141) observes that while it

may be easy to give up modes of dress and greeting, it may not be so easy to adopt a whole new view of what it means to be a person (personhood). Similarly, aesthetic values and musical or artistic practices may change over time; not so the methods of dealing with life's crises, such as birth or death. Such a distinction explains the tenacity of certain practices in the face of changing social contexts.

On this point, while acknowledging that 'cultures are not fixed or stagnant entities', and that '[O]ur African culture has been affected and has benefited from interaction with "others"', Makgoba, Shope and Mazwai (1999: x) maintain that African culture 'remains African'. Also, Asante (2003: 4) argues: 'We have one African Cultural System manifested in diversities ... Literary critics who attack Afrocentricity as essentialism have given essentialism a bad connotation.' In a way similar to Asante, Davidson (1994: 18) observes: 'However endlessly diverse within itself, the socializing process in Africa suggests an underlying unity of culture.'

Another issue to contend with when discussing culture is, as Nhlapho (2000: 144) observes, that claims to a right to 'culture are scrutinized and analyzed to show that they are invariably made by the privileged in society (ruling elites or beneficiaries of the patriarchal order for, instance) to the detriment of the *individual* rights of others, for example workers or women'. Nhlapho's (ibid.) observation is particularly significant for this article, as it is one of the issues preoccupying womanists' attention. Womanists' concern is, as Motsei (2007: 153) observes, that 'contemporary interpretations of African culture seem to equate women with cows or land that a man owns'. The question that then confronts us is: What is the status or position of women in African culture?

Women's 'place' in African culture – a historical context

Magwaza (2001: 25) observes that 'Zulu society has always been patriarchal. Its women have been given minimal or marginal opportunity to air their views.' While Zulu women are viewed as 'custodians of culture who have a duty to transmit ethnic identity to the young,' Magwaza (2001: 26–27) further observes that in 'instances where the very culture that is guarded is to the detriment of women's dignity, respect and rights, she is not allowed by tradition "to answer a man back"'.

It is perhaps against this background that Habasonda (2002: 103), discussing 'gender and African tradition' notes that 'in African society, women do the things men approve of'. Is the picture painted by Magwaza and Habasonda a reflection of how the relationship between African men and African women has always been, or is it a reflection of modern times? According to Clarke (1985: 123):

In Africa the woman's 'place' is not only with her family; she often ruled nations with unquestionable authority. Many women were great militarists and on occasion led their armies in battle. Long before they knew of the existence of Europe, the Africans had produced a way of life where men were secure enough to let women advance as far as their talent could take them.

Amadiume (1989: xv) points out that 'African women were involved in and in control of certain areas in the ideology-making process'. How did African women come to occupy the position described by Magwaza (2001: 26–27) and Habasonda (2002: 103), in contrast to the more 'historical' accounts described by Clarke (1985: 123) and Amadiume (1989: xv)?

A reading of African history suggests that in as much as Africans 'produced a way of life where men were secure enough to let women advance as far as their talent could take them' (Clarke 1985: 123), this way of life was not left unchallenged by some African men. Similarly, many rights-conscious African women resisted when they found their space invaded. Referring to the Zulus in particular, Kunene observes that Zulu king Shaka's mother, Nandi, 'was far from being an obedient, domestic and subservient woman' (1984: 410) but rather a woman who 'regarded herself as a representative of her family and entitled to political authority as any male member of the society' (ibid.: 421). Kunene (ibid.: vii) further notes that Nandi 'not only attended the Zulu National Assembly, but the court historian tells us that she was in constant confrontation with the men of the Assembly (one would think with a sense of contempt for [the] often meaningless rhetoric of the Assembly)'.

In the performance of sacred rituals amongst the Venda, Sotho and Xhosa, women play leading roles. Motsei (2007: 77) observes that according to 'Venda custom, a man's sister, *makhadzi*, is the one chosen to speak with the ancestors on behalf of his family or community. In Tswana, Pedi and Sotho cultures, *rakgadi* plays the same role.' In the case of the Xhosa, Mndende (2006: 19) notes: '*Inkulu* (the

first-born male) and *umafungwashe* (the first-born female) perform very important roles in ritual performances and have to work together and must exemplify by their conduct the unity of the family. This is one of the areas that amaXhosa (plural of Xhosa) males have now suppressed and women need to fight for it to be brought back to its original status.' Mndende's (ibid.) call to African women to bring back 'to its original status' the space 'suppressed' by African men is what womanism represents.

Womanism and feminism defined

Womanism is defined as a term that refers to an 'Afro-centric form of feminism, one that takes seriously not only gender concerns but also race and class factors' (Koyana 2001: 65). Womanism is informed by the 'interaction of Afrocentric, multicultural, and feminist theoretical interpretations of political, economic, historical, social and cultural events' (Gqola 2001: 14). It is a celebration of 'black roots and the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom' (Koyana 2001: 65).

In taking cognisance that Koyana qualifies womanism as an Afrocentric form of feminism, it is crucial to define feminism on its own so as to clearly indicate the points of convergence and divergence between these two concepts.

Feminism is defined as 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' (Enns 2004: 8). It is a scholarship that is not a homogenous but heterogeneous field of inquiry rich in diversity of theoretical approaches and methods (Riordan 2004: 84). Variants of feminism include liberal feminism; socialist feminism; radical or revolutionary feminism; lesbian feminism; first, second and third wave feminisms; and black feminism – referred to in this article as 'womanism' (Boyle 2005: 29). Enns (2004: 8) observes that although 'some Black women chose the term *feminist* to reflect their commitments, other Black women and women of color have preferred to use the term *womanist* rather than *feminist* to highlight the uniqueness of their commitment to women of color'.

There is a history that informs this preference and standpoint. In expressing her objection to the conceptual use of feminism, Hudson-Weems (2003: 155), while acknowledging that in its beginnings the feminist movement in the USA, led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, campaigned for equal rights regardless of race, class and sex, their successors 'departed from Susan B. Anthony's original women's suffrage posture'. Instead, Hudson-Weems (ibid.) argues further, the National American Suffrage Association, founded by northern white women, 'asserted that the vote for women should be utilized chiefly by middle-class white women, who could aid their husbands in preserving the virtues of the Republic from the threat of unqualified and biological inferiors (African men), who with the power of the vote, could gain a political foothold in the American system.' Against this background, Hudson-Weems (ibid.) rejects feminism on the basis that 'the

true history of feminism, its origins and its participants, reveals its blatant racist background'. Alluding to this point, Amadiume (1987:4) observes that '[g]iven the racist element of the Western women's movement, it is perhaps not surprising that none of their studies have dealt with the issue of racism. As a result, in the past few years, Black women have begun to expose the racism in the women's movement and to accuse Western feminists of a new imperialism.' Hudson-Weems's argument is contradictory in that it ignores her own acknowledgement of pioneer Western feminists' fight against all forms of oppression, and concentrates on her perceived failure of the inheritors of feminism. While some feminists may have been found to be racist, feminism in itself is not racist. Hudson-Weems's argument lumps the concept together with the proponents who erred. On the other hand, unlike Hudson-Weems, Amadiume (1987: 10) notes that she has 'retained the term feminist in spite of the controversy regarding to whom it refers and what is meant by it'. For Amadiume (1987:10) the 'meaning of the word as I have used it is a political consciousness by women, which leads to a strong sense of self-awareness, female solidarity and, consequently, the questioning and challenging of gender inequalities in social systems and institutions'. This study takes the latter position that, while not turning a blind eye to the failures of the Western feminist movement (real and perceived), it recognises and acknowledges Western feminists' contribution to women's struggle and the birth of womanism.

This study emphasises womanism because of its focus on cultural contextualisation (Kolawale 2002: 96). However, it needs to be pointed out that not all womanists reject feminism. Emphasising the relevance of feminism in Africa, Kolawale (ibid.: 93) notes that feminism must be adapted to African cultural exigencies. It is for this reason that Koyana's (2001: 165) definition of womanism as an 'Afro-centric form of feminism' is appropriate for this study. That is because it recognises the contribution of feminism to Africa and Africans. Koyana's linking of womanism to Afrocentricity necessitates the definition of 'Afrocentricity'. The concept refers to a moral as well as an intellectual location that posits Africans as subjects rather than objects of human history, and establishes a perfectly valid and scientific basis for the explanation of African historical experiences (Asante 1998: xii-xiii). While womanism rejects the misuse of African culture/s by patriarchal African men, it is opposed to the rejection of African cultural values, but seeks to argue for women's rights and dignity from the premise of African cultural values. One of the platforms identified by women's rights activists to fight their case is the media – this, due to the belief that the media have 'the power to change perceptions and attitudes and might be a useful instrument for advancing the status of women and fostering equality between men and women' (Okello-Orlale 2006: 50). In this way, women's issues are not confined to the private, but rather are brought into the public sphere.

The public sphere accounts for those spaces in society that are open, accessible, shared, collective and common (Croteau & Hoynes 2001: 150). The media are

regarded as central elements of a healthy public sphere (ibid.: 14). The importance of the public sphere lies in its potential as a societal mode of integration (Calhoun 1992: 6). But this integration, as Calhoun (ibid.: 3) points out, should be based on communication rather than domination. Calhoun's (ibid.) point on 'communication rather than domination' is a bone of contention for women activists. Women's rights activists argue, in the same way Croteau and Hoynes (2001: 5) argued, in the context of the media's role in multi-cultural environments, that 'the media should serve as the screens on which diverse images can be projected for all to see'. This means an avoidance of a situation where, as Okello-Orlale (2006: 54) describes it, 'the media continues to be dominated by men and male values.' The media should enrich public life by promoting the notion that public dialogue matters, by providing spaces where people can both see parts of their own experiences and be exposed to ideas and experiences which they do not encounter in their day-to-day lives (Croteau & Hoynes 2001: 28). In this regard, Martin and Chaudhary (1983: 11) observe that one of the important roles of the media is to be the purveyors as well as the moulders of a community's social heritage. What all this means is that, as Fuller (in Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003: 143) observes, the media need to reflect their communities deeply, failing which they will not succeed. As Fuller observes, if the media do not challenge their community's values and preconceptions they will lose respect for failing to provide the honesty that the media are expected to offer. It is these 'community's values and preconceptions' that Gasa (2006: 23) and Sokupa (2006: 39) challenged through the use of the media.

The choice of the *Mail & Guardian* by these two feminist writers – Gasa and Sokupa – is worth noting and commenting on. Not only is the *Mail & Guardian* edited by a woman – Ferial Haffajee – but also by a feminist³ who holds very strong views about women's representation in the media. Haffajee (2006: 21) has publicly objected to a situation where those who give meaning to news, the experts and analysts, are inevitably men. She believes that it is good practice (and good business) to reflect women as equal readers and viewers, and regards as best practice the integration of women as sub-editors, as expert voices, in photographs and in columns. Realising these goals is, for Haffajee (ibid.), 'part of my editor's mission.' In both Zuma and Goniwe's cases, the *Mail & Guardian* issued at least two strong editorials explicitly supporting the female complainants. In response to Zuma's supporters threatening the rape complainant, the *Mail & Guardian's* editorial (10–16 March 2006: 22) called Zuma's supporters 'com-tsotsis' (comrade-criminals), and referred to them as 'the arse-end of a continuum of prejudice and ignorance'. In the case of Goniwe the *Mail & Guardian's* editorial (8–14 December 2006: 30) noted that the 'leader of the women's caucus at Parliament, Vytjie Mentor, deserves commendation for "kicking up dust" as she put it, when the complaint against Goniwe was brought to her attention'. Regarding 'a growing trend toward politicians and civil servants using their positions to secure sexual favours', the editorial further pointed out that this 'reveals the extent of patriarchy

in supposedly liberated organizations like the ANC and its allied partners' (8–14 December 2006: 30). For its part, as Haffajee has declared, the *Mail & Guardian* has availed itself as a platform to resist patriarchal tendencies, as the writings by Gasas and Sokupa show below.

Zuma's case

Zuma's rape trial took place over 23 days between March and April 2006 (Robinson, Tabane & Haffajee 2006: 6). During this trial, which took place in the Johannesburg High Court, the 'defence strategy hinged on revealing the complainant's sexual history to attack her credibility' (ibid.). During the course of the trial, three pastors – one a parish priest where Zuma's accuser worshipped, and two others who met her when she was a theology student – gave testimony that painted her as someone to falsely accuse acquaintances of rape (Moya 2006: 3). In 'accordance with a clear strategy to discredit Khwezi (the pseudonym used by the media to describe the complainant in Zuma's case)', Moya (2006: 3) observes that 'the three priests and two other church workers told the court about how she had made unsubstantiated rape charges against at least five men, four of them priests'. Under cross-examination she was asked who she had slept with, how many lovers she had had, who she had penetrative sex with, and whether she was a lesbian (Govender 2006: 5). Govender observes that Khwezi's childhood rapes 'were used to build a picture of a promiscuous woman who cries rape after consensual sex'. During the trial, Zuma's daughter, Duduzile, told the court that she had been suspicious of the complainant from the start (Moya 2006: 4). When her father introduced the complainant as an old comrade's daughter, she knew that the complainant was at the Zumas' home 'to sponge off' her father, since in her experience 'old comrades' children are always looking for help' (ibid.). Under cross-examination, Zuma's daughter said that she did not warn her father 'because in Zulu culture, it was not the done thing to discuss sex-related matters with one's parents' (ibid.).

Watching Zuma's rape complainant being cross-examined by Zuma's defence counsel, in an open letter to Zuma, Gasas (2006: 23) wondered if it was 'not imaginable that you could have fought to clear your name and still remained within the realm of compassion, decency and respect for the human being who finds herself in this painful position'. In protesting against Zuma's endorsement of the cross-examination which the rape complainant was subjected to, Gasas (ibid.) notes that Zuma had 'done the very opposite of what our ancestors taught us – "do not beat your enemy to the ground, always leave room for a person to recover their composure"'. Backing up her contention, Gasas (ibid.) invokes the Nguni core teaching in stick fighting which states that fighting should be conducted with a sense of 'honour and dignity'. Gasas (ibid.) observes: 'Young men may engage in battle for hours without bloodshed. The one who spills the blood of the other is not celebrated as a winner. "Yhu, lixelegu! (A person with no self-respect)"

people exclaim after the fight.’ While Gasas was not expecting Zuma to be passive in the face of accusations against him, she expected him to observe African ethics that guide conduct in fighting, especially because Zuma is no ordinary person but a leader. In making explicit this point, Gasas invokes a Nguni saying, ‘*isisila senkukhu sibonakala mhla ligquthayo* (the tail of a hen will be shown on a windy day)’ (ibid.). What this means is that it is during trying and difficult times that a person’s caliber shows. Interrogating Zuma’s personality, Gasas (ibid.) questions:

Of which caliber are you? ‘Not in my name’ – we have hoped to hear those words uttered from your lips, as you call off your supporters ... Whether this person has made unfounded allegations now and in the past, the material on which she was examined last week is evidence of a painful life ... Empathy with the pain of others is a central characteristic of the free and humane society we have struggled to build ... Outside, your supporters were burning her effigies and she was physically threatened. If you see yourself as a father figure in the struggle, what message does the actions of your supporters and the strategy adopted by your defense give to South Africans? What guidance does the behaviour of your legal team give us at a time when we are trying to transform our legal framework, and build a society that cares for every human being, especially the most vulnerable?

Gasas’s concerns about ‘the most vulnerable’ found an echo in Sokupa’s writings reflecting on reported claims against Goniwe.

Goniwe’s case

ANC Chief Whip Mbulelo Goniwe was kicked out of parliament in December 2006 following a sexual harassment charge by Nomawele Njongo, an administrative assistant of the ANC (Boyle 2006: 6). In a ten-page complaint, Njongo stated that she had been summoned to Goniwe’s house to help serve dinner to a group of his friends. Soon she found herself alone with Goniwe, at around midnight, when others, including female colleagues, had left after refusing to give her a lift home. She pointed out that left with Goniwe, the chief whip – speaking to her from beneath his sheets – asked her to ‘take care of him’. When she refused, Goniwe reportedly said he had thought she was a ‘real Xhosa girl’ and asked how she could say no to her ‘chief whip as if I am an ordinary man’. When this information came to light, the ANC women’s caucus in parliament called for Goniwe’s immediate suspension (Mafela & Boyle 2006: 1). On the other hand, Vytjie Mentor, the ANC’s parliamentary caucus, regarding some men’s reaction to this issue, in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian* (Makgetla 2006: 4), noted: ‘Men protect their turf and often their instant response is to become defensive. You must appeal to their political or social consciousness for them to remember they are ANC members. What usually comes first is “this person’s my buddy”.’ While ANC women gave their support to the complainant, Mentor revealed to the *Sunday Times* that Njongo ‘received so many threatening calls, so many calls of harassment’ (Mafela & Boyle 2006: 1).

Writing about the Goniwe case, Sokupa (2006: 39) notes that in Xhosa culture 'tradition calls for older men to act as protectors of the vulnerable, particularly women and children. So, when an old man makes unwanted sexual advances to a young woman he should be treating as a daughter, it starts smelling a bit incestuous.' Goniwe's utterances reminded Sokupa that '[n]ot so long ago, we heard that Zuma culture, oops I mean Zulu culture, insists a man should never leave a Zulu woman sexually unfulfilled, for fear that she might accuse him of rape' (ibid.). Statements attributed to Goniwe, and claims by Zuma, represent (according to Sokupa) Zulu 'girls' as sexually 'insatiable' and Xhosa 'girls' as 'always sexually available' (ibid.). Sokupa charged that Goniwe had misrepresented Xhosa culture:

It was all too easy for me to imagine the 21-year-old woman's agony as a flabby, balding man old enough to be her father, lay half-naked on his bed and instructed her to come and 'take care of him' ... [O]nce again a horny old African man had used 'culture' as a way to try to coerce a young woman into helping him get his groove back. (ibid.)

Examining Gasa and Sokupa's claims in the context of womanism

In defining and discussing culture, as pointed out above, any claims made in the name of culture should be judged against the history and language of that particular culture. In examining Gasa and Sokupa's claims, this author will use that yardstick.

If, Gasa (2006: 23) observes, Zuma saw himself

as a father figure in the struggle, what message does the actions of your supporters and the strategy adopted by your defence give to South Africans? What guidance does the behaviour of your legal team give us at a time when we are trying to transform our legal framework, and build a society that cares for every human being, especially the most vulnerable?

On the other hand, Sokupa states that in Xhosa culture 'tradition calls for older men to act as protectors of the vulnerable ...' (2006: 39). Gasa and Sokupa are drawing our attention to the 'meaning' of 'fatherhood' in African culture. They are reminding Zuma and Goniwe, and the larger African community, that 'fatherhood', in fact 'parenthood' in African culture, is more than a biological concept. Historically, as Mthembu (1996: 220) notes, in 'an African system, communality is a strong and binding network of relationships. Children, for example, belong not only to their biological parents, but are also under the authority and control of any adult in the community.' This means, according to Dandala (1996: 78) that 'in an African setting ... senior members of the community would be expected to deal with the younger members as if they were their own children'. Gasa's question and Sokupa's statement suggest strongly that Zuma and Goniwe failed African standards of fatherhood. In Gasa and Sokupa's views, instead of protecting the 'children' they

exposed their vulnerability. Referring particularly to Zuma's relationship with the rape complainant, Motsei (2007: 14) notes that Zuma 'was a father-figure to her and had a moral obligation to exercise control over his sexual urges, especially if and when sex was initiated by her'. That is because '[a]s someone who has a keen eye and ear for tradition, he is aware of the principle of "my child is your child, your child is mine" which, in African societies, encourages biological and non-biological parents to take communal responsibility for the material, psychological and moral well-being of every child in their community' (ibid.: 15).

In allowing the rape complainant to be subjected to cross-examination, Gasa (2006: 23) significantly takes issue with Zuma by invoking the teachings of the ancestors, noting that Zuma has 'done the very opposite of what our ancestors taught us – "do not beat your enemy to the ground, always leave room for a person to recover their composure".'

Gasa's assertion finds resonance in Moemeka and Kasoma's (1994: 41) observation:

Magnanimity is another virtue in African morality. A magnanimous person overlooks injury and insult and does not seek revenge. He or she forgives others, and returns a hand of friendship and kindness when treated cruelly and unfairly. A person who is always ready to take revenge for the slightest wrong or unfairness is said to be mean, and not fit to be a leader.

By invoking the ancestors' teachings, Gasa raises three inter-related and significant aspects relating to African culture: 1) the status of the ancestors in African culture, 2) the ancestors' emphatic teachings on the value of compassion, and 3) how leaders, in particular, are expected to epitomise compassion towards members of their communities.

Ancestors in African culture occupy a sacred position, as Kunene (1982: xiv–xv) notes:

Each era boasts of vast cumulative achievements of the past which represent the social activities of numerous individuals known and unknown. Collectively, these honourable individuals who have made their contribution to human welfare and progress are known and honoured as the Ancestors. In this context the lessons of the past become crucial and may decide the fate of a society or societies. Thus the contributions of the Ancestors are not only laudable in themselves but are also a primary aspect of the survival and continuity ... It is crucial that the present generation and all subsequent generations must revere the Ancestors for the alternative is reverence of the tool as the measurement of human progress.

Callinicos (1996: 92) observes that 'a stable sense of identity was secured through the culture of the ancestors ... they enabled people to understand and accept philosophically any misfortunes that they were powerless to prevent'.

By linking her claims to the ancestral teachings, Gasa is historicising her statements and gives them validity, as opposed to making statements without a

historical reference. While Sokupa and Gasa have made a great contribution in challenging misrepresentations of African cultures, there is a long way to go in this regard. Among the people who protested outside the Johannesburg Court in support of Zuma, were women. Significantly, in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian* (Dibetle 2006: 5), Nomagugu Ngobese, a female self-declared traditional healer and cultural activist, noted that 'in Zulu culture, the complainant shouldn't have been in Zuma's bedroom at night'. Noting that 'Zulus are respectful' and that 'what the complainant has done is a sign of disrespect', Ngobese further pointed out that if she were Zuma 'I would file for rape against the complainant'. Her stance proves correct the observations made by womanists/feminists, namely that not all women are gender conscious in the same way that not all men are gender insensitive.

Conclusion

Years of colonial rule in South Africa ensured that to a great extent black Africans were alienated from their culture, and as a result became ignorant of its tenets. This condition rendered open an environment where many could make claims in the name of African culture without facing a challenge. It is in this context that Goniwe made an audacious claim in the name of Xhosa culture. But the intervention of Sokupa, through her piece, posed a challenge, provoking deeper reflections on Goniwe's claim, and helped to level the playing field. Through her article, Gasa helped to deepen the debate on human/women's rights and democracy in the context of African culture. Gasa's contribution challenged a perception existing in African communities that the struggle for women's rights is a Western, foreign concept. Significantly, in her arguments, Gasa made use of an indigenous language (isiXhosa) to give authenticity to her claims. As more calls are made for the media to take into consideration issues related to African culture in their operations, it is hoped that more critical articles of Gasa and Sokupa's kind will be given space by the media, so as to deepen an understanding(s) of African culture by journalism practitioners and scholars. The *Mail & Guardian*, in particular, by giving space to the voices of Sokupa and Gasa, has fulfilled the media's educational role in society and that of the public sphere.

Notes

1 Gasa describes herself as a feminist in a collection of women's writings she edited: *Women in South African history* (2007, HSRC).

2 Sokupa confirmed her being a feminist to me in a telephonic conversation – 23 September 2008.

3 Haffajee confirmed her being a feminist to me in an e-mail – 25 September 2008.

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