



# Sources of anxiety about (and among) sexual minorities in Africa

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**There is a perceived increase in incidents of rhetoric, legislation and vigilantism against sexual minorities and their allies across Africa. This 'African homophobia' is counter to human rights conventions, public health best practices and sound economic development. The paper reviews areas of progress as well as the broad economic and cultural contexts for the experiences of African sexual minorities.**

Hostility towards 'homosexuality' in Africa has been much in the news in the past few years. Or rather, to be more accurate, we should say that opposition to sexual minority rights, and fear of or anxiety about people whose sexuality or gender identity does not conform to a narrow band of heterosexual norms, have generated heated debate and controversy. The extremism and crudity of such sentiments in Uganda have attracted particular notoriety in the Western media. There were spelling errors, for example, along with provision for the death penalty in the original proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill in that country. But many other places on the continent have witnessed an apparent increase in incidents of hateful rhetoric, legislation and vigilantism against sexual minorities and their allies. The range of countries is so broad – predominantly Muslim, mostly Christian, highly urbanised, mostly rural, politically left-leaning, leaning to the right, ruled by generals, ruled by a democratically elected woman, formerly French, formerly British, never colonised, and so on – that it is tempting to speculate that a pan-African psychopathology is somehow in play.

This 'African homophobia' flies in the face of global human rights conventions, as well as public health best practices, and the current prevailing consensus on sound economic development (see, among many critical assessments of state-backed homophobia and its costs, Long, 2003; Beyrer *et al*, 2011). The meanness of some of the rhetoric and proposed constitutional changes run counter to the ethic of *Ubuntu* (a traditional form of African humanism that may be expressed as the notion 'it takes a village...'), as famously celebrated by Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu, among many others.

## Areas of progress

The appearance of 'African homophobia', however, like earlier models of 'African sexuality', can be deceiving. For instance, the media

focus on high-profile cases obscures significant, quieter progress towards human rights for sexual minorities. South Africa is a well-known success story in that regard. Since 1996, its progressive constitution has led to numerous legal victories, including the right to same-sex marriage. South Africa also co-sponsored the successful United Nations Human Rights Council resolution in 2011 to include sexual orientation among its list of categories to be protected from torture and other forms of abuse or discrimination. Botswana, Cape Verde and Mozambique have introduced laws prohibiting discrimination in select fora, while President Joyce Banda of Malawi has vowed to do so in a comprehensive way. Numerous African states have accepted the need to target men who have sex with men for education and human rights protection as a public health priority, albeit sometimes in language that is discreet to the point of indecipherability (Epprecht, 2012).

## The economic context

Much of the anxiety expressed or implicit in the homophobic rhetoric, and indeed felt by African lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans-sexual and inter-sexed (*lgbti*) people themselves, arises not from African culture *per se*, but from the stresses and strains of globalisation. In a growing number of African countries the majority of the population now live in cities and have ready access to the global media and social networks. People for the most part worry less about ancestral spirits and rituals than about how to feed themselves and their families. The rich, after all, are getting richer and the poor poorer, following the logic of the neo-liberal structural adjustment policies that have prevailed in Africa since the 1980s. The most outspoken African homophobes thus have a lot in common with leaders elsewhere in the world seeking scapegoats for three decades of broad economic policy failure and the consequent social breakdown. In that sense, they have more in common with the far right in the USA than with traditional Africa. Indeed, they are in some cases directly allied with – and generously funded by – prominent US neo-conservatives, including proponents of discredited 'ex-gay' or 'conversion' therapy (Kaoma, 2012).

For African *lgbti* people, the main underlying psychological stresses can be found in the very modern circumstances in which they typically find themselves, and with which *lgbti* people elsewhere are also familiar: worry about health, what

to wear, hooking up, falling in love, drinking too much, holding on to a job, 'normal' police corruption and brutality, paying the mobile phone bill and so forth. All the usual issues that swirl around sexual orientation and identity are, however, exacerbated by the flood of images and expectations coming into Africa from the foreign media, activists, donors and immigration officials. African *lgbt* people often find themselves having to perform 'real gayness' to international audiences if, for example, they hope to achieve refugee status in high-income countries or funding from donors (Massaquoi, 2013). However, the economic crisis in so much of Africa today lends a utopian glow to the West, which can lead to deeply alienating and disillusioning experiences if asylum is granted.

That noted, not even the most cosmopolitan, 'globalised gay' Africans can entirely escape inherited ideas about spirituality, family, gender, and ethnic, national and African or racial identity. These create some tensions specific to Africa. People in the West should be alert and sensitive to these if they hope to be good allies in the struggle for sexual minority rights.

### **A pan-African perspective**

Of course, in any discussion of the situation across a continent, allowance has to be made for many exceptions and local specificities.

Family is very important to African *lgbt* people. Extended family across generations was a fundamental building block of African culture, religion and politics, and it is explicitly enshrined as such in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The transition from adolescence to social adulthood required a man to become (or be thought to become) a father, a woman to become a mother; the transition to respected elder required grandchildren. This building block has been seriously eroded by the effects of political upheaval, war, migration, consumerism and Western ideas about individual identity and the nuclear family. However, no one should doubt that the supports, moral obligations, romance and companionship of extended family ties remain strong, irrespective of individuals' sexuality. In the absence of any semblance of welfare state, moreover, children continue to be valued (indeed, are imperative in many cases) for social security. This is even more so these days, when adult children all too frequently die before their parents, leaving the latter to raise the grandchildren.

The pressure to have children can also be intense from siblings. The practice of bride-price, by which the family of the groom pays gifts to the bride's family, is still widespread. A woman who comes out as a lesbian and refuses marriage may, by forgoing bride-price, endanger her brothers' hopes for marriage through the recycling of cash, cattle or other goods that she would normally be expected to bring to her family.

Homosexuality is a powerful norm. This is most obvious in Muslim-majority societies, where males and females cannot pray together, let alone play,

travel or work in each other's company outside often tightly supervised situations. But it applies widely across the continent. Boys and girls are mostly still socialised into strongly divergent gender roles and same-sex friendships continue to be valued as the only acceptable form of true friendship. Presumed heterosexual male–male and female–female friend relationships may be emotionally intimate and include an amount of physical touching (holding hands, sleeping together) that often surprises visitors from the West. Such relationships are preserved in part by denying the homosexual potential, and are obviously threatened by the admission that one or both may develop (and have the legal right to!) a sexual attraction. Fear of losing that rich aspect of the culture, and its powerful presumption of innocence, may partly explain the intensity of feeling that is sometimes expressed against sexual minorities.

Sexuality has a metaphysical, even occult aspect in many people's minds. Long before the establishment of police forces, social stability was maintained in much of Africa by the watchful eye of neighbours and family. Standing unseen behind those eyes were ancestors and other spirits who might intervene in the lives of the living. Sexuality, being such a powerful force among the living, was and remains one of the ways to connect to the spirit world. Hence, to maintain or to break taboos against specific sexual relationships or acts is to attract the attention of the spirits for good or evil. A prevalent stereotype today is that gays and lesbians are richer than 'normal folks', not only because they prostitute themselves to Westerners but also because their sex acts are a kind of sorcery that evokes wealth from bad-minded spirits. Rumours abound about certain political leaders and ethnic groups: how really do they maintain their power in face of the odds against them?

### **Colonialism**

A staple of homophobic rhetoric is that the Europeans and Arabs introduced homosexuality during the slave-trading or colonial eras. This is not true in any substantive way, as numerous scholars have shown, myself included (Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Epprecht, 2006; Gaudio, 2009). It is true, however, that colonial rule introduced institutions like prisons and boarding schools, and abetted the rapid growth of cities. These in turn gave rise to new forms of sexual relationship among Africans. Some of these, including prostitution and prison rape, have a deservedly bad reputation among the respectable majority and it is sometimes difficult for people to disaggregate that history of abuse or exploitation from loving, mutual, consenting relationships.

Christian missionaries, backed by select readings of scripture and bowdlerised psychological theory, meanwhile propagated an ideology that equated self-control over sexual desire with modernity or civilisation. Heterosexual monogamy became a marker of self-discipline and fitness to rule, however much breached in practice. The

generation of African politicians who claimed independence imbibed this ideology quite deeply, as it suited their political objectives. Some, like Robert Mugabe, are still in power today. In other cases, however, post-colonial disappointments with corrupt and compromising leaders have fuelled a competition for souls (and political influence) between new evangelical churches and Muslim brotherhoods or Islamist movements. Branding themselves with ever more dogmatic and simplistic interpretations of the faith, they are driving the cult of intolerance in places hitherto famous for easy-going and generous spirituality (Mali and Senegal, for example).

### National pride and homonationalism

Many African *lgbt* people are offended and ashamed by the antics of their homophobic leaders, and motivated to fight them through the courts, the media, the arts and political mobilisation with other civil society groups. Let me simply mention Nkabinde (2008), Muholi (2011), Tamale (2011) and Ekine & Abbas (2013) among dozens of impressive examples of quite courageous activism and scholarship. Many, however, are also offended by and resentful of the language sometimes encountered in Western media on the issues. Cyberspace (blogs, Twitter, Facebook) is alive with statements that generalise about 'African homophobia'. People in Kenya rightly take offence when they are lumped together with Uganda (or farther afield) in blanket denunciations of their lack of civilisation compared with, say, the former colonial powers. Such language, which Indian scholar Jasbir Puar has called 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2008), makes it easy for politicians to equate gay-bashing with patriotism, and conveniently distract attention from elites' collusion with hated economic adjustment.

Imported ideas and pressures from the West have unquestionably played a role in shaping attitudes towards non-normative sexuality in Africa. I have mentioned the Christian, bourgeois cult of respectability, 'scientific homophobia', ill-advised economic policies, aggressive promotion of 'ex-gay' and other homophobic ideology by Americans, and condescending homonationalist campaigns. There are likely others, especially when we include Islam in our understanding of 'the West' – an association made by many Africans. But let us not overstate this external element and ignore or deny indigenous sources of homophobias (plural). After all, some of the most intolerant speech today comes from the Ethiopian Orthodox and Coptic churches, both of which significantly pre-date

established Christianity in the West. Their current stand clearly derives from a different mix of factors than the crass opportunism of politicians in Nigeria, wounded patriotism in Zimbabwe or any among the other motivating anxieties discussed above.

### Conclusion

The complex factors shaping the debates around sexual minority rights, the mixed history of the West in conjuring cultures of intolerance, and the wide range of experiences of African *lgbt* people (including many good ones, loving ones, politically successful ones, let us not forget!) all need to be acknowledged as we move towards global best practices. Personally, I am optimistic that we are indeed moving in that direction, however fitfully. But I also acknowledge that it is a dangerous time, with a high risk of fundamentalist or other backlash. We shall need allies to get through it, and sensitivity to local anxieties can surely only help to achieve that goal.

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