

“Hidden” Histories of African Homosexualities

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L’auteure assure que les problèmes des LGBTQ sont occultés ou jugés insignifiants en Afrique au sud du Sahara par rapport aux pressants problèmes politiques, économiques et de santé de la majorité de la population. Après avoir étudié les écrits engagés et le riche corpus des arts des Africaines LGBTQ, l’auteure révèle que les Nord-Américaines « queer » et féministes activistes impliquées dans l’enseignement et dans la recherche auraient intérêt à écouter leur voix.

The history of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) identities and struggles in Africa south of the Sahara has been substantively documented and analyzed.¹ Yet this history continues to be marginalized in scholarship and activism around gender and sexuality, particularly as they pertain to HIV and AIDS. That disease, after all, “is based on heterosexual transmission” in Africa, as Ida Susser and Stein (133) flatly proclaim in line with mainstream AIDS discourse, even in hip South Africa. Issues of specific concern to women who have sex with women (WSW), or women who may be infected with HIV by men who have sex with men (MSM), are almost totally invisible in this discourse.²

Meanwhile, global queer studies tend to overlook Africa south of the Sahara, or simply to nod approvingly in the direction of South Af-

rica. The dramatic success of the gay rights movement in that country is justifiably held up as an inspiring achievement. But when this is placed in bare contrast to the crude homophobia of certain outspoken African leaders, it feeds into misleading stereotypes. *Queer Globalizations*, to give but one example, is an important collection of empirical studies from around the world that aims to theorize an emerging global culture of gay rights and identities. It contains a single chapter on Africa south of the Sahara focused on Cape Town, a city where the queer scene in particular was almost exclusively white or coloured until very recently (Leap). Another example might be Greta Schiller’s compelling documentary on the life of Cecil Williams (*The Man Who Drove With Mandela*), the Communist and openly gay white man who helped Nelson Mandela escape police in the 1960s and who first conscientized African National Congress leaders to the concept of gay rights. The subtext appears to be: heroic white enlightens homophobic blacks in the struggle against apartheid.

This is not to deny the value of such studies or the importance of whites’ contributions to the gay rights movement in Africa. But what happened to the rest of Af-

rica, the “black” part, the majority part, the “traditional” part? Should we assume that it is peopled entirely by homophobes and prudes who have yet to see the light of respect for human rights and sexual diversity?

This article argues emphatically against that assumption. It seeks to promote awareness of research and resources that demonstrate the historical presence of indigenous LGBTI people in Africa south of the Sahara, the often-sophisticated means of accommodating or even honouring that presence, and the contributions of indigenous LGBTI people to contemporary struggles for human rights and women’s empowerment, and against HIV. It argues that queer and feminist scholars, teachers, and activists worldwide can benefit from listening to African voices on these and other issues. Indeed, racism and ethnocentrism are continuing concerns in Canadian women’s and gay rights movements, both in their domestic struggles and in relation to Canada’s international gender and development initiatives. Understanding some of the history of African LGBTI struggles could therefore offer insights into the often-subtle interplay of sexuality, race, and power that imbue those and other Canadian initiatives in Africa and within immigrant com-

munities of colour in Canada (see, for example, Tharao and Massaquoi; Sharma; Razack).

Anthropology and History

Most African societies traditionally placed a high value on heterosexual marriage leading to many children.³ Infertile women and impotent men tended to have very low, if not despised social status. But African cultures also had ways to explain and accommodate those men and women who did not fit the social ideal. These included a wide range of spirit possessions, most commonly, a male ancestor inhabiting a living female person, and vice versa. A person so possessed could hardly affront the spirit by having sexual relations with a living person of the same sex as the spirit.

There were also various means by which appearances of fertility and virility could be maintained regardless of an individual's inability or disinterest in heterosexual performance. For example, the custom of *kupindira* among the Shona people of Zimbabwe allowed families to avoid the shame of a man's inability to make his wife pregnant. By this custom, a trusted male relative was secretly invited to fulfil the task. The problematic sexuality of the husband thus did not need to be named, and the honour of the family could be preserved.

Similarly, the widespread custom of woman-woman marriages was normally explained in spiritual, economic and political terms, rather than admitting the possibility of a sexual desire that could potentially endanger the imperatives of female fertility and respect for patriarchal hierarchies. K. Limakatso Kendall (1999) and *Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe* (GALZ forthcoming), however, show that functionalist explanations of these marriages and other close female friendships at times acted to provide cover for lesbian-

like sexual practices, including kissing, genital touching, and even oral sex. Indeed, the women in Kendall's study steadfastly did not regard such practices as "sex" on the simple grounds that no penis was involved. There is growing evidence that African men played a similar trick to deny that sexual relations with other men or boys could be counted as "sex." Rather, they were

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"play," "accidents," or "teasing."

Awareness of such subtleties and of discreet same-sex practices was largely suppressed or censored during the colonial era. In the 1970s, however, research began to reveal not only African traditions around gender role inversion and same-sex sexuality, but also how new forms of same-sex sexuality among Africans emerged in modern settings. The latter included among criminal gangs and in the male-only migrant labour hostels that characterized the industrial system in South Africa. T. Dunbar Moodie (1988, 1994) and Patrick Harries (1990, 1994), notably, showed that male-male marriages among African mineworkers had become widespread at the beginning of the 20th century. The men, and even their female wives back home in the ru-

ral areas, tacitly defended "boy-wives" (or *izinkotshane* in common African parlance). They were seen as better for the stability of the real marriage than had the men turned to female prostitutes while away from home.

Other specialized studies from South Africa include Donald Donham, who tracks the emergence of an out gay identity in the black township of Soweto, and Ken Cage, whose analysis of gay argot suggests a profound internalised homophobia within the gay community. Carl Stychin offers a detailed examination of the evolution of the famous sexual orientation clause that was enshrined in the South African constitution in 1996, placed in comparative perspective to other gay rights struggles such as in Québec and the Netherlands. Sasha Gear and Kindiza Ngubeni, meanwhile, give a sometimes chilling, explicit account of life for men behind bars. HIV/AIDS scholars in particular may care to pay attention to the men's reflections on anal sex, consensual and forced.

By contrast, the "modernization" of female-female sexuality in Africa has scarcely been researched. Judith Gay remains one of the rare exceptions. She found that young Basotho women formed lesbian-like relationships known as "mummy-baby" from at least the 1950s. This was partially in response to young men's prolonged absences at the mines and partly a means to act out or practice new, Western notions of romantic heterosexual love. Kendall's attempt to understand how these relationships existed within a strongly heteronormative culture appears both in the academic form already noted (1999) and in just-published diaries from her sojourn in Lesotho (2005).

One of the first books to cover areas outside the well-known gay centres of South Africa is Stephen O. Murray and Roscoe, which in-

cludes a variety of chapters ranging around the continent and genre, from new anthropological research to journalism to reprints of early travellers' accounts. One chapter focuses specifically on reviewing the literature on woman-woman marriages and challenging those who dogmatically assert that they did not involve sexual contacts or feelings. Bart Luirink travelled around

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southern Africa in search of LGBTI people in largely rural places like Swaziland, with mixed success. Scott Long also travelled around southern Africa, in this case looking for evidence of the hurtful impact of homophobia. His report (HRW) is one of the few sources of information available on LGBTI life in Zambia and Namibia. Marc Epprecht (2004) and GALZ (forthcoming) build on these studies with court records of same-sex crimes dating back to the eighteenth century, and with oral history to flesh out the picture in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and South Africa.

Literature

Most of the studies above were researched by European or North American scholars, and published

outside of Africa. Given the history of colonial racism and sexism, as well as the manifest difficulties of cross-cultural research on such a sensitive topic, Africans are justifiably sceptical and sometimes actively defensive against this research. Yet Africans themselves have also depicted same-sex relationships in a variety of media. To begin with African literature, homosexual characters and themes have been cropping up for at least five decades. A common trope is to present homosexuality as coming from outside to corrupt or trouble Africans. Gays and lesbians in these novels act as foils that allow African protagonists to reflect on the dignity of African culture and struggles against cultural imperialism (see Vignal; Dunton; Shaw; Epprecht, forthcoming).

There are, however, some notable exceptions to that tendency. Peter Lanham and A. S. Mopeli-Paulus, for example, show a Mosotho character who becomes sexually infatuated with a young male hustler, and hint that male-male sex was known and was not necessarily controversial in traditional, rural settings. Yambo Ouologuem also complicates the picture of homosexuality as exotic and infecting. He balances scenes of cruel sexual abuse of African boys by corrupt "Arab" elites with a tender, loving homosexual relationship between the main African character and a European man in Paris. The Zimbabwean author, Charles Mungoshi, wrote a provocative short story about a married man who having an affair with a male friend. It gives strong insight into why African women may sometimes be more homophobic (or biphobic) than African men—husbands who sleep around with other men may threaten wives' already-deep structural vulnerability.

Lesbian themes remain quite rare in African literature. Nonetheless, they do exist. To mention one new, and highly provocative example,

the Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala, radically subverts the commonplace assumption that African women's sexuality is more or less passive and subservient to men's needs. *Femme nue, femme noire* contains enough explicit—and more varied—descriptions of sexual acts to rank as pornography in some readers' eyes, including oral sex by various combinations of men and women, very tender woman-woman sensuality, several scenes of group sex, and even a (heterosexual) sex act with a chicken! The young female narrator's aggressive, "masculine" sexuality allows Beyala to comment on both the nature of desire and on oppressive gender roles and hypocrisies in African and Islamic traditions. Indeed, Beyala seems to be saying that the achievement of pleasure, by whatever means, is a radical and necessary political act for women in particular in the contemporary context.

A common thread throughout all these works is that African LGBTI existed in the past but they did not identify themselves as such. Rather, for family, economic, spiritual, political and a host of other factors, they would marry and have (or appear to have) children. The harsh homophobia that African leaders have voiced in recent years does not reflect traditional cultures of discretion and tolerance, but echo Christian missionary propaganda and Islamic fundamentalism among other exotic influences.

LGBTI Perspectives

African gays and lesbians have written their own memoirs, fiction, and poetry to add crucial insider insights to the discussion. The first collection of these included transcripts of the interviews with examiners that Moodie and Harries used in their research (Vivienne Ndatshé and Mpande wa Sibuyi in Matthew Krouse and Berman). Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe then put together its coming out

booklet (GALZ 1995). In both these works, African LGBTI people of all colours and creeds express their deepest feelings about growing up, learning to love, and learning to be confident in themselves and amongst their families. GALZ (forthcoming) follows this up with a mix of historical narrative, memoir, and short stories that dramatize actual historical events. For example, it includes a first-hand account of a sexualised “traditional” woman-woman marriage, plus a collection of snippets of lesbian writing from the 1930s to the present. Barbara Schreiner is also of interest in that it contains a few first-hand accounts by women prisoners about female-female sexuality in prison.

Another essential collection is *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Gevisser and Cameron). It contains especially insightful chapters on the law, on early efforts to organize a gay rights movement in South Africa, on gay language and culture, and on HIV/AIDS activism. There are interviews with and memoirs by leading LGBTI activists such as Simon Nkoli, Sheila Lapinsky and Zackie Achmat, plus reflections on more mundane lesbian love and family struggles by women in all of the race categories of the apartheid years.

Elsewhere, Achmat wrote an influential article that showed how previous researchers had ignored or understated evidence of same-sex sexual desire in Africa. He made a persuasive case that culturally sensitive research might be put to the service of the wider community. A fine example of the latter is the play, *After Nines*, which was performed by LGBTI members of the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church of Johannesburg (Colman). *After Nines!* has not yet been published but the full script is available on the Behind the Mask website. The transcripts of the oral history research upon which it drew

for its characters and themes are also available at the Gay and Lesbian Archives, Johannesburg. Written as a form of community outreach, it tells the story of a young African girl in the townships who wants to come out as a lesbian but faces the homophobic hostility of her parents. The living characters are then advised by ancestral spirits to overcome their modern homophobia and to love each other in a non-judgemental way as, they say, used to be the way in African traditions.

An insider perspective on the establishment and politicisation of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe comes from Keith Goddard. Margrete Aarmo is also effective in drawing out the strength of anti-imperialist, even anti-western sentiment among Zimbabwean LGBTI activists. Another fact that often perplexes visitors from the West is that many African LGBTI are devout Christians. This perspective is explored in Marilyn Alexander and James Preston, Paul Germond and Steve de Grouchy and Graeme Reid. A youth perspective oriented towards safer sex education is provided in Karen Martin and Joanne Bloch.

John Mburu reflects on gay life in Kenya, but otherwise, LGBTI writing from elsewhere in Africa remains thin on the ground. Cyberspace, by contrast, is alive with African voices. The website Behind the Mask was the first and remains the best internet source for information on LGBTI activities throughout Africa. It highlights news, debates, and announcements from around the continent, interviews with activists and artists, book and film reviews, job opportunities, and discussion forums for people simply to meet and share ideas. Researchers can link directly to the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa and to some of the many nascent LGBTI associations in places like Uganda and Kenya.

A struggle-oriented website out of Zimbabwe is The NGO Network

Alliance Project. Founded by two lesbians (Bev Clark and Brenda Burrell), it seamlessly weaves together debates about gay rights, feminism and human rights in global terms. The Treatment Action Campaign is another a triumph of graduates from the gay rights movement in southern Africa. Recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, TAC has spearheaded an international social movement for equitable access to health care and to affordable drug treatments for people with HIV or AIDS. The website is an outstanding teaching resource. It offers full transcripts of key court judgements and strong critical assessments of official policy statements and other top-down approaches to HIV. For example, it keeps a much sharper eye on the Orwellian “faith-based” initiatives coming out of Washington DC than Canadian mass media.

Turning to the visual media, there are now several fascinating video documentaries and feature films that focus on LGBTI themes.⁴ *Simon and I* looks at the sometimes-tense relationship between pioneering black gay activists Simon Nkoli and Berverly Ditsie. Ditsie was one of the first out black lesbians in Africa and a powerful feminist voice

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on the international scene. She fell out with Nkoli over his seeming lack of interest in feminist politics. Zackie Achmat is the focus of another documentary, *It's My Life*. The camera follows Achmat around in his capacity as a leader in the Treatment Action Campaign. It includes dramatic, David-versus-Goliath scenes of the court case where the TAC first challenged the multinational drug companies (who were tacitly backed by powerful governments in the North including, at first, Canada). TAC has since scored huge victories to establish the principle of placing human rights and public health ahead of private profit, and in campaigns to protest the South African government's bumbling or denialist approaches to HIV/AIDS in that heavily-affected country.

Another important video is *Dark and Lovely, Soft and Free*. This takes us on a road trip to discover black gay men who live more or less openly homosexual lives in the black townships and "rural areas", whether as healers, as mine wives, or as hairdressers. It expresses a fundamental optimism about tolerance and family in African culture. So too does *Everything Must Come to Light*, which follows the lives of three female couples who express their sexual and emotional love for each other under the rubric of traditional healers. By contrast, *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World* takes a fairly negative overall view of the human rights situation for LGBTI in six developing countries, including Namibia and Egypt. Interviews with LGBTI political refugees living in Canada and the United States add to gloomy picture of homophobic violence and seemingly growing intolerance.

Finally, two films from West Africa cut new ground in the treatment of homosexuality in African cinema. First came the full-length feature film, *Dakan*. This provided a sympathetic look at two young

gay men who fall in love in Guinée. *Dakan* is notable not only for its sensitive treatment of the theme but also for the first male-male erotic kiss ever to be shown in African cinema. Yet it is far from a celebration of coming out in the Western sense. On the contrary, it contains a strong celebration of family in traditional terms, including marriage and children. *Woubi Cheri*, on the other hand, does come closer to representing the modern gay scene. It examines the ups and downs of life in a transgender community in the very chic city of Abidjan.

Conclusion

A substantial body of scholarship, art, and activist writing on African LGBTI people is now fairly readily available to researchers. It appears, therefore, that the history and current struggles of LGBTI people in Africa only remain hidden to those who actively desire not to see them. Why that would be is the topic of another essay. It bears reiterating, however, that homophobic, biphobic, heterosexist and other exclusionary or denialist scholarship does not contribute constructively to the development of a culture of sexual rights and women's empowerment. By common consensus, including UNAIDS and Canada's own CIDA, such a culture must be nurtured if headway is ever to be made in the war against HIV/AIDS.

A second conclusion is that the histories of African LGBTI people offer powerful insights into global hegemonic cultures, including western queer identities. Not only do they reveal different and often quite humane ways that African societies have understood or even honoured people who did not fit heterosexual ideals. The importance of family and spirituality also comes through quite strongly. This provides a stark critique of the fervent, individualistic materialism of

much contemporary urban life in the West. African LGBTI activists like Nkoli, Ditsie, and Achmat also tend to emphasize the need to locate the struggle for gay rights squarely within the fight against corporate globalization. Winning sexual rights for a rich, consumerist elite in the North and in select enclaves in the global South, in this view, is a crime when the majority Africans are consigned to poverty, alienation, and ill-health by neoliberal economic models and neo-colonialist structural adjustment regimes.

This is a refreshingly radical perspective. Knowing that Africans today are arguing from it eloquently and courageously can help to dispel commonly held stereotypes of Africa as totally heterosexual, and as a passive victim of the international development scene. That, in turn, could help in struggles against the exclusionary attitudes and vocabularies that still often bedevil human rights and public health activism in Canada and elsewhere in the global North.

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¹Notably, Gevisser and Cameron, Murray and Roscoe, Epprecht (2004) and GALZ (forthcoming). The terminology used in this article reflects preferred usage of the All-Africa Rights Initiative. See the website Behind the Mask which tracks historical as well as contemporary LGBTI issues.

²Note, for example, the invisibility of LGBTI issues on the popular sexual health website, Love Life Campaign. Searches for homosexuality, lesbian, MSM, WSW, bisexuality, homophobia and anal sex on the UNAIDS website for sub-Saharan Africa turns up a total of precisely zero docu-

ments. The Canadian International Development Agency, which otherwise has a strong record on gender issues and HIV, is almost similarly mute—the exception being a link to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission website. See Phillips for an astute analysis of this invisibility.

³Bleys gives a critical overview of the early ethnography, also discussed in the specific cultures described in the various studies cited below. The following compressed discussion is alert to ethnocentrism and anachronism in the ethnography. See Epprecht (1999, 2004) for expositions of methodology.

⁴Idol Pictures of Cape Town, notably, has produced a number of powerful videos on both LGBTI history and HIV activism.

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