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“My heart goes shut up, shut up!”:¹ Gay marriage to an Indian man—one year on

I am Māori, gay and married to an Indian man. We have been married for a year now. I cannot identify my lawfully wedded “partner”² because he comes from a culture that is so ultra-conservative, that to do so would cause for him a deep and certain social death. I do not post pictures of him on social media. He does not have Facebook, but if he did, I would not tag him into any posts. I do not have “married” as my relationship status on Facebook as it would cause questions to be asked that I would not be able to answer without exposing him. Being in a same-sex marriage with an Indian man is difficult to say the least. My heart literally goes “shut up, shut up!”

I constantly reflect on what it might mean for my partner to be Indian and gay. In some ancient Hindu texts homosexual activities are mentioned in a “non-judgemental manner” (Mohan, 2018, p. 7) and, in particular, the *Kamasutra*—an ancient Indian text that indexes sexual practices—does not seem to speak disapprovingly of homoerotic acts between men (Vanita &

¹ The main title of this paper “My heart goes shut up shut up” is inspired by the title of Ahi Karunaharan’s show *My heart goes thadak thadak*, produced by Silo Theatre. I had the honour of watching this show with Daniel Williams who designed the set for the show, and “trans-socialite”, Arabia Le Veil.

² In the ceremony, we chose to use the word “partner” instead of “husband”.

Kidwai, 2000). Indeed, Vanita and Kidwai's (2000) book, *Same-sex love in India: Readings from the literature and history*, details in more than 300 pages many examples of same-sex love and homoerotic behaviour discovered in ancient Indian texts. While most examples are described in positive or neutral ways, some are described in negative ways: one example being that homosexual sex could result in being sent a particular hell where one would need to survive by ingesting semen (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). Significantly, about Vanita and Kidwai's (2000) work, Rishi (2009) opines that "the book has the potential of being the manifesto of the gay and lesbian rights activities as it provides empirical evidence about the celebration of same-sex love across India over the last two millennia" (p. 201).



Figure 1: Lakshmana Temple in Khajuraho, 954 CE—a man receives fellatio from a seated male as part of an orgiastic scene (Kumar, 2019, p. 134).

Laws in India that forbade homosexuality were a direct result of the British Raj as part of a colonising agenda (Khan, 2001; Mohan, 2018; Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). Previously, homosexuality was not perceived as inferior (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). According to Mohan

(2018), following the impacts of the British Raj on Indian society, significant numbers of Indians now believe homosexuality to be morally unacceptable and that these attitudes result in homosexual people being mistreated and discriminated against in Indian society. Many in India, who might feel homosexual and act out their homosexuality, Mohan (2018) argues, “prefer to hide their sexual preferences or identities” and chose instead to have “heterosexual relationships and families” while also “engaging in same-sex relationships outside of their marriages” (p. 1). Indeed, the mistreatment of gay people in India has led to poor mental health outcomes and suicidal ideation in many individuals (Gwalani, 2015; [Sivasubramanian et al., 2011](#)).³

My partner comes from a religio-cultural context where having a same-sex relationship is taboo and forbidden (although homosexual activities and relationships are carried out in secret). When people originally from India see us together, it seems that they look at us with a distasteful curiosity. My partner says that there are reasons that we look odd together, even as “friends”. First, we are of different ethnicities; second, we are of different ages; and third, I am “native” which makes our pairing of further interest to spectators as some in the Indian community perceive that Māori are dangerous (I have *tā moko* as well which probably adds to this perception). In the past, we would visit Indian restaurants in Sandringham and dine as “friends”. However, the staff would make comments that my partner could understand such as “here comes the suspicious pair”, which led to us choosing to eat only at non-Indian restaurants. We tend to avoid places where people from India congregate to avoid being stared at. In particular, we avoid being seen together by people from the same area in India where my partner is from. The reason for

³ It should be noted too that the very notion of “mental health” itself, according to Shidhaye and Kermode (2013), is a highly stigmatised idea in India that may prevent people from seeking help.

this is to ensure that people he might know do not see us together and start rumours.

Concerning my identity as Māori and gay there is a growing body of literature about pre-colonial Māori sexualities that shows that Māori ideas about sexuality were fluid. According to Emeritus Professor Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku—whose academic work has been integral to understandings of pre-colonial Māori sexualities—“[w]hatever Christianity may have brought to the Māori world which was good and wholesome and proper and acceptable, it also brought a great deal of pain and a lot of judgement” (cited in Thomas, 2018, n.p.). Kerekere’s (2017) research shows that for many Māori elders, those who may have had same-sex preferences were simply accepted as “part of the whānau”—the main title of her doctoral thesis. Kerekere (2017; cited in Thomas, 2018) also argues that because Māori did not regard same-sex relationships or sexual activities as wrong, she believes Māori hid these identities to protect them. Tragically, however, colonial and Christian views of sexuality were internalised by Māori (Kerekere, 2017). Because of these internalised views, some Māori, may not always be fully accepted by their families and communities. In many ways, I continue to feel a level of shame about my own sexuality. It often feels like a matter of “don’t ask, don’t tell”.



Figure 2: Mid to late 18th-century feather box or treasure box (papahou) made of wood, Haliotis shell (British Museum, Oc1964.05.1.a). *Note: In this image, it appears that the central figure receives into its mouth a phallus, while at the same time a tongue emerges from the same mouth to make contact with a vulva.*

As a Christian—I have experimented with several denominations, I have experienced the torment of coming to terms with my sexuality in light of some common (mis)understandings of Christian theology. In justifying Christian-based claims that homosexuality is wrong, sections of the New Testament are used which are based on interpretations of the Greek word, ἀρσενικοῖται (*arsenokoitai*). This term is made up of two words: *arseno*—male; and *koitai*—a word that refers to a bed or bedroom and specifically to having sex with someone (Helminiak, 2000). More accurately, Helminiak (2000) argues, *koitai* refers to the active partner, or in other words, the penetrator. Boswell (1980, 1994), who argues that Christianity was essentially indifferent to homosexuality up until the late Twelfth Century, proposes that the word *arsenokoitai* refers to male prostitutes who were available for sex with either men or women. Countryman (1988) also maintains that *arsenokoitai* refers to male prostitution but more precisely to those male prostitutes who targeted older men to gain an inheritance. Helminiak (2000) contends that if the word *arsenokoitai* does, in fact, refer to male prostitution, that the problem lies not in the act of having

sex - with either the same or the opposite sex - but with a particular type of prostitution that has "...something to do with sexual foul play around money" (p. 110). Scrogg (1983) agrees that *arsenokoitai* refers to prostitution but limits the definition to sex between males, and in particular, pederasty.

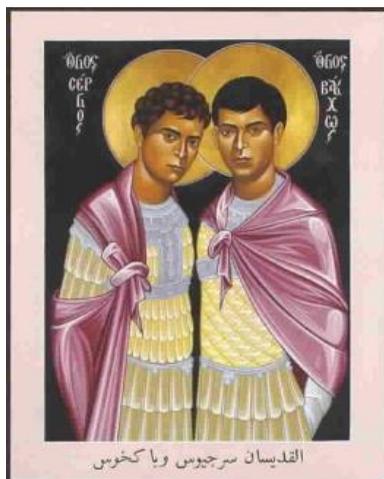


Figure 3: Saints Sergius and Bacchus, Robert Lentz, 1994 (Aburrow, 2009, n.p.)

Interestingly, Boswell's (1994) *The marriage of likeness: Same-sex unions in pre-modern Europe* describes *adelphopoiesis*—an ancient Greek term meaning “brother making”—as same-sex unions that were sanctioned by the Church and celebrated liturgically. Of course, this is a fiercely contested topic! As expected, Boswell's work—especially concerning his translations of certain texts and his analysis of the historical context—was heavily criticised by Christian scholars (Shopland, 2018). Other academics, however, praised his work for opening the discussion on a historical topic that has relevance today (Shopland,

2018). Boswell (1994)—a Harvard PhD who went on to become a full professor at Yale—suggested that the Christian martyrs Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus had been joined together in Christian ritual and that they were *erastai* or lovers (p. 154). Though Boswell's methodology and conclusions have been challenged by many, his work remains of great interest to those interested in alternative understandings of Christian sexualities.

In the past, I have struggled with my sexuality. As a result, I suffered from depression and suicidal ideation. Minority stress theory argues that minority groups suffer from higher levels of stress and that gay people, in particular, suffer stressors that are directly related to their sexuality, which may result in negative mental health outcomes (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Mays et al., 2007; Meyer, 2003). The minority-stress-related risk factors for gay people may include, negative events such as discrimination and victimisation; negative views of homosexuality; internalised anxiety about sexual and/or gender identity; and emotional distress connected to acceptance/rejection (Kelleher, 2009; Rosario et al., 1996; Rosario et al., 2002). Indeed, several studies have linked minority-stress with suicidal behaviours among gay people (Mays & Cochran, 2001; Russell, 2003; Ryan et al., 2009; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

In *Life on the seesaw: A qualitative study of suicide resiliency factors for young gay men*, Fenaughty and Harré (2003) argued that there are some important factors about resilience for young gay men and protecting against suicide. These include identification with positive role models; positive social norms and conditions; support groups; positive gay representations; high self-esteem; and high levels of support and acceptance from family, peers, and schools. Conversely, heterosexism, social isolation, bullying, HIV anxiety, depression, internalised homophobia, rejection and loneliness, substance abuse and social withdrawal are considered to be well-known risk factors for gay youth (Fenaughty &

Harré, 2003). Fenaughty and Harré's (2003) *Seesaw Model of Bisexual and Gay Male Suicide*, shows that finding a balance between these positive and negative factors may reveal solutions for gay suicide. They state: "Depending on the balance of these factors, youth might either be resilient, attempt suicide, or teeter somewhere in between" (Fenaughty & Harré, 2003, p. 1).

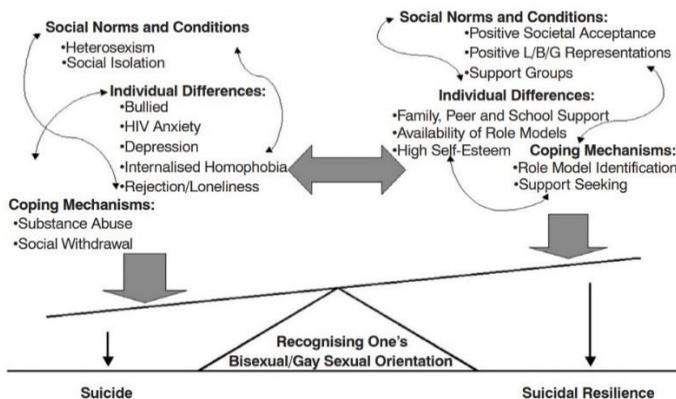


Figure 4: The Seesaw Model of Bisexual and Gay Male Suicide (Fenaughty & Harré, 2003, p. 17)

According to Phillips (2019), there is "increasing evidence that people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersexual have a greater risk of suicide" which is attributed to the "stigma and discrimination which can occur anywhere, including within families" (n.p.). For Māori, high rates of suicide have been linked to "mental illness, drug abuse and family disruption on the context of Māori social and economic deprivation" as well as the "effects of colonisation [which] remain far-reaching and must be considered as a contributing factor" (n.p.). Certainly, for those who are both Māori and gay, the risks of suicide are undeniable. McBreen's (2012)

research into a tikanga-based model for understanding sexual diversity is helpful in terms of providing for Māori a sense of identity and place that contributes to a healing process for Māori who are gay or sexually diverse.

In analysing the literature and ideas surrounding Māori sexual diversity, McBreen (2012) reasoned that there were generally four camps. Intolerance—a “position dominated by church representatives [and] asserts that Māori were exclusively heterosexual” (p. 26). With some claiming that “deviation was punished by death” (p. 26). Celebration—a position held by Māori academics who study Māori sexual diversity and claim that Māori celebrated sexuality in a range of forms. Tolerance—that “heterosexuality was the norm, marriage was the primary expression of sexuality, but homosexuality was tolerated” (p. 26). Acceptance, the fourth camp, holds that “sexuality is not an issue” and that people are “accepted irrespective of who they love” (p. 26).

McBreen (2012) argues for a tikanga-based approach for understanding and accepting sexual diversity in a Māori context. With regard to tikanga, McBreen (2012) states that the “purpose of tikanga... is to maintain relationships between ourselves, and between us and our environment” (p. 22). Through the application of values, rather than “rules”, McBreen (2012) maintains, tikanga—that can be “changed or developed to suit our needs”—“allows flexibility”, “social stability”, and “enduring solutions to problems” (p. 22). Based on tikanga, McBreen (2012) uses the following Māori concepts—which form the basis of Māori reality—to discuss Māori sexuality: whakapapa, whanaungatanga, mana, rangatiratanga, manaakitanga, and atuātanga.

McBreen (2012) describes whakapapa as “the basis of all tikanga and mātauranga, defining every relationship” (p. 30). Whakapapa, McBreen (2012) opines, provides a Māori person with their “place in the world”, “as well as identity and the right to participate” and notes that their “position within whānau, hāpu and iwi cannot be taken away” due to sexuality (p. 30). Indeed,

McBreen (2012) asserts “My whakapapa is the basis of my belonging to my whānau, not my sexuality. It cannot be taken away” (p. 30).

McBreen (2012) states that whanaungatanga “stresses the importance of maintaining relationships”, “working collectively”, “inclusiveness”, and “making use of people’s skills for the collective good” (p. 30-31). Indeed, more diversity within the whānau, hapū, and iwi means a greater range of skills for the collective to draw upon (McBreen, 2012). Referring back to the four camps—intolerance, celebration, tolerance, and acceptance—McBreen (2012) argues that “[w]hanaungatanga is inconsistent with intolerance or mere tolerance, and consistent with acceptance and celebration” (p. 31).

According to McBreen (2012), mana is derived from atua through whakapapa. For McBreen (2012) “[i]mportant skills and attributes are inherited from tūpuna and ultimately from atua through whakapapa” (p. 31). Mana, McBreen (2012) contends, is “essentially a measure of social standing based on both whakapapa and on personal achievements and contributions” to whānau, hapū and iwi (p. 31). All Māori people, regardless of sexuality, inherit mana from tūpuna, atua, and from their achievements and contributions to their people (McBreen, 2012). McBreen (2012) states:

For many of us, our understanding of mana has been distorted by the colonising culture—especially its fear of women and homosexuality. We need to reclaim our definitions of mana so that it continues to promote healthy, functioning communities. My understanding of mana is as a force to achieve potential. Clearly, this is consistent with accepting and celebrating diversity, and inconsistent with limiting expression of who we each are (p. 32).

For McBreen (2012), rangatiratanga signifies the “qualities of good leadership” with regard to “recognising and using the resources of a group to enhance the mana of that group, as well as maintaining social cohesion” (p.

32). McBreen (2012) maintains that rangatiratanga is about maximising “skills and acknowledging everyone’s contributions, so that everyone feels valued and continues to participate” (p. 32). Significantly, McBreen (2012) maintained that “[a]lienating people or allowing them to be alienated because of their sexuality is inconsistent with rangatiratanga” and that alienating people “means losing group members and their skills from the pool of resources, so the whole group suffers” (p. 32).

Manaakitanga, McBreen (2012) argues, is the “constant need to nurture relationships and care for people” (p. 32). For McBreen (2012), manaakitanga is “a kaupapa which can only be interpreted as honouring diversity and respecting others” (p. 32). For those who express diverse sexualities, manaakitanga “is clearly inconsistent with intolerance or mere tolerance of sexual diversity, and is consistent with acceptance and celebration” (McBreen, 2012, p. 32).

McBreen (2012) opined that atuatanga is the “truest expression of ourselves” (p. 32). According to McBreen (2012) “[w]e all whakapapa to atua, and because we create and shape the world around us, we continue that atuatanga” (p. 32). Importantly, McBreen (2012) asserted that “[a]tuatanga is consistent with accepting and celebrating who we each are. It is inconsistent with exclusion, or any message that silences part of us” (p. 32).

McBreen’s (2012) analysis of Māori sexual diversity argued that to truly honour Māori culture and heritage is to accept those who are sexually diverse. Whakapapa connects us and we need to maintain and nurture relationships. We must respect one another’s inherited and achieved mana as a means to maximise on the skill-base that adds to the collective mana and progression of our people. We need to care for one another deeply and to acknowledge our creative potential as descendants of atua.

Being married to an Indian man for the last year has had its challenges. “My heart goes shut up, shut up!” because we have to protect and conceal our relationship around Indian people. “My heart goes shut up, shut up!” because of deeply internalised fear that my sexuality brings shame to my whānau, hapū, and iwi, even though I have a deep understanding of the Māori philosophies expressed by McBreen (2012). My partner and I are most happy when we are in each other’s company. For now, we need to protect his identity, so that he can freely mingle with his community and work and earn a living without being ostracised. For me, I remain “out and about” in Auckland, but discrete and somewhat “closeted” when I am back home. This is how it is for us right now, but hopefully not forever.

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