

The division between private and public life

That President Zuma has a right to privacy cannot be denied. That we have a right to discuss what that means for our society is also our right as citizens, writes Nomboniso Gasa

A POSITIVE outcome of President Jacob Zuma's rather busy sex life is the space it creates to examine the very African cultural and traditional practices upon which the justifications are based.

Notwithstanding a comment attributed to Professor Stephen Friedman, "I think we are matured enough to distinguish between a politician's private and public lives," the president's choices on these matters are in fact of public interest.

For many centuries now, the women's movement internationally has been arguing for the breakdown of the dichotomy between the private and the public.

When women entered into political activity in the early 20th century in South Africa, as their sisters had done earlier in the universal suffragette movement in Europe, they were claiming the public political space as also belonging to them.

They articulated, in words and in action, the connection between the public and private domain. Many have written, in this continent and elsewhere, that private manifestations of patriarchy form the bedrock of public patriarchy.

Regretfully, the ANC's comment on Zuma's reportedly fathering a baby with another woman, as well as that of Friedman and many others, is not helpful in forging new terms of engagement by those who hold public office. Distasteful as it may be, we must engage with these issues and their connection to the virulent and chauvinistic masculinity that is pervasive in our country.

We are told, in line with polygamy, that the president has a right to court other women because, according to Jackson Mthembu of the ANC, it is through such courtship that he will be able to identify women that he may wish to marry later on.

Really, according to what norms

now? What about the time-honoured codes of behaviour which guide this realm of cultural life? What about the code of "preserving the honour and dignity of the woman in question, as well as her family"?

For too long, tradition and culture are used to silence critique and voices of dissent because apparently once something is given the cultural and traditional label, it is deemed sacrosanct.

We speak because we know the damage that is done to many of us in the name of culture, tradition and religion. We also know the damage that is done through these crude misrepresentations of "our culture and tradition" not only to those affected, but also to the rich and complex heritage that these cultures present to us. African cultures and traditions, like all cultures the world over, are varied, nuanced, full of contradictions, at times liberating, but also intensely oppressive.

While women in polygamous marriages have agency, as women everywhere have, let us examine the complexity of that space – polygamous families themselves.

Having grown up in the Sabalele plains, in a small village called Ntshingeni (the place of Khwaza's plumage), I can speak with some experience of the damage that polygamy often wreaks in families.

It is no accident that we have a saying – *unochuku ngathi unguntwana wesithembu*, you are so quarrelsome, as if you are child of a polygamous household.

In that world of my childhood, kids from these families competed for the attention of their fathers and other paternal relatives. These fathers were absent because of the migrant labour system and also because of their selfish choices.

Yes, much has been said about Zuma's transparency on these matters. As they say, many men and women have these extramarital affairs but choose to hide them. As a proud African man and, I might



President Jacob Zuma and his three wives, from left, Nompumelelo Ntuli, Thobeka Mabhija and Sizakele Khumalo, after his State of the Nation address in parliament last year. The writer says Zuma's private life cannot be ignored because it has an effect on attitudes towards women in society.

PICTURE: REUTERS

add, one posturing as a benevolent patriarch, our president prefers to marry his many mistresses.

So what? we may ask. That Zuma has a right to privacy cannot be denied. That we have a right to discuss what that means for our society is also our right as citizens. But if women choose to enter these unions, why do we bother?

We bother because it is our business. Presently, Sisters-in-Islam, a

Malaysian organisation, is undertaking a study on the effects of polygamy in that country. Tired of being brushed aside and ignored by leading Islamic clerics as troublemakers, these women have decided to study the real impact of polygamy. Based on benevolent patriarchy derived from a more liberal interpretation of Islamic laws, the women have found this situation puts children and their

mothers under untold pressure.

Interestingly, many men who have been interviewed have argued that they find it stressful, expensive and emotionally exhausting. These fathers say they cannot recommend polygamy for their sons.

In the meantime, Sisters-in-Islam has picked up on the rolling-back of some of the considerate provisions.

Polygamy is no longer based on

whether a man can treat all his women equally, that the introduction of another spouse will not lower the standard of living of the other, that it must be fair and necessary. There have been gradual legal amendment of these provisions, which has eaten away the more considerate and liberal provisions.

The research has uncovered large areas of spousal and child neglect. When children ask their

fathers for school fees and pocket money, their daddies look confused and ask, "To which mother do you belong?" There has been a rise in the tensions between mother and child in that country, children blaming their mothers for not being able to secure a more comfortable position with their fathers.

With our president, it appears we do not have to worry about such unpleasant side-effects. He has declared to the world in Davos that he loves all his wives equally.

Some may have given some qualifications and spoken about individual characteristics and how one person is not the same as another, blah, blah... our president speaks in absolutist terms. Such grey and complex areas do not exist. Instead of shunning the debate under the pretext of private liberties, we need to unmask it and engage with it. It is as real and critical as the economy, arms deal and other issues on the national agenda.

After all, as June Jordan reminds us, "There is power and there is difference: he who holds that power determines the meaning of difference".

The president has once again opened space to examine the meaning of that power and its transformation so that when we speak against multiple concurrent partners, responsible sexuality and unequal power relations, we know that is the present and the future we bequeath future generations – those who choose differently, will do so knowing there are other options and models.

That is the beginning of maturity of our democracy for which we all take responsibility. As the banner under which the president spoke on International World Aids Day said: I am responsible.

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