Representations of 'progressive fatherhood' in postcolonial Zimbabwe: binaries, ambivalences and ambiguities

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Representations of 'Progressive Fatherhood' in Postcolonial Zimbabwe: Binaries, Ambivalences, and Ambiguities

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how the Swedish ideal of 'progressive fatherhood' is represented in the context of a photo competition and exhibition organized by the Swedish Embassy in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Drawing on Rose's (2016) method of Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA), the article examines how Zimbabwean fathers are represented as being progressive through both image and text and the extent to which these representations could be seen to challenge or 'mimic' (Bhabha, 1984) the Swedish ideal of 'progressive fatherhood'. While some of these representations reproduced certain binaries, they also presented the kind of ambivalent, 'postfeminist' relationship with gender equality that has been identified in other contexts. Overall, these representations were found to go beyond colonial mimicry by challenging and extending the Swedish ideal of 'progressive fatherhood' beyond the context of the middle-class, nuclear family.

Key words: fatherhood; parenthood; postcolonial; representations; visual discourse analysis

Introduction

In October 2016, the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe hosted a photo exhibition entitled 'Swedish Dads'. The exhibition featured twenty-five photographs of Swedish fathers at home on parental leave with their young children. The photograph (Figure 1) shows people standing on the pavement outside the Swedish Embassy in Harare, looking at the 'Swedish Dads' exhibition, which was displayed on the embassy's outer walls. When I came across this photograph, I was struck by this curious scene and wondered how a collection of photographs of 'Swedish Dads' ended up being displayed on a wall in Zimbabwe.

Figure 1 ‘Swedish Dads’ photo exhibition outside the Embassy of Sweden in Harare (Photograph by Johan Bävman)

The ‘Swedish Dads’ exhibition features photographs of fathers and children engaging in everyday activities – such as cooking, cleaning, and enjoying moments of physical closeness. These photographs appeared to represent middle-class fathers (Klinth, 2018) as members of implicitly biological, nuclear families. The photographs were taken by photographer Johan Bävman. When Bävman started the ‘Swedish Dads’ photo project, he had two objectives. Firstly, ‘to describe the background to Sweden’s unique parental allowance [system]’, and secondly, ‘to inspire other fathers – in Sweden, and further afield – to consider the benefits of such a system’ (Bävman, 2017, preface). Parents in Sweden, including fathers, are entitled to share a total of 480 days of parental leave, paid at 80% of their regular salary. Since the 1970s, the Swedish state has actively encouraged fathers to take parental leave (Klinth, 2002) and promoted the notion of ‘caring fathers’ (Johansson and Klinth, 2008).

However, the situation for fathers in Zimbabwe is very different. Zimbabwean legislation allows for maternity benefits for female employees in the private and public sector, as well as in quasi-governmental departments (MPSLSA n.d.). However, men currently have no legal right to parental leave in Zimbabwe. At the time of writing, proposed amendments were being discussed to improve the rights of female employees to maternity leave, but there are no immediate plans to make parental leave available to fathers. In spite of the legislation protecting women’s rights, Zimbabwean fatherhood

has been described as ‘patriarchal’ – only tolerating feminism that does not challenge this status quo (Muchemwa and Muponde, 2007: xxii). Even in transnationally split families living between Zimbabwe and South Africa, gender-normative parenting has remained entrenched (Chereni, 2015). Zimbabwe is thus very different from the Swedish context.

As it turned out, the exhibition of ‘Swedish Dads’ in Zimbabwe was not a unique phenomenon. Between 2016 and 2019 this exhibition has been circulated by the Swedish Institute – ‘a public agency that encourages interest and trust in Sweden around the world’ (SI, n.d.). In collaboration with Swedish Embassies, the exhibition was circulated to over 40 countries around the world. The circulation of visual material is not uncommon for the Swedish Institute, which has exported photo books and photo exhibitions for many decades to connect the Swedish brand to notions of ‘gender equality’ (Klinth, 2018). Indeed, since at least the 1990s, Sweden has been represented as ‘the gender equality champion internationally’ (Towns, 2002: 157) – with ‘a duty to encourage imitation’ (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018: 58). The exhibition of ‘Swedish Dads’ in Zimbabwe can thus be understood against this backdrop. Since the notion of ‘progressiveness’ is also a central aspect of the Swedish nation brand (Glover, 2009), the circulation of this exhibition could be understood as a form of nation branding through which Sweden reinforces its image as a progressive country (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018).

In response to the ‘Swedish Dads’ exhibition, many Swedish Embassies organized photo competitions featuring photographs of local fathers. One such competition was organized in Zimbabwe under the title ‘Vana Baba Vanhasi/ Obaba Balamhla/ Fathers of Today’¹. The winning photographs from this competition were included in a photo exhibition by the same name, which was hosted by the National Gallery of Zimbabwe. The call for entries into the competition invited ‘Zimbabwe’s best photographers’ to participate in a competition ‘dedicated to documenting and showcasing the roles of *progressive fathers* in Zimbabwe today and how fathers today relate to and interact with

¹ For the sake of conciseness, I refer to ‘Vana Baba’ or simply ‘the exhibition’.

their children’ (emphasis added). In this sense, the notion of ‘progressive fatherhood’ was embedded in the competition right from the start.

The Zimbabwean photo competition invited photographers to submit a maximum of two photographs with a title and a description. The Embassy received approximately 100 entries, and the 25 winning entries were selected by a jury. This jury included the Communications Officer from the Swedish Embassy, as well as two award-winning photographers connected to the National Gallery of Zimbabwe. They judged the photographs based on technical aspects (e.g. lighting and composition) as well as the story and characters depicted and the symbolic messages around fatherhood. All photographers who entered the competition received written feedback on their photographs from the jury. The top 25 photographs in the competition were all included in the exhibition and an overall winner was selected (Figure 2).

Rationale and Aim

The field of fatherhood research has historically been dominated by research from the global North, focusing predominantly on ‘white, middle-class North American, European and Australasian families...’ (Beardshaw, 2006: 306). The same could be said for much of the research that focuses on representations of fathers and fatherhood, which have largely been conducted in Western contexts (cf. Marshall et al., 2014; Leader, 2019; Hamad, 2010; 2013). At the same time, research has also highlighted the importance of conceptual and contextual specificity when studying specific, local practices of men’s care in relation to notions of equality (Doucet and McKay, 2020). The limited research on representations of African fathers highlights that such representations have historically drawn on racialized metaphors and tropes which were used to position Black fathers as ‘deadbeat dads’ (Cammatt, 2014). Furthermore, colonized people have historically been represented, exhibited, and displayed in ways that did not allow them to ‘talk back’ to their audiences (Benedict, 1991). There is thus an important need for research that engages critically with representations of Black and African fathers.

Following this, the aim of this article is to explore how the Swedish ideal of ‘progressive fatherhood’ is represented in the context of a Zimbabwean photo competition and exhibition organized by the Swedish Embassy. Drawing on Rose's (2016) method of Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA), the article examines how Zimbabwean fathers are represented as being progressive through both image and text and the extent to which these representations could be seen to challenge or mimic (cf. Bhabha, 1984) the Swedish ideal of ‘progressive fatherhood’. While the analysis is based on a close reading of the material, it is also situated in relation to a larger historical context – particularly Zimbabwe’s colonial history, as will now be discussed.

Postcolonial Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe can be understood as a colonial creation in the sense that its borders were arbitrarily drawn up in the infamous ‘Scramble for Africa’ (Mlambo, 2019: 51). Although the colonial period lasted less than a century, it has had a deep and enduring legacy on the continent (Mudimbe, 1988). This article explores how Zimbabwean fathers are represented as being progressive and how the notion of ‘progressive fatherhood’ can be understood in this postcolonial context. Colonial discourse is characterized by binary oppositions such as ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (Mudimbe, 1988: 17) and the discourse of ‘progress’ – i.e. the idea that the modern, developed and civilized countries of ‘the West’ could help to civilize the traditional, superstitious and backwards people of ‘the Rest’ of the world (cf. Hall, 1992). In this way, European colonialism was justified through the idea of bringing Western *enlightenment* to “the Dark Continent” (Jarosz, 1992), producing notions of White, Western superiority and Black, African inferiority (cf. Rollo, 2018). The idea of ‘progressive fatherhood’ is thus particularly interesting to study in such a postcolonial context, especially considering that the concept could be seen as a cultural export from Sweden (Klinth, 2018).

European colonialism had a powerful impact on notions of family in Africa. Through colonialism, the European nuclear family system was ‘universalized’ (Oyěwùmí, 2002) and the ‘nuclear/modern/bourgeois family’ came to be seen as a mark of civilization

(Kitch, 2009; McEwen, 2017). Indeed, there is no evidence of the nuclear family structure being practiced as a norm on the African continent – either historically or currently (Oyěwùmí, 2002; McEwen, 2017). Indeed, in many African countries, child rearing is seen as the responsibility of the extended family and broader community (Mkhize, 2006). The affiliation with the extended family is of fundamental value to the individual (Wickström, 2014). However, the reliance on extended family and community members for care can also be a matter of necessity (Wickström, 2014). In circumstances where parents are often forced to migrate for work, but may be unable to afford childcare, they may have no choice but to rely on their relatives.

Colonialism and imperialism also had a deep impact on gender dynamics and notions of masculinity on the continent (McClintock, 1995; Morrell and Swart, 2005: 90). Shire (1994) argues that the patriarchal masculinity that was embedded in British colonial discourse became internalized by Zimbabwean (Shona) men in the form of patriarchal family structure. Indeed, Shona men were routinely emasculated and subordinated to colonial power, with adult men being referred to as ‘boys’ (Shire, 1994). Thus, patriarchal masculinity in Zimbabwe could be a means of resistance to being subordinated, although it ultimately resulted in an internalization of colonial power. When considered against this backdrop, photographs displaying intimate and involved fatherhood – as well as caring masculinities – become particularly significant.

Ideals and Representations of Progressive Fatherhood

Social representations are infused with great ideological power and are often shaped by normative discourses (Phoenix, Howarth, and Philogène, 2017). This is indeed the case when it comes to representations of fathers, which lie at the intersection of cultural ideals governing representations of masculinity, parenthood, and family. In terms of masculinity ideals, the ‘breadwinner model’ has been challenged by the image of the ‘new’ man who ‘actively and publicly engages in child-care and child responsibilities’ (Morgan, 2001: 228). Parenthood ideals, in turn, are increasingly influenced by notions of ‘involved’ (Forsberg [Gottzén], 2009), ‘intimate’ (Dermot, 2008) and ‘caring’

(Johansson and Klinth, 2008) parenthood and fatherhood. In terms of family ideals, the ‘hegemonic family discourse’ is often invoked, based on the western ideal of a married, monogamous, heterosexual couple and their biological children living in a single-generation household (Auer *et al.*, 2020: 3-4). While these ideals are particularly prominent in Western post-industrial countries, they do not necessarily reflect the empirical reality in such countries. Despite this, these cultural ideals still carry great ideological power.

The image of the ‘new man’ also carries a strong moral charge because of its connections to notions of modernity, enlightenment, and equality (Klinth, 2002). Indeed, fathers’ involvement is not *just seen* to benefit their children but is also linked to broader discourses of gender equality in relation to men’s implicitly female partners (Ives, 2015). Thus, ideals of contemporary fatherhood take on a moral dimension, giving rise to a ‘gender equality-orientated (heterosexual) masculinity’ (Bach, 2017). Such ideals are particularly prominent in Sweden, where the contemporary image of masculinity is strongly influenced by the ‘ideology of gender equality’ (Johansson and Klinth, 2008). Thus, contemporary fatherhood is ‘... associated with “*progressive*” forms of caring masculinity which challenge the gendered, and traditionally unequal, dichotomy between work and home, public and private, breadwinning, and childcare’ (Ives, 2015: 282, emphasis added). In this sense, the term ‘progressive fatherhood’ also carries powerful moral connotations.

In recent decades, fathers were often portrayed as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ – either as ‘loving fathers’ who are intimately involved with childcare and family life or as ‘deadbeat dads’ who are either absent or violent and abusive (Freeman, 2003). However, more recent research has highlighted more ambivalence and ambiguity. For example, research on gender-equality orientated men in Denmark found ambivalence in that traditional notions of what it means to be a man were simultaneously preserved and destabilized (Bach, 2017). Similarly, research on representations of fathers in magazine advertisements highlighted that fathers have become an increasingly ambiguous presence over time (Marshall *et al.*, 2014).

Several studies of portrayals of involved fathers and caring masculinities have also highlighted ambivalence in that while these representations may initially *appear* to support a feminist agenda, they generally do little to challenge the status quo, and may, paradoxically, serve to reinforce it (cf. Marshall et al., 2014; Leader, 2019; Vavrus, 2002; Jordan, 2018). For example, research on portrayals of stay-at-home dads in the US during the 1990s highlighted that the use of strategies such as ‘gender role reversal’ (p. 354) may *appear* to support feminist ideals without meaningfully challenging the cultural dominance of hegemonic masculinity (Vavrus, 2002). Such representations may also reify the idea that involved fatherhood is a middle-class phenomenon (Vavrus, 2002; Forsberg [Gottzén], 2009).

Considering that these portrayals of involved fathers and caring masculinities generally do little to challenge the status quo and may even reproduce it, such representations could potentially be considered more ‘postfeminist’ than feminist (Vavrus, 2002). Indeed, this paradox is so common that the term ‘postfeminist fatherhood’ has been developed (Hamad, 2010; 2013). Post-feminism can be understood as an active process whereby the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are undermined, while simultaneously appearing to engage in a well-intended response to feminism (McRobbie, 2004). In this way, postfeminist representations draw on and invoke feminism while simultaneously suggesting that feminism is ‘a spent force’ that is ‘no longer needed’ (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Thus, postfeminist representations of fathers may give the *impression* of promoting second-wave feminist ideals by showing fathers as active and competent parents. At the same time, they may do little to challenge existing power relations and may even reinforce them (cf. Vavrus, 2002; Hamad, 2010; 2013; Marshall et al., 2014).

Methods

This article is part of a larger PhD project which examines a range of materials connected to the ‘Swedish Dads’ photo exhibition and its circulation by the Swedish Institute and Swedish embassies around the world. In this article, I take a social

constructionist approach, looking at how these images and texts serve to represent fathers in a very specific context i.e. a photo competition and exhibition organized in relation to the ‘Swedish Dads’ exhibition and in collaboration with the Swedish Embassy and National Gallery of Zimbabwe. I focus on the 25 winning images in the ‘Vana Baba Vanhasi’ exhibition, along with their accompanying titles and captions. Each photograph was accompanied by the name of the photographer, although no further information was provided about the photographers. I gained access to the material through email correspondence with the Swedish Embassy in Zimbabwe, where I also gained additional background information regarding the organization of the competition and how the winning entries were selected.

There were many actors involved in producing the exhibition. These include the Swedish Embassy and the National Gallery of Zimbabwe who collaborated in organizing the photo competition and subsequent exhibition. Other important actors include the photographers who took the photographs and wrote the captions and titles, as well as the fathers and children who were featured in the photographs. Finally, the jury that selected the winning photographs for inclusion in the exhibition also played a fundamental role in constructing how ‘progressive fatherhood’ was represented in the exhibition.

The analysis draws on Gillian Rose's (2016) method of Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA). VDA is inspired by Foucauldian discourse analysis but includes a focus on how visual images and other forms of text influence the social world by reproducing, contradicting, or reinforcing certain discourses. Following Rose (2016), I take a micro-level approach by focusing on the image itself, including both visual and written textual materials. In this sense, my analysis pays careful attention to the photographs of fathers, as well as the titles and captions that accompany them. I also take a step back and consider the image in relation to institutional practices and power relations – i.e. a more macro-level analysis. This method is useful for examining the discourses that produce objects and subject positions that are associated with specific institutions (Rose, 2016: 251), as well as the discourses which images and texts may draw upon.

Following Rose (2016) I began by familiarizing myself with the material by doing a content analysis. I made lists of words and images and found connections between them, looking for patterns and connections between groups. In this way, I explored the meanings produced in both images and texts. In the next phase, I identified the most commonly recurring discursive strategies across the material in relation to the notion of ‘progressive fatherhood’. I analysed photographs and texts to explore how the father is represented and in what ways this could be interpreted as progressive. Through repeated rounds of analysis and data sessions with colleagues, I narrowed the focus to three main discursive strategies relating to ‘progressive fatherhood’. These included fathers represented as being:

- 1) Progressive through modernity
- 2) Progressive through social fatherhood
- 3) Progressive through gender role reversal

Analysis

1) Progressive through modernity

The overall winner of the ‘Vana Baba’ photo competition is entitled ‘School run is over’, submitted by Budwell Masaiti (Figure 2). This example could be seen to be the quintessential representation of ‘progressive fatherhood’ in this competition since it was selected as the overall winner. This image was unusual among the 25 ‘Vana Baba’ photographs in that it features the whole family – including mother and siblings. Most of the photographs (i.e. 18 of 25 photographs) in the exhibition showed only a father and child, and only a few (i.e. 4 of 25 photographs) also included a ‘mother figure’.

Figure 2 School run is over (Photograph submitted by Budwell Masaiti)

This photograph contains six figures – a man, a woman, two male children, one female child and a baby. This appears to be a nuclear family made up of heterosexual parents and their children. The father has his back angled away from the camera/viewer, while the mother's body is facing the camera/viewer. The central focus of the image is on the 'hand-over' of the baby from the mother to the father. This gesture could be interpreted as symbolizing the very notion of 'progressive fatherhood'. Through the mother's act of 'handing over' the child to the father, she symbolically hands over the responsibility of childcare to him. In this sense, the implication is that the responsibility for childcare no longer rests with the mother alone, but that some of this responsibility is 'handed over' to the father.

In the title 'School run is over', the concept of 'school run' refers to the practice of dropping and fetching children from school. This implies that the father has just got home after fetching the older children from school. The caption explains that on this 'normal weekday', the father goes to work but still makes sure to be on time to fetch his children from school. It describes how he comes home to his wife and baby, making sure to 'connect with his little one' upon his return. In this sense, this photograph and caption present a father who not only succeeds in fulfilling the traditional male role of the breadwinner but is also a caring husband and thus a progressive and involved father.

Another photograph of this same family (by the same photographer) was also part of the exhibition. The photograph is entitled 'Modern Daddy' (Figure 3) and shows the father

and his children gathered around the baby's cot/changing station, about to change the baby's nappy.

Figure 3 Modern Daddy (Photograph submitted by Budwell Masaiti)

In this photograph, it appears that the father and daughter are playfully holding the diaper above the son's head, as though it were a hat. This photograph gives the impression that it is fun for a dad to be with his children – even doing ‘care work’ such as changing diapers can be playful and fun.

The family shown in these photographs are well-dressed and appear to be able to afford consumer goods – such as the speakers and hi-tech cot/changing station (Figure 3) and the flat-screen television (Figure 2). The impression given is that this is likely a middle-class family. Since this family was featured in the overall winning photograph in the exhibition, this could imply that a ‘progressive father’ is a ‘modern daddy’ (the title of Figure 3) who is able to provide his family with a middle-class lifestyle. In this sense, the exhibition implicitly promotes an idealized image of a middle-class, nuclear family that revolves around a heterosexual, couple, and their children.

In contrast to the notion of the ‘Modern Daddy’, the exhibition also included photographs of fathers and children engaging in practices described as ‘traditional’. For example, ‘The Grindmen’ by Misheck Rusere (Figure 4) shows a father and son in profile – each holding a large, grinding stick above a wooden mortar. The photograph is

set outdoors, with the two figures in the foreground and traditional thatched huts visible in the background.

Figure 4 The Grindmen (Photograph submitted by Misheck Rusere)

The caption includes the following description: ‘Traditionally the mortar and pestle were used in the Shona and Ndebele² cultures to grind grain for to feed the family...’. The caption continues, with the author noting that the pestle and mortar can also be used to make a kind of ‘African sherbet’ – which the author describes as ‘my favourite’ and ‘a delicacy’. This part of the caption gives a sense of pride and joy in sharing this traditional, local practice with the viewer. The implication here is that some traditions should be valued and honoured – such as using a pestle and mortar to crush grain. The rest of the caption helps explain how this image can be interpreted as progressive, by describing that historically there has been a clear division of labour between the sexes. However, ‘As times progress, the gender gap is being bridged and we are seeing more of the gender specific roles diminishing like take for example cooking was dedicated to women [...]’. In this sense, the image is intended to be progressive because it shows men involved with food preparation – a practice that had historically been seen as women’s responsibility. The caption describes how change has taken place over time, with the implication that traditional gender roles are problematic and that it is positive that ‘the gender gap is being bridged’.

² The Shona and Ndebele are the largest ethnic groups in Zimbabwe

Many of the captions in the exhibition refer to a ‘traditional past’ (characterized by traditional gender roles) and contrast this against the image of a ‘modern daddy’ who is progressive in challenging these gender stereotypes. What is unusual about ‘The Grindmen’ example is that it presents a more complex and ambiguous relationship with tradition. On the one hand, the traditional practice of crushing grain with a pestle and mortar is presented as being a positive, cultural practice that is spoken of with a sense of pride. On the other hand, some traditional practices (particularly those related to gender roles) are presented as being outdated, with the implication that it is desirable to reduce ‘the gender gap’. Such progressive attitudes were associated with modernity in the previous examples (Figures 2 and 3). However, here traditional practices are presented together with ‘modern’, progressive attitudes towards gender equality. In this sense, ‘The Grindmen’ highlights the ways in which the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ can coexist in a single moment – a single photograph.

These three examples (Figures 2, 3 and 4) illustrate how fathers are represented as being ‘progressive through modernity’. They highlight the role of the ‘progressive father’ in figuring out which traditions to uphold and which ‘modern’ attitudes to embrace.

2) Progressive through social fatherhood

While the winning photograph of the exhibition featured an apparently nuclear family, there were also examples that challenged the implication that ‘progressive fatherhood’ could only exist in such a context. In the example, ‘Spread your wings and fly’ (Figure 5), we see the silhouette of a man lifting a boy, against the backdrop of a pink and gold sunset. The boy has his arms outstretched to his sides. When viewed in relation to the title of the photograph, the implication is that the boy is spreading his wings and flying – with the help and support of the man who is holding him. The boy’s posture implies a sense of trust – that he feels confident to let go, and that he will be held safely. The bodies of the man and child are oriented towards each other, but the boy’s body is lifted high above the man’s head – as though lifting up the next generation.

Figure 5 'Spread your wings and fly' (Photograph submitted by Nyasha Mutigwa)

Visually, there would be no reason to assume that the man in the picture was not the father of the child – particularly since this photograph was entered into this competition featuring 'progressive fathers' and their children. Indeed, it is only through reading the caption that we learn that this image is of a boy and his *uncle*, rather than a boy and his *father*. The caption explains that the mother was originally planning to take photographs of her brother and sister-in-law. However, while chatting to her sister-in-law, she noticed her son and brother playing together, and was able to capture this moment spontaneously. In this sense, the whole scene presents a kinship network that extends beyond the nuclear family and includes a relationship with aunts and uncles.

This was the only example in the 'Vana Baba' exhibition that specifically presented the man in the photograph as a *relative* of the child, rather than the *father* of the child. In this case, the representation of 'progressive fatherhood' is extended beyond the nuclear family to include a broader kinship network. However, there were also examples that presented 'progressive fatherhood' as *not* being limited to kin relations. An example of this is seen in 'The Village' by Mercy Dhillwayo (Figure 6).

Figure 6 'The Village' (Photograph submitted by Mercy Dhilwayo)

This photograph presents three figures – an adult man and two children. The man is holding a guitar against his chest and lifting it up for the girls to look at. He is using his right hand to gesture towards the strings and he appears to be explaining something as he does so. The girls appear to be fully enthralled by the guitar – standing close enough to touch it and studying it carefully. The physical closeness between these three figures implies a sense of emotional closeness, intimacy, and trust between them. This impression is further enhanced by the caption and the title of the photograph – both of which allude to an African proverb:

There is a saying that goes, 'it takes a village to raise a child'. But in modern times, that village seems to no longer exist and when the mother is not there, it is often the boys who hang around, who chip in to lend their 'boy' a helping hand. The boys become the village.

The caption explains that the village no longer seems to exist in modern times. The idea of the mother not being there is also connected to these 'modern times' – perhaps related to women's increasing participation in paid employment. The caption continues, noting that when the mother is not there, the boys 'chip in' to help, and in this way, 'the boys become the village'. Here the village becomes a metaphor for the community in which a child grows up, based on the idea of taking collective responsibility for raising and caring for children. However, the romantic idea of 'the village' could also be interpreted as a matter of necessity in the face of challenging economic circumstances. For example, the mother not being there could also be an allusion to the high levels of migrant labour

where parents leave Zimbabwe in search of work in neighbouring countries (cf. Chereni, 2015). Reliance on communal caring could also be seen as a necessity in a context where people may be unable to afford care (Wickström, 2014).

In any case, the implication of this representation is that the figurative ‘village’ is a place where people are expected to take care of each other – even if they are not biologically related. In this way, the proverb ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ extends the concept of kinship from the biological family to include everyone who lives in a community. Similarly, the example of ‘The Village’ extends the concept of ‘progressive fatherhood’ beyond fathers to include ‘the boys’ of the village. In this sense, this example shows that representations of ‘progressive fatherhood’ are not limited to members of a biological kinship network. Together, these two examples (Figures 5 and 6) show how fathers are represented as being ‘progressive through social fatherhood’. They represent ‘progressive fatherhood’ in cases where the father is a member of the child’s extended family (e.g. an uncle) or a person that is connected to the child in other ways (e.g. a member of ‘the village’).

3) Progressive through gender role reversal

Another form of progressiveness that was visible in the exhibition is what I call ‘progressiveness through gender role reversal’. An example of this can be seen in the photograph entitled ‘Fun in the kitchen’ (Figure 7). The photograph shows a father and son doing the dishes at the kitchen sink. The image is made up of two photographs taken from different angles – giving a mirror-image effect. The father and son are positioned side-by-side, both facing the sink and looking down at what they are washing. Visually, the connection between father and son is reinforced through the colour blue – with the father wearing a blue t-shirt and cap and the son wearing a blue shirt.

Figure 7 'Fun in the kitchen' (Photograph submitted by Thomas Matikiti)

The caption is written in the first person using 'I' and 'my'. The father explains that his wife took the photographs, but that he edited them – resulting in a kind of co-production. This is an unusual example in the exhibition in the sense that it was the father featured in the photograph (rather than the photographer) who is presented as having written the caption. The caption states: 'I always try to assist my wife with the dishes whenever I can and would like to pass on the habits to my children so that they understand that it is not a woman only role to do the dishes and other home based chores'. Here, the father positions doing the dishes as one example of a 'home based chore' that may be falsely seen as a 'woman only role'. In challenging this assumption, the father emphasizes his desire to 'pass on' this good habit to his son. The implication is that this will not only affect the present moment but will also affect the future generation if his son grows up being willing to challenge traditional gender roles.

This father is positioned as being progressive in two ways – firstly by 'assisting' his wife with the dishes and secondly, by encouraging his child to follow this model of progressive behaviour. Here, the visual mirroring effect, combined with the mirroring of the colour blue serve to reinforce the idea that the father is mirrored in the son (and vice-versa). In other words, the father is represented as a progressive role model for the son *to mirror*. However, the statement that the featured father 'assists' his wife in doing this chore, the implication is still that it is her responsibility, that he *helps* with rather than being something he would see as his responsibility too. Once again, the image of the 'progressive father' is somewhat ambivalent - explicitly promoting a progressive

approach, while simultaneously reinforcing the status quo.

This example illustrated ‘gender role reversal’ in relation to the father and a *male* child, where the father was shown challenging gender stereotypes and encouraging his son to do so. However, there were also examples from the exhibition that showed fathers encouraging their *female* children to challenge gender stereotypes. Such an example can be seen in the photograph ‘She’s the man’ (Figure 8).

Figure 8 ‘She’s the man’ (Photograph submitted by Misheck Rusere)

This photograph (Figure 8) is a black and white image showing a young daughter and her father working on the engine of a car. The father wears a t-shirt, jacket, and backwards cap, while the daughter is dressed in a sleeveless top and shorts. The father appears to be leaning over the engine, reaching for the spanner that the daughter has in her hand. Not only is the daughter holding this important tool, but she also appears to be reaching for something that the father is holding. In this sense, the daughter appears to be active and engaged in the activity at hand. At the same time, the positioning of her body on the edge of the engine creates a strong category contrast – the petite body of a child seems somewhat out of place in relation to the exposed, industrial-looking engine.

The caption describes that girls are often at a disadvantage when it comes to doing things like changing a tyre or changing the oil of a car. It describes how they often have to ‘wait for a male to come along and do it for them’ even though ‘they could do it for

themselves’. It continues, noting that ‘dads that are progressive’ take the initiative to teach their daughters ‘how to be handy’, and at the same time, they develop their bond with them. The image and caption position the father as progressive because he is challenging the gender stereotype that girls do not know about and/or are not interested in cars. The father is encouraging his daughter to be independent and self-sufficient, without needing to rely on a man to do things for her. Despite these progressive elements, the image simultaneously reinforces the gender stereotype of men being interested and knowledgeable about cars. This contributes to the ambiguity of the progressiveness in the image, as it simultaneously challenges and reinforces gender stereotypes.

These two examples (Figures 7 and 8) show how fathers were represented as being ‘progressive through gender role reversal’. These fathers were constructed as being progressive when they engaged in such role reversals themselves, for example by doing the dishes. However, fathers were also constructed as ‘progressive’ when they encouraged their male and female children to challenge gender stereotypes – for example, by encouraging their sons to do the dishes with them and encouraging their daughters to learn about cars.

Concluding Discussion

This article has explored how ‘progressive fatherhood’ is represented in the context of a photo competition and exhibition organized by the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe. The analysis highlighted three ways in which these fathers were represented as being progressive: 1) progressive through modernity, 2) progressive through social fatherhood and 3) progressive through gender role reversal. I will now discuss these findings in relation to the literature, addressing the extent to which these representations challenge or ‘mimic’ (Bhabha, 1984) the Swedish ideal of ‘progressive fatherhood’.

Binary oppositions such as tradition and modernity were typical of colonial discourse (Mudimbe, 1988) – and to a certain extent, these binaries are reproduced in the ‘Vana

Baba' exhibition. However, closer analysis also revealed greater complexity and ambiguity in how these notions were navigated and represented. Rather than simply positioning tradition as something negative and outdated which should be abandoned, examples such as 'The Grindmen' (Figure 4) show how certain traditional practices are represented as being worth maintaining, while other traditional attitudes and practices (such as traditional gender roles) are represented as being exchanged in favour of more egalitarian approaches. Furthermore, some of the representations in 'Vana Baba' could be seen to challenge the negative, racialized metaphors and tropes that have historically been used to demonize Black fathers (Cammett, 2014). Instead, these representations of Black and African fathers appeared to align with the norms governing fatherhood in Western post-industrial countries (Dermot, 2008; Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Forsberg [Gottzén], 2009).

Many of the points of ambivalence and ambiguity in this material related to representations of gender equality. Several of the fathers in 'Vana Baba' were represented as being progressive because they engaged in 'gender role reversals' themselves (Figure 7) or because they encouraged their children to engage in activities that challenged traditional gender roles (Figure 7 and 8). However, while appearing to challenge traditional gender roles, they paradoxically reinforced the distinction between 'men's tasks' and 'women's tasks' (cf. Janning, 2017: 75). Such representations could thus be seen as 'ambivalent' (cf. Leader, 2019; Bach, 2017; Marshall et al., 2014). They could also be understood as being 'postfeminist' (cf. Vavrus, 2002; Hamad, 2010; 2013; McRobbie, 2004) – appearing to embody second-wave feminist ideology while doing little to challenge existing power relations, and potentially even reinforcing them.

While this photo competition and exhibition explicitly addressed issues of gender equality through its focus on 'progressive fatherhood', this article has highlighted other forms of inequality which may be important to consider in this context when it comes to constructing idealized images of 'progressive fatherhood'. In particular, the article highlights that – especially when applied in a postcolonial context – the term 'progressive fatherhood' itself may unwittingly carry colonial connotations. As previously shown, the discourse of 'progress' was used as a means of justifying

European colonialism based on the idea that the ‘superior’ West could help to *civilize* the traditional, superstitious and backward people of the ‘the dark continent’ (Hall, 1992; Jarosz 1992). Considering that European colonialism had a powerful impact on African notions of family, gender and masculinity (cf. Oyěwùmí, 2002; McEwen, 2017) and considering Sweden’s image as a progressive nation (Glover, 2009), the exporting of ‘progressive fatherhood’ from Sweden to Zimbabwe is far from neutral and potentially reproduces notions of Western superiority and African inferiority (cf. Rollo, 2018).

With this being said, these representations of Zimbabwean fathers are not simply a matter of ‘colonial mimicry’ (Bhabha, 1984), since they do not just replicate the model of ‘Swedish Dads’ but show alternative ways of representing progressive fatherhood. In this sense, the ‘Vana Baba’ exhibition could be a way to ‘talk back’ (cf. Benedict, 1991) to the ‘Swedish Dads’ exhibition. Indeed, some of the representations in ‘Vana Baba’ challenged the notion of ‘progressive fatherhood’ that was implicit in the ‘Swedish Dads’ exhibition. For example, while the ‘Swedish Dads’ exhibition represented implicitly middle-class (Klinth, 2018), nuclear families, some of the examples in ‘Vana Baba’ also represented ‘progressive fatherhood’ in cases of extended families and communities (Figure 5 and 6) and in less affluent settings (Figure 4). In this sense, these representations served to broaden notions of progressive fatherhood, challenging the hegemonic family discourse that was ‘universalized’ through colonialism (cf. Oyěwùmí, 2002; McEwen, 2017; Auer et al., 2020) and the association of ‘progressive fatherhood’ with middle-class families (cf. Vavrus, 2002; Forsberg [Gottzén], 2009).

These findings have important implications for both research and practice. In line with previous research, the article emphasizes the importance of conceptual and contextual specificity when studying local representations of men’s care in relation to notions of equality (cf. Doucet and McKay, 2020). Indeed, the meaning of ‘progressive fatherhood’ may be very different in Zimbabwe compared to Sweden - partly due to the different gender norms and parental leave provisions in Zimbabwe (cf. Chereni, 2015; Muchemwa and Muponde, 2007), but also due to the country’s different histories and

positions in the global social order. The article highlights the importance of guarding against the assumption that Western, European ideals of ‘progressive fatherhood’ have universal appeal and relevance. Instead, global institutional relations and collaborations should be grounded in local understandings. Overall, this article highlights the importance of engaging critically with the ideals, representations, and constructions of ‘progressive fatherhood’ with a sensitivity to local context, history, and power relations.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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