

Behind the Mask

Bart Luirink

Since spring 2000, the Johannesburg-based website, *Behind the Mask* (BtM), has been providing information to people about developments surrounding homosexuality in Africa. Attracting tens of thousands of visitors each month, *The Mask* has built a network of hundreds of African partners and informants over the course of several years. Soon, French-speaking people will be able to participate as well.

The symbolism cannot be missed by anyone. *Behind the Mask* is based in the offices of the Women's Gaol, the former women's prison of Johannesburg. For much of the previous century, women who had broken apartheid laws were held here, where current employees of *Behind the Mask* produce an E-zine. This interactive gay organisation is both an expression of acquired freedom as well as enduring struggle.

The prison is now a museum, like the Old Fort situated next door where men were once held. Both complexes basically embrace the newly built Constitutional Court of South Africa, the highest court in the country, which instructed its parliament in December 2005 to enact legislation legalising same-sex marriage and implement the legislation within one year. New and old buildings there shelter the official Gender Commission, The Public Prosecutor and the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), a black lesbian organisation that originates from *Behind the Mask*, combining to form Constitution Hill, situated on the outskirts of the centre.

The solitary confinement department of the women's prison contains six cells where the lights never went off. Today these are exhibition rooms that tell the stories of the women once held there. Nolundi Ntamo was a regular; she was repeatedly arrested because she didn't carry a passbook (proof of identity). Yvonne Ntonto Mhlauli was arrested at the age of 22 because she held the hand of a white man. He got a warning; she disappeared under lock and key. Sibongile Tshabala had the audacity to brew traditional beer. Liliane Keagile was charged with terrorism and was tortured several times. Albertina Sisulu was arrested with two thousand other women because they had demonstrated against apartheid. In other exhibition rooms appear the names of comrades: Barbara Hogan, Lilian Ngoyi, Winnie Mandela, Fatima Meer and Helen Joseph.

Visitors to the BtM office often enquire how they managed to acquire office space on this holy ground. It's very tempting to wear a tired face and describe exasperation over endless meetings, dozens of e-mails and telephone calls, intensive lobbying and constant pressure on the authorities; to tell how it almost went wrong because christian fundamentalist homophobes caught wind of it and the new ANC leadership (African National Congress) which had voted for a gay-friendly constitution, turned out to be less brave in taking action.

The truth is that it was arranged within half an hour over a cup of coffee with one of the directors of the Johannesburg Development Agency, which was responsible for the devel-

opment of 'Con Hill' and the rebirth of the centre once marked by crime and blight. It is likely that there was a hidden agenda and the settlement of a LGBTI organisation on the hill fitted well. It exists in an atmosphere of normality among numerous receptionists, guards, construction workers, ushers and guides. Consequently, once there, one fancies oneself in the Promised Land.

This does not mean that it's now all paid down on the nail for gays and lesbians in South Africa. But the offices of BtM and FEW do indicate a deep transition to a constitutional state that started less than one and a half decades ago. In the old apartheid South Africa, homosexuality was a mortal sin and penalised. In the new South Africa, equality is law. How much this truth has become generally accepted for homo-activists dawned on me when I noted the disappointed reaction of a BtM spokesperson to the earlier mentioned historical decree of the Constitutional Court instructing parliament to legalise marriage between people of the same sex within twelve months. 'Now we have to wait another year,' she sighed.

Visibility - © Behind the Mask / Lesego Masike



South Africa's dark past seems far away. In October 1990 while I was visiting, the first Gay and Lesbian Pride March passed through the streets of Johannesburg, directed by Simon Nkoli and Beverly Ditsie. A few hundred young people, many with paper bags over their heads, exuded the optimism of the moment. In the years since then, the young gay movement increased the pressure. Its leaders took to talk shows on radio and television, and drank tea with Nelson Mandela. Using a long-kept-secret fund from more privileged, exclusively white gays and lesbians, a successful lobby was established for the different parties at the negotiation table. Their first success was a gay friendly clause in the transitional constitution. After the first democratic elections, this lobby took aim at parliament and senate, which led to the second success: in 1997, a constitution that explicitly guaranteed freedom of sexual orientation was almost unanimously voted in. It was a world first. LGBTI groups were established within the South African police, insurance companies and pension funds stopped discriminating, adoption by gay parents was allowed and finally, in December 2006, after another year of waiting, marriage between people of the same sex was legalised. Who still dares to pretend that in Africa everything always takes longer than elsewhere?

If I tell South African friends that it took forty years of discussion, and the absence of christian-democrats from government for the first time in centuries, for same-sex marriages to be legalised in the Netherlands, they look at me with astonishment. In South Africa the whole exercise didn't take more than ten years.

Meanwhile, neighbours took a completely different direction. The Zimbabwean president, Mugabe, opened the Harare book fair in 1995 with a hunt for gays in his country. In a speech he called them 'less than pigs and dogs'. The managers of the fair felt obliged to exclude the organisation, *Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ)*, which had registered for a stand for the first time. That there were gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe could not have been news to the president. His predecessor, Canaan Banana, was himself an eager lover of same-sex intercourse. The Zimbabwean AIDS activist Lynde Francis told me in 1995 that that was a public secret. 'Banana had a football team and to be admitted to the team criteria other than good performance applied.' But when GALZ announced they wanted to present a booklet about homosexuality during the book fair, the silent tolerance vanished. Mugabe was happy to have a new scapegoat: the economy of the country was showing its first cracks.

This is the African split - Zimbabwe versus South Africa. Tradition and culture versus modernity. 'Don't tell, don't ask' versus visibility, coming out and identity. The same pattern manifests itself time after time. Organisations of gays and lesbians form and the rulers reject them. An activist allows an interview. 'It's strange to our culture,' a minister calls out. The activists announce an assembly. 'Hold your tongue,' declaims the bishop, 'it is a western import'. Zimbabwe, Namibia, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon - it's the same story everywhere. During survey trips in spring 1998 for a book about the life of gays in the south of Africa, I constantly encountered the oscillation of action and reaction. But at the same time it became clear how far the genie was out of the bottle, and that reality in reactionary countries is often more complex than it seems from the outside. Gay activists in Zimbabwe were amongst the first who dared contradict the president and hence became trendsetters. Their organisation experienced a turbulent increase after president Mugabe's attack on gays in his country. Across the border in South Africa, a contrasting development was taking place. After all their successes, a substantial part of the gay movement ended up in crisis, and the leading Gay and Lesbian Equality Project fell prey to (financial) mismanagement.

A memory: It's Sunday afternoon in August 1998. The doorbell rings and Simon Nkoli, my neighbour, stands at my doorstep. 'I have all the South African participants of the Gay Games in my house. Can you come over and tell them something about Amsterdam?' Later, about fifty black boys and girls were listening breathlessly to a predictable explanation of canals, our wealth acquired from former colonies, the Reguliersdwaarsstraat, the night sauna and Vivelavie. I think it was on that Sunday that I realised what it could mean to be amongst peers for two weeks. To be part of the majority for fourteen days. And some weeks later the delegation set out for Amsterdam. No gay bar was skipped. During the debates the South Africans did most of the talking. For the first time, and for the last time, an almost entirely black delegation carried the new South African flag inside the stadium, to tumultuous applause. In 1993 Simon was told he was HIV-positive and announced he would witness the Gay Games of 1994 in San Francisco. Four years later he was in Amsterdam. Back in Johannesburg, he showed me pictures of the two weeks of celebration. Here and there stood a single Zimbabwean, a couple of Namibians and a Kenyan hidden between South Africans. 'In 2002 all African countries will be represented,' he enthused. 'We have to hold on to this moment!'

Simon died on 30 November 1998. His role in the struggle for equality of gays and lesbians is unequalled. Many publications about his life have materialized and Beverley Ditsie made a touching documentary, 'Simon and I'. A corner of Johannesburg's cosmopolitan Hillbrow area is officially named after him. Former South African Minister of Defence, Moshua Lekota, spoke at his funeral. In the eighties, together with Nkoli, he had been a member of a group of anti-apartheid fighters brought to trial on the charge of high treason. Behind prison walls, the men entered into furious discussions about homosexuality. Nkoli was confronted with prejudices and the fear of his comrades that the state would use this theme against the suspects. He won the debate, as Lekota reminisced during his funeral oration. 'During those days, an awareness grew that in the South Africa after apartheid, nobody should be excluded from equal rights. (...) When we sat down at the negotiation table it was self-evident that we would stand up for our homosexual comrades as well,' he said. In November 2006, during a parliamentary debate on same-sex marriage, Lekota called the resistance of other African leaders 'repulsive' and 'primitive'.

There is a discreet quarrel going on amongst historians about who or what influenced the ANC to choose a different direction from that of the rulers of many other post-colonial nations. Some assign a great deal of influence to the role of European anti-apartheid organisations, who put the issue on the agenda of the ANC. Others state that ANC legal experts such as Albie Sachs and Kader Asmal performed a key role. The British activist Peter Tatchell, who addressed the ANC leadership in an open letter in 1987, claims that the ANC's support for gay rights was especially due to his efforts. In his lectures about this matter not one black South African plays a role. Undoubtedly, all these factors have had an influence, but it's the contribution of black South Africans like Nkoli that turned the tide during the internal ANC debate. After all, they are the physical proof that homosexuality is not a western import, not 'un-African' and not contrary to culture or tradition.

This story is a long preamble to that of the office on the hill, on the outskirts of the Johannesburg centre, where about ten young South Africans refresh a website and maintain a sizable network of activists and friends in Africa every day. But it is a necessary introduction

to show that the *Mask* is taking root in recent South African history. An involved outsider, a Dutch journalist who was tired of being a correspondent, might have introduced the idea. The result is the expression of the desire of Africans to make themselves visible; to exchange experiences, tell stories, pose and use new technology for what you may call a liberation struggle. *Behind the Mask* has held on to the moment of which Nkoli spoke, and moulded it into a virtual variant of that delegation of fifty that entered the Amsterdam Arena in 1998. But above all, *Behind the Mask* is an African organisation. That might sound like a given but for a long time this was extraordinary within the South African landscape of LGBTI organisations that were mostly dominated by white South Africans in the nineties, and some even up to today. At assemblies and conferences I have repeatedly heard delegates of these organisations sing the praises of the necessity of ‘transformation’ after which a lamentation was started about the many pitfalls on the road to an organization with colour at all levels. One could wonder to what degree the doubts about the ability of black South Africans to set up and lead organisations is based on a fear for the loss of their own positions.

Originally, we had spoken about a newsletter. I come from a generation that filled a large part of the day with copying, stapling, stuffing, writing and stamping envelopes. Since 1999, I had had email and access to the Internet, but it didn’t occur to me that the development of a website would be an option. A good friend of mine pointed out that possibility enthusiastically. It’s not that difficult, he said. And much cheaper. The next day I awoke in cyberspace. Emmanuel d’Emilio, a Young Namibian journalism student who had lost his parents’ financial support because he was homosexual, offered the name: *Behind the Mask*. After months of pondering who could design a suitable logo, I realised that visual artist Clifford Charles lived around the corner. I had met him in The Netherlands as a guest of the Amsterdam Thami Mnyele Foundation, which runs a residence for African artists. Now very successful on the international art scene, Charles had made a trademark of androgynous masks. The assumption that it might not be possible to find a black homosexual Webmaster was rejected at a conference of the International Gay and Lesbian Association in Johannesburg in 1999. At one of the sessions I met Zanele Muholi, who described these discussions on her laptop and completed a summary before the end of the meeting. ‘What do you think?’ she asked as she put the laptop in front of me. Afterwards she told me she was taking classes in web-design. It took some time before she quit her job and became employed by *Behind the Mask*. She is a well-known photographer and filmmaker now, whose work is shown in New York, Amsterdam, Kaapstad and Toronto.

Of course, every once in a while there was a burglary and an editor-in-chief disappeared. This sounds more dramatic than it really was; there is a constant pursuit of talented black South Africans and the temptations of considerably higher salaries and more career opportunities are great. The AIDS pandemic has also had major consequences for the organisation. Some years ago, Npumi Njinge, a regular at *Behind the Mask*, passed away. This was reason to examine in the temporary BtM working group called ‘*Mpumi’s Friends*, how it was possible that the AIDS education in South Africa was almost ‘de-homosexualised’, while gay-activists such as Nkoli and Zackie Achmat had taken the lead at the beginning of the nineties. And what to do about it? (I remember the often hilarious ‘condom droppings’ in Skyline, the black gay café near ‘Nkoli Corner’.) The pandemic often took up the leisure-time of BtM staff. ‘Are you free this weekend or do you have to go to a funeral?’ I sometimes heard them say to each other.

Supported by the unprecedented coaches Nell & Shapiro, *Behind the Mask* director Thuli Madi has translated the HIV/AIDS truth of this country into 'office policies' that includes access to a non-discriminatory medical insurance. Such realities influence the functioning of the organisation and postpone developmental speed once in a while.

In February 2007, *Behind the Mask* formulated its mission statement as follows: '*Behind the Mask* is working towards a continent where lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex people have a proud and celebratory voice and information on LGBTI issues is readily available to all. Throughout Africa, human rights of everyone are recognised as indivisible and are guaranteed.' It is a clear statement that leaves room for continuous discussion, careful consideration, strategic choices and recalibration of often more, occasionally less, successful projects. How do honest journalism, the necessity to critically follow the LGBTI organisations on the continent and engagement with the broader movement for equality relate to one another? How to build bridges between African environments of activists, NGO's and students and LGBTI persons in rural areas without access to Internet or email? How does *Behind the Mask* create optimal balance in its report? Not only news from Johannesburg, but also from other parts of South Africa. Not only from South Africa, but all regions of Africa. Not only English, but also French. Not only English and French, but also Portuguese. Not only European languages, but also African languages? Not only with relevant issues for men, but also for women. Not only 'LG', but also 'BTI'. Not only for their own community, but also for curious people from the straight world. Not only activist themes, but also coming out, health, religion. Not only a website, but also other (new) technology like radio, digital video and photography, iPod and SMS. Not only new technology, but also a broad approach, where old and new media are interrelated in a broader perspective in which each plays its part. In other words: a paper edition of *BtM* can't exist without a digital edition and vice versa. Both can't do without activities such as debate, a Club *BtM*, the development of networks, etc. And last: how can the organisation, which gets financial support from Hivos, Atlantic Philanthropies, NIZA Media fund and the Astreea Foundation, generate its own income and also appeal to the South African government?

But the discussions in the 'editorial room' or the boardroom of *Behind the Mask* aren't confined to matters of the specific role the organisation plays within a broader African LGBTI movement. Consequently, the employees of *The Link* call it the networking department of *BtM*, regularly receiving questions from European or American asylum lawyers searching for information that supports their clients' interests. The requests for asylum do not always appear legitimate, that is, as long as the tenets of western asylum policy are used as the principle. How are the employees of *BtM* dealing with such questions? From time to time, information reaches reporters about dubious LGBTI groups comprising fortune hunters who seek income in the gay struggle. What do you do with information about these 'gay by day, straight by night' activists?

Or a more recent question: after two black lesbians were murdered in 2007 in Soweto, there seems to be increasing 'hate crime', so why, in the freed South Africa are more gays and lesbians assaulted and murdered than in other, more homophobic countries of Africa? It has been well over ten years since South Africa realised equal rights for gays and lesbians and the Zimbabwean president started the witch hunt on them.

It is nine years since the establishment of *Behind the Mask*. What is notable is that homo-

phobe leaders rarely deny the existence of gays and lesbians in Africa any longer. Increased visibility has effectively undermined this 'argument'. But the new visibility, to which *Behind the Mask* has provided such a big contribution, places the activists in new dilemmas.

Website: www.mask.org.za

Dutchman Bart Luirink is living in Johannesburg, South Africa. He was initiator of Behind the Mask and since 2006 limits his involvement to membership of the Board of the organisation. His published works include Moffies, Gay Life in Southern Africa, which was published in both Dutch and English. Since 2004 he's been chief editor of ZAM, an independent opinion periodical about Africa in Dutch. With Madeleine Maurick he is working on a book about the struggle of gays in Africa, scheduled for publication in 2010.

Simon Tseko Nkoli (I)

Ireen Dubel

In 2007, the South African Gay and Lesbian Archives, *Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action* (GALA) celebrated its tenth anniversary. In a relatively short period of time, these archives have been able to assemble a unique collection focussed on the history of gays and lesbians in South Africa. Magazines, videos, newspaper clippings, minutes of action meetings, T-shirts, interviews, letters and photographs have all found their way to the archives. By making the collection accessible GALA wants to contribute to the actual realisation of the rights of LGBT persons as established in the South African constitution.

'23.04-85

Dear Roy

I am trying to get at least contact with you. But I can't really. I wish I can tell you how well I am, to know about your health. Good gracious Roy, I am not sure of my spelling. My language is so bad. But anyhow, I'll be glad to hear of you. I'll be very happy to know that you haven't gave up praying for us (detainees).

Roy, because of thinking of you every time, I'll try to face life - though sometime I think otherwise. I completed seven months today, thank God. Here I am, with Johnny [co-defendant] trying to bring me back to the normal world. I appreciate him so much that I'm becoming fond of him - pity he's not gay, isn't it?' (2)

To mark the occasion of the tenth anniversary, a new GALA publication was issued. The first booklet in a series on the LGBT history of South Africa focused on Simon Nkoli and the letters he wrote in prison. Those letters form one of the earliest and most important collections at GALA.

Simon is the best known and quite possibly the most beloved LGBT activist of South Africa. His main theme was the indivisibility of all human rights. As a student, he was involved in the uprising against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools and took part in the demonstrations in Soweto in 1976. It was in the student's movement that he came out of the closet. Simon became a member of the gay organisation, Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), a primarily white, apolitical organisation. He founded a group and organised a place for the black minority membership to meet.



Simon Nkoli in the early 1980s - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)

In 1984, along with 21 other anti-apartheid activists, he was arrested. Nine months later he was charged with treason, attempting to overthrow the state and possible cooperation with the African National Congress (ANC), then a banned liberation movement. These 'crimes' were punishable with the death penalty. It took four years before he was released on bail and six years before all the charges were withdrawn. Upon his acquittal in 1990, he observed: *'In South Africa I am oppressed because I am a black man, and I am oppressed because I am gay. So when I fight for my freedom I must fight against both oppressions.'* He therefore went on to found a new non-racial gay organisation called the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) which organised the first Gay and Lesbian Pride march in 1990. One of the first South Africans who were open about their HIV-positive status, he was very active within the AIDS movement in the last years of his life.

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AAN TO Roy i Alfred
115 A Doran Street
Belgravia
2094

HOOF VAN DIE GEVANGENIS
 1986-05-02-
 MOEDERBEE
 HEAD OF THE PRISON

YOU OF STIPPELYNE VANAF 1 TOT 2—FOLD ON DOTTED LINES FROM 1 TO 2

NAAM EN ADRES VAN AFSENDER—SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS
Simon Nkolo HO 13/85
Modderbee Prison
Private Bag X 1045
Benoni 1560

INSLUITINGS WORD NIE TOEGELAAT NIE—ENCLOSURES ARE NOT PERMITTED

BEGIN HIER SKRYF—START WRITING HERE

Hellow you two! 18.04.86
 How are you, my love? I have nothing new to tell you. It is all the same old story that I am still living from one day to another, and I am still protected by mercy of God. Apart from Alfred's visit to me, I had not received a single letter from you. I am glad because this is the sign that

Letter from Simon Nkolo to his lover Roy Shepherd, sent from Modderbee Prison - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)

In 1998, at the age of 41, Simon Tseko Nkoli passed away.

During the four years of his imprisonment, 1984 - 1987, Simon wrote many letters. He did so in the little time he had to spare between the tough preparations for his trial and attending the long hearings. He wrote letter after letter, sometimes more than one a day, and often for multiple days in a row. He wrote to friends, comrades, and later to people abroad who supported him. His letters to Roy Shepherd, his lover at the time he was arrested, form the core of the collection now held at GALA. *Till the time of Trial* contains a selection from hundreds of pages of these letters. The first letter, written seven months after his arrest, had to be smuggled out of the prison. The last letter he wrote shortly before being released on bail.

Simon's letters always begin with *My dearest Roy* or *Darling*, but his last letter begins with *My one and only Roy*. He also concluded the letters to Roy with passion: *your loving and only Simon or I am all yours, xxx Simon*. Not all of the letters were smuggled out of the prison. They also left through official channels, as illustrated in the booklet via an image of a letter with the red stamp of the prison authorities. In the letters he also refers to censorship by the prison authorities as his letters to Roy would often be too long and therefore too time-consuming to read: *'... Roy the prison authorities say that we are only allowed to write about 500-600 words in a letter because long letters cost the censor a long time to read. He was talking to our committee ... He quoted your letters to me as an example - and when the committee reported that to us, I was embarrassed, but to hear your name made me to blush a little. So honey try to write short letters, because in future they will not give me your letters ...'*

While reading, I was intrigued by the question of which letters were or were not scrutinised by the censor since, in his letters, Simon is very open about being gay. He writes about his frustration that the gay organisation GASA, of which he and Roy were members, does not want to have anything to do with him because his arrest did not have anything to do with him being gay: *'What are the gay related matters Gasa wanted me to be arrested for? Sodomy? Loitering? Public indecent, or what? I am absolutely mad to read about me being arrested on "irrelevant" issues to gay related matters.'* And so he conceives the plan to launch a new organisation after his release and he asks Roy for advice on a good name: *'What about Cosag (Congress of South African Gays) or Nadege (National Democratic Gays Association). Don't you think it's a charming idea?'*

The selection of letters provide a picture of Simon's political beliefs as well as of his deep personal needs, his humanity and sense of humour. He expresses his preference for romantic literature and pop music and his almost daily worries about his clothing, especially when he has to appear in court: *'My dear Roy, I was delighted to hear from you, though I was so disappointed that I did not receive all the clothes I needed ... Tomorrow I thought I will be wearing the light grey trousers and the yellow jacket that you bought for me, when we going to court - Jana [one of the lawyers] seems to like that jacket; every time she comes around she is asking me "Where is your yellow jacket?" ...'* His requests could not always be met and it frustrated him to be so dependent and powerless. The letters show his struggle with the trial and the challenges of life in prison, especially being gay in those circumstances.

Firstly, only a few of his co-defendants knew he was gay. He refers to it in his letters, but not often. *'I am trying this silly method to get this letter to you before they could censor it ... I am much more worried about you than I am about myself ... Roy darling it's not wise to be on your own for such*

a long time - especially when you feel down. I know how do you feel and I put myself in your situation. I do understand it. You are in a situation that many people are, especially in this trial of mine. But other people's conditions are much better than ours you and me - their wives can manage to come and see them when they have the chance ...' (3) And: '... Johnny's girlfriend came on friday as well, so I was the only one sitting there on the benches looking at other people talking to their friends, parents and lovers, wishing that I could have courage to interfere as they always do when my lover is around. I suppose they all don't recognize him because a gay relationship is not supposed to be real.' (4)

After some time he came out, which led to heated discussions within the group. Later, after his release, he explained the reason. The prison warders had discovered that one of the defendants was having a sexual relationship with a convicted prisoner. The other defendants were outraged and condemned homosexuality outright. Simon decided he had to come out. A number of his co-defendants were of the opinion that the state would use Simon's being gay to undermine the moral stance of the anti-apartheid movement that the group was accused of being a part of. There was even talk of a separate trial for Simon, but a few members of the group and the lawyers pleaded for one trial for all. In the end, his co-defendants accepted Simon's argument that discrimination based on sexual orientation was just as unacceptable as racism. He was able to convince them that gay and lesbian rights were part of human rights. His coming out has been of great importance for the development of LGBT rights in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela with LGBT activists Ian McKellen, Phumi Mtetwa and Simon Nkoli, on behalf of the no longer existing National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)



This is a crucial turn.

Some of Simon's co-defendants would later become part of the upper echelon of the ANC and use their influence during negotiations on the new South-African constitution. Adopted in 1996, this constitution contains a paragraph in the Bill of Rights which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. (5) With that South Africa became the first country with a constitution that recognised gay and lesbian rights as human rights.

Openness about Simon's HIV-positive status during his imprisonment was an even greater taboo. In his letters he is vague: '... My dear me! I have left your letter in the cell and now I am locked alone in a storeroom. How nice to be on my own at last Roy - Piece in my mind. I feel like asking the Prison Authorities to give me a single cell. I mean Peace not Piece. To live alone where nobody will ever think that I can spread Aids - to live alone where Aids will never come as part of our discussion.' (6) By breaking this taboo as well after his release, Simon has more than lived up to his role of pioneer for the urgency of gay liberation in South Africa, irrespective of colour.

Till the time of Trial has been published with care. In addition to the excerpts of Simon's letters to Roy, it contains photographs depicting Simon's life and an informative introduction to the political context that shaped the many-sided activism of Simon Tseko Nkoli. A new treasure has been added to GALA's publications in tune with its motto: 'Without queer history there is no queer pride.'

Ireen Dubel (MA) is Programme Manager Gender, Women & Development at Hivos. Since its foundation GALA has been supported by Hivos: <http://www.gala.wits.ac.za>

Notes

- (1) This article is a review of: Shaun de Waal & Karen Martin (eds.), *Till the time of Trial: The prison letters of Simon Nkoli*, GALA, Johannesburg, 2007. A pdf file of the publication can be requested from Anthony Manion: anthony.manion@wits.ac.za
- (2) Opening paragraph from the first letter written by Simon Nkoli during his imprisonment, *Till the time of Trial*, p. 13.
- (3) *Idem*, p. 16.
- (4) *Idem*, p. 32.
- (5) *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Act 108 of 1996*, Pretoria, 1996, p. 7.
- (6) *Till the time of Trial*, p. 44.

Queer Jihad (I)

A View from South Africa

Scott Kugle

Muslims in Cape Town, South Africa, explore ways to be openly lesbian, gay, and transgendered and still be part of a muslim community. Advocacy groups there assert their place as interpreters of islam in a way that is open to diversity and engaged in a quest for justice.

Gay and *muslim*. Do those two words belong together? They belong together because they form the basic identity of actual people in muslim communities throughout the world. As one can imagine, such lives are a struggle - a queer jihad. 'Queer' is broader than the more technical term 'homosexual' and has been used in academic and advocacy discourse to denote lesbian, gay, and transgendered people who draw together into an alliance, each questioning patriarchal assumptions about what is normal, natural, and moral in human society. South Africa has a long-standing muslim minority community living under a new secular democracy. The South African constitution is decidedly progressive, and specifically protects citizens from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender. The constitution was adopted in 1996, and by 1998 a group of muslims in Cape Town organised the first queer muslim support and advocacy organisation, Al-Fitra Foundation. This organisation has matured into The Inner Circle and has expanded to include branches in the major cities in South Africa. At their second annual islamic retreat in March 2005, I was privileged to meet thirty members of the organization and conduct interviews with some of them. Their stories place the legal and theological issues pertaining to queer communities in a much-needed depth of human experience.

The constitution of South Africa protects the right of citizens to practice their religion. It might appear that South African muslims who are gay, lesbian, or transgendered are empowered by their new constitution to assert their identity and rights. Yet most members of the muslim community interpret religious freedom as the right to regulate internal and community affairs according to islamic custom. For most queer muslims in Cape Town this has meant that when they 'come out' voluntarily or are 'outed' by force, they concomitantly leave their families and muslim community. They find little scope to play roles and live with dignity and honesty with their sexual orientation or gender identity within their religious community.

Muslim Youth Activism

Queer muslim activists are notably young (from 20-35) and have tended to clash with most of the elders of their communities and established institutions such as the muslim judicial counsel that speak for 'orthodoxy' in Cape Town. Many of them have endured censure,

abuse, and sometimes violence or its threat, often without recourse to protection from the state despite its progressive constitution.

Most pre-modern muslim religious authorities asserted that homosexual sex (whether between two men or between two women) is prohibited by islamic law. In the modern context, most go further to declare that homosexual orientation (as a personal understanding of one's self through emotional and psychological forces) is sinful and reprehensible.

Support groups like Al-Fitra Foundation and The Inner Circle contend that this condemnation is based more on patriarchal presuppositions than upon a clear reading of scriptural texts, especially the quran. They, along with feminist and pro-democracy activists, are contributing to an alternative vision of islam that is not based on patriarchal values.

This project is made even more urgent by two forces for social change that are pulling the muslim communities in South Africa in contrary directions: the AIDS pandemic, and the push for muslim personal law. The organisation, Positive Muslims, calls for an islamic 'theology of compassion' that refuses to stigmatize people, such as these suffering from HIV and AIDS, with conventional moralism (see the Positive Muslims website www.positivemuslims.org.za). Queer muslims join them in defining what an islamic theology of compassion might be, especially in regard to sexuality, sex education and health, and sexual ethics. They raise the possibility of islamic same-sex marriages (with great disagreement of whether this would be called *nikoh*), the islamic legal permissibility of 'civil partnerships' (for South African law treats homosexual and heterosexual partners with no distinction), and the risks of promiscuity. Such controversial topics are threatened by the push to have the South African state officially recognize muslim personal law, based upon the classical sharia governing family, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as the defining feature of the islamic community. (2)

Queer muslim support groups function at many levels. While members of such activist groups may be small in number, this does not mean their impact is small. Even as they grapple with what a non-patriarchal islam might be like, activist muslims who are lesbian, gay, or transgendered are certain that it can exist. They faithfully assert that it will be a recovery of true islam, or at least a progressive islam and join a long tradition of liberation theology centred upon the koran which has been especially strong in post-apartheid South Africa.

Reinterpreting Religious texts

Muhsin Hendricks of the first Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer and Questioning Muslims (LGBTQ) support group in Cape Town in 1998 was one of the founders of Al-Fitra. The name Al-Fitra, an Arabic term meaning one's 'original and essential nature', points to the core philosophy of the group. Fitra is used in the koran to describe how god created all things, distinct in their individuality yet making up a harmonious whole. *So set your face toward the moral obligation in a true way, according to the original nature granted by God, upon which God fashioned people, for there is no changing the creation of God! That is the original and steadfast moral obligation, but most of the people do not understand.* (koran, surat al-rum 30:30) Traditional theologians read such a verse dogmatically, to assert that islam is the 'original and steadfast' religion, *al-din al-gayyim*, which uniquely conforms to the requirements of human nature that is the same for all people. However, LGBT muslims read it differently (though just as literally!) to assert that god creates each being with an original nature that cannot

be changed, and that the 'original and steadfast' religion is to return to god in harmony with one's inner nature. They hear the quran affirm this, even if living and worshipping in accord with their inner nature is in contradiction with the surrounding society, as *most of the people do not understand*.

Muhsin serves as spiritual advisor and organizer, saying, 'homosexuality is not just about sex. We have very spiritual people among us. I pray five times a day, read the koran, fast, and attend mosque regularly'. Along these lines the group employs certain organisational practices of the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) founded in 1970. It organises lectures on sexuality and spirituality, weekly *halaqat* or small-group discussions, and *dhikr* sessions of meditative chanting (a sufi practice that is central to islamic practice among Cape Town's muslims). It also makes full use of the internet to provide spiritual and social counselling while protecting anonymity in an unprecedented manner.

Most LGBT muslims assert that their sexual orientation and gender identity are essential components of their personality: either an innate quality they were born with, or an unalterable character from childhood before rational cognition. Muhsin affirms that he was born with a same-sex sexual orientation, knew he was different from the age of five, though 'was sixteen before I realized they called it gay, and came out of the closet years later, at 21'. His story confirms a common pattern of a disturbing feeling of difference that sets one apart in childhood long before it can be recognised in concepts, articulated in language, or accepted in one's heart. For LGBT muslims like Muhsin, spiritual growth is a protest of stripping away the sense of having a 'false self' that is imposed by family, society, and religion, in order to free a 'true self' through which they can sincerely turn to god.

Coming out

Nur, a member of Al-Fitra, recollects the interval struggle and liberation that accompanied his decision to 'come out'. He recalls, 'I came out to my mother when I was 28, which for me was like a rebirth... I was born into my truth, whereas before I was living someone else's truth, their truth'. Nur's comment captures a paradox: his search for truth is driven by religious belief yet appears to be in conflict with conventional religious morality. He continues, explaining, 'I had in my 24-27 year period a great turmoil within myself, between my homosexuality versus me wanting to be god-fearing, or perceiving myself to be god-fearing... But before I could sit [my mother] down, I had to sit myself down! In front of the creator. Not for islam, not for my family, but for me. For my internal health.'

The quran rises above conventional islamic mores and speaks to the existential search for a path toward living sincerely according to one's own inner dispositions: *Say, 'O Lord, allow me to enter in sincerity and to leave with sincerity, and make me draw close to you with the authority of divine aid. And say, 'Truth has come and falsehood melts away - truly falsehood is insubstantial!'* We reveal with the koran that which provides healing and compassion to those who believe, but this only increases the oppressors in loss... Say, 'Each lives by his own disposition, thus your Lord knows who is guided along a right path. (koran, surat al-isra 17:80-84) This is exactly what Nur implied when he spoke of sitting himself down in front of the creator in sincere honesty. 'It's like looking in the mirror and coming clean - no lies. Truth. I only have one life... I always felt that if I should die or my mother should die, I would never forgive myself if I hadn't have told her, and come

clean with my creator and with her.'

While some keep this search for a true self hidden out of fear, others face the difficulty of a bewildered family and often hostile community. Muhsin relates that by age 28, 'it was very hard, but the conflict within me was so great that I had to tell them the truth'. Others come out at a much earlier age. Nafeesa, a transgendered person who was raised as a boy but now considers herself a woman, wears *hijab* to the mosque and prays in the women's section. She calls herself a typical coloured girl raised in the Cape Flats, but in the body of a boy. She was in denial until fourteen, accepted her sexual attraction to men at sixteen, and came out to her parents as 'gay' at eighteen, soon after which she began to wear women's clothes and changed her self-assessment to transgendered rather than simply gay. 'When I was eighteen and coming out my mother just didn't know how to handle it. She wanted to get me an arranged marriage. I said, "Hell no, darling! Over this dead body! I would rather kill myself". I'd rather lower my *iman* [faith] and kill myself than do something like that. I said, "you wouldn't like your daughter to be embarrassed, hurt, crushed every second night by her husband who behaves like a moffie [an effeminate gay man in Cape Town slang]... or catch her husband in her own wedding dress!"' Not everyone in the support organisation is as brash as Nafeesa or as bold as Muhsin; lesbian women, in particular, face hurdles asserting themselves as independent women above and beyond struggling for dignity with their sexual orientation.

Gay Muslim Outreach

Al-Fitra Foundation has merged with a separate organisation based in Johannesburg, Gay Muslim Outreach, which had been more social in orientation and less spiritual, and has emerged as The Inner Circle, with branches in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and with plans to open a branch in Durban. It joins an international network of queer muslim support organisations including Al-Fatiha in the USA, Salam Queer Community in Canada, Imaan in the UK, the Yoesuf Foundation in the Netherlands, and Helem in Lebanon. They focus on building confidence, creating support groups, raising consciousness, and encouraging *ijtihad* in the interpretation of religion and law. The Inner Circle believes that being a South African based organisation with a muslim constituency, it is uniquely placed to advance the international debate harnessed by South Africa when it became the first country to safeguard the freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation in its Bill of Rights. Accordingly, The Inner Circle is an advocate for a minority within minorities along a three-dimensional plane-gay and muslim, while simultaneously offering the world the 'unique South African experience' (www.theinnercircle-za.org).

It is not certain whether lesbian, transgendered, and gay muslims can help create a more open and accepting atmosphere in Cape Town or wider South Africa. However, they will certainly create for themselves a social niche in which they can practice islam in ways that grant them dignity. Whether or not they are recognised by other muslims as equal partners in faith, they will highlight the need for muslim communities towards placing an ethical focus on sexuality.

104 *Dr. Scott Kugle is a postdoctoral fellow at the ISIM and Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion, Swarthmore College. He is currently working on a comparative study of gay, lesbian, and transgendered activists from muslim minority communities in the European Union, North America, and the Republic of South Africa. Email: skugle@swarthmore.edu*

Note

- (1) This article was published earlier in: *ISIM Review*, 16, Fall 2005.
- (2) Abdulkader Tayob (1999), 'The Function of Islam in the South African Political Process: defining a community in a nation', in: A. Tayob & W. Weisse (eds.), *Religion and Politics in South Africa: from Apartheid to Democracy*, Waxmann Verlag, Münster / New York.

Self-portrait

Chan Mubanga

My name is Chan Mubanga, a [Trans*] man living in Zambia. Today, when I hear people talk of LGBT emancipation, I can actually see the light at the end of the tunnel. I can taste the sweet that coats the salty sweat of our struggle. Twenty years ago I would never have believed that today I would write out my life and share my experiences with the world.

I was ten years old when I became aware of my attraction to girls. At that time, the word Transgender was unknown and people were either Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual. But I already knew that I wasn't a lesbian because being a lesbian involved two women. My attraction to girls felt so natural, like it was meant to be that way. It never crossed my mind that there could be something wrong with my feelings, after all I was a boy and boys always fell for girls.

It was only when I began having periods that I realized that I wasn't like the other boys, that I was different from them. This revelation was devastating, stealing the glow from my spirit and literally crushing my hopes and dreams. Night after night I prayed to god to stop the periods, to stop these breasts that had begun to grow where my proud chest used to be. But when these changes carried on, I began asking myself - Who am I? What am I?

I come from a family of boys and I am the third and youngest. I started questioning everyone in the house why I was changing while my brothers still stayed the way they are. My mother laughed and tried to explain the biology of it all. I cried that night... felt cheated, lied to and I hated myself. Why did I have to be born a girl? The idea of having children sickened me. I now know that it was at that age that I made the decision never to get naked with anyone. If I ignored what was happening to my body, then it would go away. At age ten I psychologically transitioned to male, completely shutting off my physical being. For me, this shell did not belong to me, my soul had no home and I lived in it, not in harmony but without choice.

I had my first intimate relationship with a girl at age eleven, I remember so well how excited I felt at kissing and touching her. She did not mind not being able to touch me back and this suited me. I quickly became addicted to sex, it liberated me making me feel so close to being a man. Well into my teens I had to have many sexual partners, three or four at a time. I often found it ironic that sex helped me forget my ugly body.

At seventeen, my mother started to put pressure on me to straighten out my life though she did not directly tell me so. I could tell she wasn't pleased with how I kept on changing 'friends' and how every weekend there was a new girl sleeping over. I made a decision to try to sleep with a boy and see if I really was a girl. I think the hardest part was taking off my

106 clothes and letting him touch me. I remember crying through it all and I told myself it was not for me. Being with a man makes me feel gay and I know I am not a homosexual.

I come from a christian home, my mother was a church elder. She tried hard to make me attend church, to pray every night, to accept christ as my saviour. I did these things to please her but personally I was finding it difficult to pray to someone who had ignored my prayers and tears when they had mattered to me the most. I know god is perfect and we should not question him but how does he allow such things to happen to people. I was never given a chance to choose what sex to be born in but had this casing imposed on me. I am the one left to deal with this mess, so how can I say 'Thank you'?

Traditionally, our culture dictates that a woman is passive and the man active. People do not know how to deal with a biological female who lives as a man. I have often encountered resistance whenever I try to pursue my dreams, from family members to my partners. I am passionate about driving big trucks across borders, discovering far and remote places. I am an electrical engineer by profession but twice I was turned down because they thought that women are a distraction. I have been unemployed for over six years now and rely only on small private jobs to get by. I want my spirit to soar but this shell inhibits me, people in my life do not understand the burning energy inside of me. I could do anything to have the right body so that I am not limited by fear, fear of being raped and of being misunderstood.

Every single day of my life, I have had to explain my gender and sex to passers-by, every day I am verbally abused wherever I go because I seem like a man yet I am a woman. People do not understand how painful it is to be constantly reminded that there is something different and ugly about you. Every single day I am reminded to hate myself, sometimes I stay home and call it self therapy. I comfort myself, make promises to one day change my body and I feel better because I really cannot talk to anyone close to me about the anger and pain I have carried all my adult life. My girlfriend cannot begin to understand what I have been through and what I go through every time I am in public. She doesn't understand the desperation to want to feel comfortable with my body. She tries, I know but when you have a sore on your finger, nobody else can feel the pain. No one understands the disappointment of having to settle for less, for what is socially acceptable, for what my shell is allowed to do - to have to live within the limits of a woman's body in this society, when all that my male spirit wants is to be free. I miss walking bare-chested with the boys, I would give anything to experience that happiness again.

I keep my relationships a secret from my family and society because very few people understand transgenderism in Zambia. My affairs would be labelled as homosexual and though I could handle the discrimination, my partners prefer to remain closeted. The criminalization of same-sex love has made it impossible to educate people about sexual diversity and gender identity. It will take some time before people can differentiate gender identity from sexual orientation, to recognize that butch lesbians and trans men are totally different. It is easier for people to discriminate against trans people together with gays and lesbians but we are more exposed to violence because we are gender non-conforming and the only way to 'fix' us is by beating us or raping us. Identified gay men in Zambia are victims of extortion by

the police or their close friends. Lesbians are less visible and usually pass off as straight in public.

It is frightening that I may die carrying with me my disappointment, anger, emptiness and for that reason we have come together to form a support group called TranGend, Zambia. It is an initiative formed by female to male trans people who want to share their anger, to extract positivity out of the negative experiences of their lives. We listen to each other and where we can help, we do not delay. If I had had a group like this when I was younger, I probably would have handled my stress and rage better. I misuse alcohol to numb the pain and turn to sex for comfort, though I have turned more to alcohol these days. I see TranGend growing over time, offering a safe space for sharing, research and character building. Zambian trans need to feel a sense of belonging and worth, we need to know that there are others like us, and there are people who understand and accept us as we are without second thought.

Only when this initiative has a solid foundation, can we look to improve our social environment by community organizing and information dissemination and begin to influence policies. We seek to achieve legal reform, for our government to accept transgender people as individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were born into. Our major challenges for now are ignorance about gender identity, colonial laws that criminalize homosexuality, gender inequality and traditionalist customs that forbid sex/sexuality education.

I would love to marry my partner as a heterosexual man, whether physically transitioned or not but recognized as a man and she as my wife. For now we cannot hold a ceremony in Zambia but I dream of a day that I can make this possible for us. A white wedding with a gown and suit, best men and bridesmaids. It would be lovely, I know, for my partner is very beautiful and a wonderful person. One day she will be my bride, then I won't die sad and lonely.

Note

- * I use trans tentatively because I have already transitioned in mind and spirit, totally rejecting my body.

Trapped!

*I'm tired of this body
that was imposed on me
never given a chance...
never offered a choice!
I come before you
fully dressed when we make love
covered by bandages*

when we go out!

*Love your body... they say
love yourself... they tell me*

*I cannot stand this casing!
that covers my true identity
and conceals the joy within...
I cannot feel my lover's breasts
against my aching chest!*

*My lover cannot touch me
cannot build me up
like I do her... Oh fucking hell!
Will I have to live
and die
in this cocoon; this shell
that deprives me
yet leaves me exposed
to pain and suffering!
to loneliness and hunger!
Love your body... they say
love yourself... you say to me*

*But your stares, your looks
remind me everyday
that something is wrong...
where do I go
I'm trapped
within myself and within
your constricting walls.*

Chan.
www.poetstreet.blogspot.com

How to be a 'Real' Gay (I)

Gert Hekma

South Africa has become the most modern country in the world with regard to gay rights. Not only do same-sex couples have the same rights as heterosexual couples, as in the Netherlands, Belgium or Spain, but homosexual rights have even been anchored in the constitution. Just like in the Netherlands, those equal rights have great symbolic meaning, however within social reality the hetero standard still continues and gays and lesbians remain second-class citizens.

In South Africa, which is so much more violent than any western country, gays and lesbians are victims of violence that is sometimes specifically directed at them. Still, the legal development is promising and offers an example for many other countries in the south. For example, Supreme Court Judge Edwin Cameron, who is gay and an AIDS activist himself, went to Nepal to explain to the local judges why and how homosexual rights became part of the South African constitution. He did this as a contribution to the discussion about a new Nepalese constitution.

Reid's book is about black 'gay' men in the province of Mpumalanga (between Johannesburg and Mozambique). In their profession as hairdressers they fulfil a central role in local society, especially for other gays for whom the hairdresser huts are the only homosexual meeting places in the area, and also for the men they have sex with and for women they give the nicest hair-dos. They organise beauty contests in which gay men in travestite clothing participate, which is very popular with the real ladies. It is an interesting question why hairdressers worldwide (and fashion designers) often fulfil a central role in gay society, from South Africa and the Netherlands to the Philippines.

Another interesting theme is the identity of black gays. Globally, there seems to be a development of faggots taking on a female role, being penetrated orally or anally during sexual relations, by either hetero or gay men who are no longer unmanly and enter sexual relationships with each other in which they are both 'top' and 'bottom'. This is the case in Johannesburg, but not in places in Mpumalanga such as Ermelo, Bethal, Badplaas, Amsterdam, Standerton or Nelspruit. There, the black gay hairdressers are still faggots who do not enter relationships with each other but with real men: the 'ladies' go for 'gents', usually single young men who will switch to women at some point. They cannot imagine that gays would be with gays. Those 'gents' do it with the 'ladies' for the money and the sexual gratification such relations offer. The ladies are very much aware that the gents are unreliable lads who will at some point leave them for a wife and a family. Nonetheless, some gents do have relations with women and 'ladies' simultaneously where the latter is often a source of income for the family.



Soweto Pride 2007 - © Behind the Mask

The ladies are the real gays and the gents the passers-by in the faggot world. It is a world of unstable relationships between sex partners, while the 'ladies' can develop strong friendships amongst each other, they can also be jealous of each other because of boyfriends. In this world of black 'ladies' the new constitution that politically anchored homosexual rights came as a source of enormous support. Some faggots were so inspired that they started to organise gatherings for gay men in addition to the beauty contests. There they discussed violence against gays, religion and homosexuality and 'how to be a real gay'. This last theme especially fascinated Reid; he had expected that in a globalizing world local faggots would embrace the modern manly model of the homosexual. However, in spite of their city connections, the black gay men held on to their identities as 'ladies' and the distinction between themselves and the 'gents'. As ladies, they are the 'real gays'. Of all men involved in gay trafficking there was only one who had doubts about the distinct roles of lady and gent, but all others had a permanent place in the system of gender (sex) and sexuality. Reid views this unfamiliarity with the 'modern gay' as a signal that it is not at all certain that in a global world all gays will share the same sexual identity. All manly types that trade their sex and do not maintain a permanent role behave like the gents and the ladies. I'll keep my fingers crossed that diversity means more than a choice between hetero, homo and bisexual, and that beyond those

categories thousands of other sexual categories can flourish.

From the perspective of the modern gay, the 'ladies' of Mpumalanga are not exactly modern. They view themselves very differently, and the same is true for other residents of the towns where they run their hairdressing businesses. To the local community a gay hairdresser is signal of modernity. He gives you the hair-do that is really in fashion. The 'ladies' that the city gays look down upon as dense appear to be very modern in the countryside. But the attribute of modernity has a negative side for black gays because Mugabe and other black leaders call out loud and clear that homosexuality is a modern, western imported product, that it is very un-African and un-Christian, and that it is not an inborn identity but a fashion trend. For the faggots it is difficult to manoeuvre between being modern and being traditional, between being homosexual and homosexuality as a temporary impulse, between African roots and European degeneration.

There are good arguments against such accusations. Naturally, it has been pointed out that un-Christian and African go together very well, because christianity itself is a product imported from the West, often forced with violence onto black cultures of Africa. The black gays themselves often belong to all kinds of christian groups and fulfil an important role in those groups, for example, as singers. They even have their own church in South Africa, the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Church. Against the argument that they are a western-import product, they can cite the example of the *Sangomas* - 'ladies' like themselves who were traditional priests and healers within the black cultures in South Africa. This tradition still exists and amongst the *Sangomas* are many faggots. So certain forms of homosexuality are very African, have nothing to do with temporary fashion, and indeed have a long history that the christian West would very much have liked to end. In addition to these *Sangomas*, since the end of the nineteenth century there has been a tradition of more paedo-sexual relations between mineworkers (*Xibonda*) who lived far from their villages and boys (*Tinkonkana*) they took from home to provide them with domestic and sexual services. Such relations cannot have been new to the African culture or else they could never have developed in the mining cultures, given the European disapproval of homosexuality. The Zulu have their own words for this, such as *iqenge* and *isikhesana* (gent and lady).

All these themes are discussed in a very lively manner in *How to be a 'Real' Gay*. Reid has woven together theory, method, research results and personal observations in an attractive way. Most studies show a distinction between introduction, problem, theory and method, the result of the study and finally, its conclusions. He has broken that very boring pattern. Throughout the book he discusses and tests theories. He does not put down the great story of the history of sexuality in South Africa in a dry way in broad terms, but embeds the most important events in a story, for example, of his visit to an assembly of Zulu leaders who discuss what they think of same-sex marriages. He weaves social context into the story by describing the route he takes to his visit to a *Sangoma*, or by painting a picture of the mess in which these hairdresser huts are located. Reid tells the great story of South Africa in a very *low-key* manner based on the small-town situation of the ladies. That makes the story much earthier, livelier and more convincing. Add his loose style of writing to that and the result is a very good and vivaciously written book.

Reid offers various suggestions for the development of homosexuality. On the one hand he points out the persistence of the ladies and gents pattern despite social and sexual changes. Before the arrival of the whites there were manly men who did it with unmanly men and boys

112 and that system is still intact. In the province it is difficult to find manly gays that enter equal relationships with one another and play interchangeable sexual roles. Secondly, according to Reid, globalization does not lead to a general dominance of the modern homosexual. The example of Mpumalanga shows that the diversity of ways of being homosexual and displaying homosexual behaviour does not disappear as a result of globalization. Reid even takes it one step further and claims that the system of lady and gent is better for the black faggots because this way they do not form a separate ghetto, but live integrated into their local situation: 'The very project of gay emancipation that asserts an identity based on difference and sexual object choice rather than gender may very well produce homophobia, by radically disrupting the sex/gender system which currently offers gays and their boyfriends the possibility of integration.' (p. 154)

Time will tell if globalization goes with variant forms of homosexuality. It seems to me that those forms are dynamic and develop themselves; they are not as rigid as Reid suggests. The gender system of lady and gent is already very different from that of the mineworkers who had sexual relationships with boys who did not necessarily develop into ladies. Reid himself makes a distinction between traditional and 'millennium' *Sangomas*, where the latter are a modernised version of the first forms. On the other hand, the 'modern gay' is less stable than some authors would have you believe. In the West, a 'queer' alternative developed and there are all kinds of subgroups that sometimes meet all the norms of the modern homo (leather men, 'bears', sport fetishists) and sometimes not at all (such as modern faggots with a sense for fashion who have not disappeared, or masochists that give up their manliness with passion). The picture becomes even more muddled if we move outside of the western world where a multitude of unmanly homosexual types exists and that, without doubt, is in full development, especially around transgender themes. The modern gay may have become the standard for general homosexuality; but his position is picked at from both inside and out. We can thank Reid for offering us a beautiful example of a group of faggots who are resistant to the idea of the modern gay and still continue to develop as ladies who want to become really gay!

Dr. Gert Hekma studied anthropology at the Free University of Amsterdam and has been teaching gay/lesbian studies at the University of Amsterdam since 1984. His published works include Homoseksualiteit, een medische reputatie (Homosexuality, a medical Reputation) (1987) and Goed verkeerd (Rightly Wrong) (1989), and he edited The Pursuit of Sodomy (1989); De roze rand van donker Amsterdam (The Pink Outskirts of Gloomy Amsterdam (1992) and Sexual Cultures in Europe (1999). In 2004, he published Homoseksualiteit in Nederland van 1730 tot de moderne tijd (Homosexuality in the Netherlands, 1730 until the Modern Times).

Notes

- (1) This is a review of: Graeme Reid, *How to be a 'real' gay. Emerging gay spaces in small town South Africa*, Dissertation University of Amsterdam, 22 June 2007, 242 pages.

Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa (I)

Gertrude Fester

This book is indeed a very brave and important one even though the writing of it was no easy project. Many untold stories come to light for the first time. The editors quite rightly emphasise 'the general homophobia of (African) post-colonial governments... is compounded by the local patriarchal system in each country' (p. 11). Tapes of the interviews had to be destroyed because of fear about how they could be used thereafter. In some cases tapes were not used as many research participants refused to be recorded and those interviewed gave pseudonyms. The editors, anthropologists, Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, initiated the African Women's Life Story Project: Exploring Same-Sex Practices. This enabled them to 'train women activists from different African countries to do such research' (p. 11).

What is impressive were the preparation and briefing these researchers / writers underwent. In March 2003 the eight writers, Nancy Baraka (Kenya), Sophia Musa Mohamed (Tanzania), Marie Nagadya (Uganda), Madelene Isaacks and Elizabeth Khaxas (Namibia), Busi Kheswa and Nkunzi Nkabinde (South Africa) and Siza Khumalo (Swaziland) all underwent training. This included techniques in interviews, including being introduced to major interview techniques used in oral tradition and analysis thereof, participant observation and triangulation of various methodologies. Theoretical concepts underlying research on women's same-sex relations practices and relations were introduced and discussed including issues of identity, labeling, and the schism between sexual behaviours and identities. What was also a crucial input for the researchers / writers was the revelation and insight into the 'herstory' of traditional forms of same-sex relations in Africa; many of which had been curtailed, obliterated or branded 'evil' during colonialism and concomitant missionary work. Some participants shared that often same-sex relationships were recorded as 'immoral', 'satanic', 'barbaric' and 'alien' indicating the level of homophobic internalization. These processes, identifying researchers and their difficulties (hence the research from Botswana was limited and therefore could not be included) are the focuses of the first introductory chapter by the editors.

This book has numerous credits: I'm not sure whether the absolutely empowering process of incorporating a representative group of women researchers / writers is more laudable than the actual content: the diverse and colourful primary data contributing to the breaking down of the myths of the many African leaders' claim that same-sex relationships are 'un-African' and 'an import from the west'. This echoes the accusations within African national liberation

114 struggles when feminists were emphasizing women's liberation within the national struggles: feminism is an import! The irony of this does not go unfounded: socialism and Marxism were uncritically accepted into liberation discourses and not as 'imports from the west'. What is most revealing is the wealth of research into pre-colonial and indigenous forms of same-sex relationships in various parts of Africa, West, North-East, East and Southern Africa. Critiquing and coordinating various twentieth century research, Wieringa contends that women marriages have been recorded in about forty African societies (p. 298). Many African women themselves have not always had the opportunity to learn about these.

The book is divided into a general introduction by the anthropologist editors, both of whom have considerable experience of researching same-sex relationships internationally. The introduction is informative, giving highlights of the process of compiling the book as mentioned earlier. This is followed by chapters on the various countries; Kenya, Uganda, two chapters from Namibia on Ovambo and Damara women, two chapters from South Africa, butch-femme subculture and ancestral wives amongst same-sex *sangomas* (traditional healers / prophets inspired by ancestors) and Swaziland. These are chapters one to eight. The two final chapters by the editors focus on historical perspectives of African women's same-sex relations (Wieringa) and current same-sex practices and the challenges and aspirations of working towards becoming sexual citizens in their own countries (Morgan and Wieringa).

This book is a pioneering in many ways: African women activists themselves doing the research and writing of a subject seen as taboo. It follows in the tradition of the groundbreaking *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* by Ifi Amadiume (1987). (2) Too often the status of African women has been homogenised as passive, poor and without agency by 'well-meaning' western women as Ama Ata Aidoo laments (1998). (3) This book is a welcome addition to the growing corps of texts on the power, autonomy and agency of African women in spite of the prevailing patriarchy reinforced by culture and religion. Among the many major strengths of the book are the long direct quotes from the research participants - capturing some of the flavour of the language and characters - despite translation (interviews were done in the vernacular). The acute and rigorous scholarship of the two editors enhances the overall prestige of this book - a must for all interested in Africa and issues of sexualities.

Most of the case studies chapters are prefaced with autobiographical details of the researchers, followed by useful country profiles or analysis of the legal position of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed (LGBTI) persons, defining the penal code and prison sentences imposed, utterances by presidents or prominent people, which organisations exist and some social history and /or the impact of HIV/AIDS. This is followed by religious and cultural contexts - again highlighting how these reinforce heteronormativity. Bio data of research participants or interviewees (as they are called in the text) follow. Overview, early same-sex experiences, high school experiences (boarding school), current relationships and references to specific gender roles internalised are outlined. What the latter confirms is that there are no homogenous gay / lesbian women's identities or movements, but rather multi-faceted ones where diverse power roles are exemplified. Gender and sexuality are fluid and indeed a 'performance' as Judith Butler states. There are examples of a few unequal hierarchical roles: 'I call the shots... I am the one who decides on what we should buy or what we should not buy. I am always telling her what to wear.' (p. 37) Despite the above the other

partner states that they share rent and take turns doing shopping. She emphasizes 'This has brought us respect for each other.' (p. 37) For Ndapewa (Namibia), she and her partner are equal members in the relationship with no dominance (p. 111). Generally this impressive empirical work essentially challenges conventional gender roles and gendered hierarchies.

In Kenya, as in other countries, research participants are ambivalent about religion: 'Sometimes I feel like a sinner. Sometimes I feel like I am doing the right thing. As I told you earlier I feel confused.' (p. 38) In Swaziland, however, the research participants did not feel that religion had contributed to homophobia (p. 264).

Homophobia abounds in Tanzania and many LGBTI people are not living out their sexuality openly. This is despite a rich vocabulary in Swahili which their grandmothers knew: testament to many forms of same-sex relationships existing in the country. Words like *wasenge* and *mashoga* refer to gay men whereas *wasagaji* means lesbian. *Wapemba* is a general word for homosexual from the name *Pemba*, in Zanzibar as it was initially thought that homosexuality originated on the coast (p. 53).

Three Tanzanian women felt 'fully woman' as their 'committed love' was the most important sense of self (p. 59). The confident Haniefia shared her first sexual experience with her mother who insulted her and who later chased her away when she refused to marry a man. Most of them are only 'out' with other LGBTI people. Some hate men or think they're better than them (p. 58). Fortunately there is an organisation in Tanzania which can help and support them. For their future dreams they hope to have committed relationships whereas Asha wants a 'hot and horny dyke' (p. 62).

The Tanzanian women were very positive about this project and see the potential for promoting homosexual struggles: 'I hope this research will also help us to get support from other organisations in Tanzania, as they will see how our rights as women and as human beings are violated.' (p. 62)

In Uganda the use of the concept 'tommy boys' is frequently used and hence the title of the book: 'My last interviews are with tommy boys who use male pronouns as they see themselves as men.' (p. 66) Again there is the ambivalent relationship with the church - although he (the research participant) is christian 'he no longer goes to church because of the criticism and negativity around homosexuality'. The use of the male pronoun for the research participant again exemplifies the blurring of sexual identities. The book strongly exudes the message that the rigid and unitary sexual categories imposed on people are but gendered constructions.

Namibia and South Africa (SA) have very strong organisational support structures (The Rainbow Project and Sister Namibia and Behind the Mask and Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW)) and hence LGBTI persons are not as destitute as those in other African countries. The fact that South Africa has a progressive constitution and laws belies the prevalent aggressive and violent homophobia. 'One of the same-sex *sangoma* interviewees in rural SA refused to be tape-recorded at all... (nor did she want) Nkunzi (the interviewer to

116 take notes during the interviews' (p. 16). References to the South African exceptionalism not having a homophobic government are made. However, the reality contrasts starkly with the paper rights of the constitution. Incidences of 'corrective rape' especially of black lesbians seem to be on the increase. As a response to this, the 777 campaign has been launched to highlight the incidences of the murder of black lesbians in SA in February 2008 in Cape Town. This campaign is named after the date on which two black lesbians from Meadowlands in Soweto were murdered: 7 July 2007. This increasing 'curative rape' of lesbians is testified by Nkabinde (p. 232) although she emphasizes that same-sex *sangomas* are not raped 'as people are afraid of the *sangomas* because of the power they believe *sangomas* have' (p. 232).

In the penultimate chapter, Wieringa outlines women marriages and other same-sex practices. The wealth of historical data and the reflections thereon are major contributions to the meagre materials on these issues. She critically assesses previous research of academics such as Gay (1979) and Oboler (1980) and their myopia - they refused to acknowledge the existence of erotic sexual relationship between women. (4) Oboler, for example, observes that women were attracted to homosexual marriages as opposed to heterosexual marriages but she does not elaborate on why. Wieringa also leaves us with important questions. Using the primary data on Nama Damara women she asserts that women marriages may be culturally embedded. However 'Is it possible to trace any historical continuity between present-day women engaged in women's same-sex relations and those in earlier times? The references are few and scattered and none of them tell of women marriages.' (p. 288)

The final chapter on present-day same-sex practices in Africa includes conclusions from the African Women's Life Story Project. Through the acutely wrought empirical data of the previous chapters, the editors develop their theoretical insights on the range of gendered identities, same-sex relations and links to 'global queer'. They problematise the category of queer and raise the concerns about the tendency to essentialise and universalise 'western' categories to people living elsewhere. They contest the argument of 'the national imprints of a global movement' (p. 310) but rather stress the emergence of relationships from local contexts: 'We rather view the communities described here as relatively autonomous sub-cultures who are rooted in past practices, even though only the echoes of those practices remain.' (p. 310) This is a major theme emanating from this study: they acknowledged the impact and influences of indigenous cultures and practices.

According to the editors, the weakest aspect of the project is that of the photographic component (p. 14). Given the existing and violent homophobia this is not unexpected. However, the text is beautifully complemented by the photographs of visual artist Zanele Muholi, a Johannesburg-based lesbian activist and founder member of FEW (Forum for the Empowerment of Women).

In conclusion, the contribution of *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Husbands and Ancestral Wives* is special in that it exemplifies the unity between feminist activism and feminist academy. One of the many positive by-products of the African Women's Life Stories Project is the formation of the African Lesbian Alliance now renamed the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL). (5) Eleven African countries are now represented in CAL. The entire process for the African research-

ers / writers too was a positive and empowering one. Many see this book as a contribution and intervention to their struggles for human dignity and rights as sexual citizens in their respective countries.

In consulting a South African black women's writers collective about the book two questions were raised: was it necessary to include the editors' names to the chapters written by the researcher / writers and why was a photograph of the collective group not featured as opposed to those of the editors only? A further question prompts me: When will a book of this nature be financed by African resources? The questions continue as the struggles for dignity and humanity for all continue.

Prof. dr. Gertrude Fester, has been involved in anti-apartheid politics for most of her life, with the specific focus on the articulation between women's and national liberation. She worked as a teacher and lecturer before entering formal politics in 1996, as an MP for the African National Congress. She currently is an independent writer and researcher, completing her PhD thesis, and is professor extraordinaire at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town.

Notes

- (1) *Tommy boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*, edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa (2005), published by Jacana Media, Johannesburg.
- (2) Amadiume, Ifi (1987), *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Zed Press Ltd., London and New Jersey.
- (3) Aidoo, Ama Ata (1998), 'The African Women Today', in: *Feminisms, Sisterhood and Power*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea.
- (4) Gay, Judith (1979), "'Mummies and Babies" and Friends and Lovers in Lesotho', in: *Cambridge Anthropology*, Vol. 5, no. 3, p. 32-62, and Oboler, Regina Smith (1980), 'Is the Female-husband a Man? Woman/Woman Marriage Among the Nandi of Kenya', in: *Ethnology*, Vol. 19, no. 1, p. 69-89.
- (5) The African Women's Life Stories Project was realized with financial support from Hivos. The Coalition of African Lesbians is being supported by Hivos as well.

Black Bull, Ancestors and Me My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma (I)

Boshadi Semenya

In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde explores issues around sexual culture and sexual identity from the vantage points of an African cosmological framework and feminist epistemology. Female same-sexuality is identified as a site of struggle between the interests and African ways of knowing as embodied through traditional Zulu culture, and the peculiarities of modern life. She draws tight links between African spiritual ritual performances as manifested through spirit possession and female same-sex practices to frame her thesis for analysing and understanding female same-sexuality and culture. She attempts to uncover the struggles and dangers associated with freely articulating one's own same-sex orientation, particularly among African females in current-day South Africa. To do this, she locates us in the 1970s South African political and cultural history and places the struggle among same-sex oriented female sangomas to articulate their sexual selves openly alongside some radical elements of our past - anti-apartheid, civil rights and feminist movements - depicting the wide spectrum of sometimes threatening but historically important creative actions to achieve social change.

In this simply written autobiographical narrative, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde makes a commanding and impassioned contribution to the struggle for Africans to start to explain themselves in ways that must assert the African cosmological frame and break free from the chains of both colonialism and conservative traditionalism and their oppressive legacy. She asserts in this book, that a vibrant spiritual-religious culture as embodied through the practice of *iSangoma* (2) holds the power to stimulate and accommodate other types of sexual culture and creativity. Judged through the African cosmological lens and looking specifically at the practices of *iSangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde presents us here with a conceptual understanding of female same-sex practices in Africa so radical and potentially transgressive that it may startle some readers, even those who have been prepared for it after reading her chapter with Ruth Morgan on Ancestral wives in *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives. Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*. (3)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps difficult to shock readers with an idea that sounds as potentially radical as an African Lesbian. This is because most of the progressive radical concepts that have been dreamed of and implemented since the Enlightenment have gained some public acceptance. One would include here such diverse and groundbreaking concepts as the idea of feminism and human integrity for women and children, the advent of the labour and civic movement, the disassociation of reproduction from heterosexual activity, the desacralisation of 'whiteness' in western culture and reconstruction of the concept of 'Africanness' and/or 'blackness' to reinscribe dignity in African culture,

Yet in fusing African cosmological framework with radical feminist epistemology, a position which Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde clearly seems to privilege when examining South African life, African culture and female same-sexuality in Africa from the late twentieth century, we begin to see radical raptures emerging as she tries to articulate other constellations of identity and sexuality. By positioning herself as a lesbian sangoma, she is claiming a historical, cultural, political and even ideological set of experiences which I briefly touch on in this review. A quick reading of the title of the book evokes, at least for me, a set of problematic questions that point to pertinent theoretical and even epistemological issues worth reflecting upon. The first problem that some readers may identify is the tendency to qualify what is African (specifically here, the healing practices of *iSangoma*) by fitting it into some established dominant way of understanding, at least in this case, female same-sexuality. The qualification of the concept 'sangoma' with lesbian I find to be somewhat problematic and wonder whether there are not models within the prescribed practice of *ubungoma* (4) that can inform us to see things slightly differently and talk about these issues in a language that captures the essence of the practice. While one should acknowledge the difficulty of finding in African vocabulary a similar corollary for the English concept lesbian, we also need to resist reinforcing whatever is African as a difference needing to be qualified for it to be regarded as 'normal' and appropriate. It is at this point, perhaps, that we need to ask whether we can find a genealogy in being a sangoma that can help us understand and appreciate different constellations of sexual identities and forms of articulating ourselves that are still respectful of what remains sacred in the practice. Are we able then, if possible, to drop the conceptual framework of lesbian and still be able to explore these issues? Are we able to imagine African cosmology as a legitimate conceptual tool in its own right that can provide understanding and still be able to treat these issues in a way that does not return things to the past, but that can inform our current practices and understandings of who we are at this point in time? Is there space within this cosmological framework to articulate one's political agenda and interpret power relations of domination, struggle and emancipation without reinforcing certain epistemological superiority?

Regarding some of these concerns, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde draws our attention to the element of flexibility that is characteristic of the practice. This is perhaps where we notice the most important thesis of the book, when Nkunzi makes tight connections between forms of identity and spirit possession. Identity and sexuality, within the context of the practice of *iSangoma*, encompass many different ways of expressing, experiencing and appreciating self and the presence of the sacred. It is logical that the flexibility of the practice is accommodative of a crossing of boundaries (be they, cultural, religious, sexual, racial or gender based). Spirit possession in this religious sense constitutes the spiritual groundwork that can enable Africans to frame their distinct thoughts and feelings, while at the same time embodying their ideas of the sacred which bears endless potential that can be used to adapt to the changes of life. This assertion disrupts our ideas about what constitutes normative constellations of identity and sexuality; and what represents normality and pathology. In equating identity (in its various manifestations) with the processes of spirit possession in traditional healing practices of *iSangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde provides us with a useful tool for

120 interpreting some of the complexities in our relatedness with ourselves as individuals and within a collective of others.

The book does something else, as important, as well. Apart from the fact that you can easily manifest any number of identities while engaging directly with spiritual entities (both your direct bloodline and those alien to your blood ancestry) during spirit possession, we are also shown that this space is charged with the power to provide a sense of belonging; a sense of physical, emotional and psychological safety. The capacity within this prescribed practice to inscribe positivity to what happens during this creative process can allow us to transform the ways we choose to be present in the physical world that is respectful to our diversity and uniqueness and vanquish the shame, hatred and violence that we associate with differentness. However, one is also sharply aware of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's lament of the 'invisibility' of female same-sex life and culture (not only within the healing practice of *iSangoma*) as constituting a significant loss, not just for same-sex oriented people, but for African culture in general whose effect turns us all into a drab and homogenous mass of identical citizens. This raises a couple of questions for us: how do we stretch this practice in new ways that can inform our modern struggles meaningfully? How does a Sangoma, health professional, academic in 2009 practice in a way that is relevant to current day issues? How do we as ordinary men and women, young and old, make life in current day South Africa in ways that acknowledge and embrace our interconnectedness? We find the key to these questions through the symbolism of the Constitution Hill and the work she does there provided in the chapter 'Doing Things Differently'. What Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde does in this chapter forces us to look not only at the joys of liberation (political, sexual or otherwise), and/or the dire and debilitating effects that the shame of colonialism's apartheid projects had on our lives, but to see that the only way to fight constructively is take a middle path: a path that can return the dignity of a vision of flexibility, where creativity and innovation can instead be an expression of our liberation.

In the book, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde challenges us not to fear the awkward questions and to ask ourselves how can we teach younger same-sex oriented persons, male and female alike, to value themselves and their lives if they do not value their sexuality? Sexual liberation, she is claiming, will come when we are able to go beyond our biases and prejudices about what constitutes normative sexuality and acceptable standards for expressing ones sexual orientation. This, she asserts, can be gained from adopting some of the flexibility of the practice of *iSangoma*. An open expression of one's sexuality and same-sex orientation, is not a cause for hostile violation of the integrity of others, but the motivation to see potential in our diversity and uniqueness. This, Nkunzi proposes, is not only liberating but may be the only way out of this senseless tendency to respond to anything and everything that we regard as different to ourselves as deserving of punishment and annihilation. The practice of *iSangoma* thus provides us with possibilities for experimenting with various ways of expressing our various persuasions without shame. The celebratory and liberationist intentions that she draws from the healing practices of *iSangoma*, is that they possess the ability to create a public space of queer shamelessness, and to conquer the violence that has become the certainty of our South African life.

We needed this book! The insights are timely and can facilitate constructive dialogue around issues of indigenous knowledge, a topic which is currently at the axis of local and global debate. Our contextual histories, politics, spiritual and cultural considerations are respectfully interwoven together. We see this more powerfully in how Nkunzi starts off her first chapter with a poem which not only announces who she is to us, but also honours those that have come before her. As a fellow Sangoma, I know and understand that it is only proper and respectful to acknowledge her poem and work and hold these in a sacred space. The following poem is a representation of this acknowledgement:

Nathi sesidabuka nge njabulo
 (We also originate with joy)
Sithi abese kunjalo kakhulu, Khehla
 (We say, Lo! it is now well so, Old One)
Kakhulu kakhulu!
 (Very well so!)

Boshadi Semenya is a lecturer in the department of psychology at Unisa in Pretoria, South Africa. Before joining academia, she worked for a few years as a clinical psychologist at Weskoppies Hospital, a psychiatric institution in Pretoria, Gauteng. She is currently engaged in facilitating conversation around women's reproductive health issues particularly termination of pregnancy with nurse midwives in Gauteng, South Africa. She is also part of a research project undertaken by the Unisa Center for Applied Psychology in conjunction with Gay Umbrella as community partners. The research project aims at enhancing understanding of cultural and traditional issues in emerging LGBT communities in North-West Province in South Africa. She followed a calling to become a Sangoma and was initiated into this practice of African Traditional Healing by Baba Credo and Mama Virginia Mutwa in 2006.

Notes

- (1) This is a review article of: Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde (2009), *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me My life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg / Cape Town.
- (2) *iSangoma* is a Zulu term (in plural form) for traditional healers.
- (3) The title of the chapter is: "This has happened since ancient times... it's something you are born with': ancestral wives amongst same-sex sangomas in South Africa", p. 231-258, in: Ruth Morgan & Saskia Wieringa (2005), *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives. Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg).
- (4) *Ubungoma* is used here to refer to the practice of traditional healing characterised by specific principles of what it is that makes us heal and how the process of healing unfolds. To all intents and purposes, sangomas are possessed by the ancestral spirits. Many *sangomas* throw bones and some will trance.

Self-portrait

Victor Juliet Mukasa

My name is Victor Juliet Mukasa, 32, a transgender lesbian from Uganda. I am a human rights defender and a banker by profession. I am currently working with the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission as research and policy associate for East, Central and Horn of Africa.

At the age of eleven, I started having love feelings for a good friend of mine in primary school. I started treating her in a very tender, caring and loving way. It was strange to both of us. She got so uncomfortable about it. I got confused too but could not stop those deep feelings. I got so uneasy and not at peace with the way I felt. It was because I knew it was bad according to the books that my mother bought me and the lessons from my biology teacher about adolescent girls.

At that stage, I was supposed to be getting these feelings for a boy. It was not right. I then decided to tell my mother about it. She was my friend and I told her anything. I told her about my feelings for my girlfriend and how I felt that it was wrong. My mother was calm about it but agreed with me that it was not okay but that it was a phase and that my feelings would change. Being from a dedicated catholic family, we solved a lot of problems through prayer. This was another problem and indeed we prayed about it over a period of time. I just kept missing this girl who was, by now, no longer my friend.

In 1989, I joined secondary school. In the first year at this school, I fell in love with another girl. We kissed whenever we got a chance and not more than that. However, other students soon found out and reported to the headmistress that my girlfriend and I were lesbians. This was the first time I heard the word 'lesbian'. To me she was my deep friend and lover. A name was finally attached to how I felt. It was in this school that I met other girls that felt the way I felt for my friend at the age of eleven.

My mother, who was my only support, passed away in 1990. Soon reports from school reached my family. My brothers and sisters started treating me like I was rubbish. They did not care about me anymore. Many stopped talking to me and chased me out of their homes. I moved from family to family for years. Suffered seriously but nothing could change about the way I felt. I went from church to church seeking healing. I only got emotionally, psychologically, physically and sexually abused by the men and women of god in the name of making me 'straight'.

After passing with flying colours at school, I was denied jobs that I qualified for. For those that I got, my workmates soon found out about my sexual orientation and gender identity and I was often fired. I became very poor and homeless, often begging, walking long distances because I could not afford bus fares, going without food for days and always sick.

In 2002, I got fed up of my situation. By this time I had identified other lesbians, gay men and transgender persons in the area where I lived and had made friends with many. I looked

around me and realised that all my suffering was a result of my sexual orientation and gender identity. I had never been in the closet about who I am from the start. Everywhere I went, somehow people found out about me. I was fed up of all the abuse and suffering and was ready to die for the truth. I decided that year that I was going to fight to change the situation for me and for all those that were like me. It was in this year that I started my political activism for LGBTI rights in Uganda. I was ready to die liberating myself and I preferred that to living a distressing life of being different. If my sexual orientation and gender identity were a choice, I would have chosen differently long ago but I could not.

It was in 2002 that I co-founded Freedom and Roam Uganda, an LGBTI women's organization. My political activism started here. Lobbying policy makers directly, creating awareness on LGBTI rights through the media and mobilizing other homosexuals and transgender people to join the struggle.

In 2004, I also co-founded Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), the coalition of several LGBTI organizations, where I was chairperson up to October 2007. During my time at SMUG, I actively directed the movement, engaged in direct lobbying of policy makers and building alliances for the movement. A lot of things changed during this time. There was continuous public discourse in the media on LGBTI issues, improved perceptions about these issues, more coming out of LGBTI individuals and in general, growth of the movement. LGBTI people have expressed more determination and togetherness in their liberation process and in 2007 this has been exhibited in the August LET US LIVE IN PEACE media campaign and the ongoing LGBTI court case in which I and a Kenyan transgender took the government of Uganda to court for violation of our rights based on our sexual orientation and gender identity. (1)

It is very difficult for activists in Uganda to work towards change. In the areas where change has occurred so far, people have had to sacrifice their lives as they work in a hostile environment. Apart from the law that criminalizes homosexuality and homophobic government officials, religion and culture have played a huge role in frustrating the lives of LGBTI people. Culturally, there is no acceptance, with claims that homosexuality is un-African and a vice from the West. Religious leaders have waged war against homosexuality. Many LGBTI people have been abused in churches and excommunicated. A group of influential church leaders recently formed a network to fight homosexuality in society, the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition Against Homosexuality. This has increased rejection of homosexuals.

Despite all the above, the struggle continues. Ugandan homosexuals and transgender people have guts and this has played a big role in the struggle. They say, 'Enough is enough' and I add, 'No guts, no victory!!' ALLUTA CONTINUA!

The Law in Uganda

In 2008 the Ugandan government has announced a major offensive against gays and lesbians in the African country, saying it will prosecute anyone who comes out. Sex between two people of the same sex is a criminal offense - punishable by life imprisonment according to Cap. 106, Section 140 of the Penal Code - but Ethics and Integrity Minister, James Nsaba Buro, said the government is concerned about the number of gays and lesbians in the country.

124 Under the legislation being planned it would be illegal just to be gay. 'We want it to become law in that if someone is a homosexual or confesses to being a gay or lesbian, then he is a criminal,' Buturo has said. Anti-gay attacks are commonplace in Uganda but have increased since LGBT rights groups openly demand basic civil rights.

On October 14, 2009, a member of parliament tabled a private members bill before the Ugandan parliament titled the 'Anti-Homosexuality Bill'. The Bill is aimed at increasing, and expanding penalties for 'homosexual acts' and for all institutions (including NGOs, donors and private companies) who defend the rights of consenting adults who engage in sexual relations with people of the same sex. The Bill calls for Uganda to withdraw from all international treaties and conventions which support the rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals. It introduces extradition arrangements for Ugandan citizens who perform 'homosexual acts' abroad, and includes legal penalties for people who fail to report alleged homosexual acts or individuals and institutions that promote homosexuality or same-sex marriage to the authorities. Any person alleged to be a homosexual is at risk of life imprisonment and, in some circumstances, the death penalty. The Bill whilst targeting the LGBT community, puts at risk the wider community of parents, teachers, landlords, medical doctors, civil society leaders, human rights activists, media houses, internet café's etc. who do not denounce or report on suspected 'homosexual acts'. In short, this bill targets everybody, and involves everybody: it can not be implemented without making every citizen spy on his or her neighbours. It asserts Extra Territorial jurisdiction. It would imply Uganda to withdraw from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

In response to the tabling of this Bill, a civil society coalition on human rights and constitutional law has been formed to fight the enactment of the Bill based on the need to uphold Uganda's constitution and the fundamental rights of all.

This strategy of targeted repression by ruling parties / governments of the LGBT community is not unique for Uganda. Once more it is being used to divert attention from ongoing social problems and intensify repression in the run-up to the forthcoming elections.

Victor Juliet Mukasa is a prominent LGBTI Human Rights Defender. He is a TransLesbian working with the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) as Research and Policy Associate for East, Central and Horn of Africa. Victor is a founding member of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), served as SMUG's Chairperson from March 2004 to October 2007 and is now serving on the organizations Advisory Board. He was member of the board of pan-African and international LGBTI groups, which are supported by Hivos, for example, Behind the Mask, Coalition of African Lesbians and the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

- (1) This case was the first time LGBT's - Yvonne Oyoo and Victor Juliet Mukasa - took the police to court in Uganda. In an interview with the *New Internationalist* in 2007, Victor Mukasa said he decided to sue the government because he was tired of the harassment: 'I am suing because of the constant human rights violations that are committed against LGBT people by the government and the public of Uganda without anyone raising a hand,' he said. A day before Christmas 2008 a Ugandan judge has awarded the two LGBT's \$ 7,000, saying their rights were infringed when they were arrested on suspicion of being lesbians in 2005. Justice Stella Arach-Amoko awarded \$ 5,000 to Yvonne Oyoo, who had been a guest in Victor Mukasa's house when it was raided by the police. The payout was for 'arbitrary torture', as Yvonne Oyoo had been man-handled and sexually assaulted. About \$ 2,000 was awarded to Victor Mukasa, a leading Ugandan human rights activist, for damage to his house during the raid.

Homosexuality in Cameroon: Identity and Persecution

Peter Geschiere

What does it mean to come out of the closet in Cameroon? It is clear that it takes courage, particularly lately, as the law has always expressly prohibited homosexuality. (1) The police, generally feared because of their brutal extortion of money from people, are eager to react to accusations of 'improper' proposals. That provides more opportunity for blackmail of both foreigners or Cameroonian citizens. Moreover, in the last few years homosexuality has become, quite abruptly, a hot issue evoking great indignation throughout society. The result is a hunt for alleged 'homosexuals', not just by the police, but also by the population.

Scandalous Practices by Elite Figures

On January 24th 2006 *L'Anecdote*, one of the many destitute newspapers in Yaoundé (capital of Cameroon) published a list of fifty prominent homosexuals. The list contained notable names: a former first minister, some other ministers, renowned journalists and other well-known figures, mostly men but some women as well. The exact accusations were not quite clear. For each person, a small photograph was published, accompanied by a short text. A recurring theme was the alleged forcing of job applicants into homosexual acts ('... but soon the pants came down ...'). Apparently the idea was that the elite are corrupt to the core and take advantage of the willingness of unemployed youths to do anything for a job, including accepting a homosexual 'initiation'. The list hit as a bombshell. In a few hours the newspaper was sold out. Other newspapers copied parts of the list, adding more general articles about homosexuality throughout the centuries in various parts of the world, but also as a creeping threat to Cameroon society.

The article in *L'Anecdote* did not appear out of thin air. During a crowded press conference a few days later, Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga, the editor-in-chief of the paper, referred to the christmas sermon delivered a month earlier by the archbishop of Yaoundé, monsignor Victor Tonye Bakot, in which the latter warned against homosexuality amongst the Cameroon elite, criticizing also the European Union and the Amsterdam Treaty 'of 1997' (actually 1999) that required member states to prohibit any form of discrimination based on sexual orientation. The archbishop insisted that this was contrary to the express teachings of the bible. His attack on the EU relates to a wider problem: increasing pressure by international human rights organizations to end the penalisation of homosexual acts is one of the reasons why homosexuality has become an increasingly hot issue in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa.

In other respects, the archbishop's sermon may have arisen out of the particular context of Cameroon although there may be parallels with what is happening in other African countries). For some time the churches, primarily the Catholic Church, have been concerned

about the influence of secret societies from European origin, first the freemasons and later the rosicrucians, among high-placed Cameroonian politicians and civil servants. Paul Biya, president of Cameroon since 1982, is a practising Catholic and a typical product of Catholic schools. But since he rose to power he openly admits that he is deeply involved with the rosicrucians. 'Radio Trottoir' as it is popularly called in Cameroon, is a source of constant rumours about black masses and secret confrontations between factions of freemasons and rosicrucians within the elite due to their unscrupulous hunger for power and wealth. Such rumours are encouraged by more or less explicit allusions by the president and his close collaborators to occult sources of their power. But they probably forgot that, since their introduction during the colonial period, both freemasons and rosicrucians are popularly associated with homosexuality. With his christmas sermon and his attack against gay practices, the archbishop apparently wanted to denounce these shady backgrounds.

This relationship may explain also why the list of prominent gays in *L'Anecdote* prompted such keen indignation amongst broad layers of the population, whilst the elite did not seem to know how to defend themselves. Within the country, there is growing anger against Biya and his regime which, prior to 1990, was based on a one-party dictatorship. In spite of the wave of democratisation during the early 1990's, he succeeded in holding on to power due to massive electoral fraud. The rising economic crisis of the same years is placing terrible burdens on the population. Over the last few years the regime, with the consent of the World Bank, publishes very positive figures of economic growth. But all that is happening is the enrichment of a small elite group around the president. This is painfully clear in an ongoing building boom in the elite neighbourhoods of the big cities which contrasts poignantly with the impoverishment of the vast majority of the population. Indeed, it is with good reason that Cameroon has been at the top of the list of most corrupt countries in the world for years now. It is also consistently named as one of the most graphic examples of the 'criminalisation' of a post-colonial state. (2)

For years the regime has been the object of increasingly bitter mockery among the population. However, until now Biya and his helpers have been able to divide the opposition by taking advantage of ethnic divisions in such a way that it had no chance to present a clear alternative. This divide-and-rule tactic is complemented by the ever-present and increasingly brutal show of force by the police. Apparently, the unexpected accusations of immoral gay practices offered an ideal opening for the population to express their suppressed anger, all the more so since the elite did not seem to know how to defend themselves against this sudden wave of moral indignation. It was striking that *L'Anecdote* was not immediately banned. The editor-in-chief was even given the chance to substantiate his accusations at a press conference (though his allusions to concrete evidence remained utterly vague), and on January 31st 2006 the newspaper published a second list of another fifty prominent 'homosexuals.' Some people on the list sought publicity and denied these 'terrible' accusations most emphatically, but most of them just kept their heads low. Only a few of them filed a libel complaint with the Department of Justice, but, as is usual with the Cameroon Justice Department, these cases are still pending. Apparently, *L'Anecdote* had found a weak spot to hurt the regime.

The whole affair had concrete consequences in daily life. At several places in the country a true witchhunt followed. In Yaoundé itself a boy was lynched by his schoolmates because he allegedly made improper proposals to a friend. Elsewhere, boys were removed from school

128 because they were suspected of 'unnatural' practices. And the regime started its determined hunt for alleged homosexuals which goes on till today - young men being sent to jail for longer periods on very flimsy evidence. What is striking is that in the lively debates around this issue - for instance, through letters to the editor in various newspapers and in Internet chat rooms - there was hardly any room for putting the accusations into perspective. Only a few writers defended a 'more modern' approach by emphasizing that sexuality is a private affair and that there is no reason to portray homosexuality as immoral. The great majority expressed great moral outrage about the supposed occurrence of such practices. For instance, one of the accused on the list of *L'Anecdote*, Ms. Rosine Nang, a well-known TV-journalist, felt she had to emphasise how shocked she was by such horrific accusations by stating that if these accusations were true (which of course was not the case) god had to punish her descendants up to the third generation. Almost all commentators appear to view homosexuality as unnatural and as a stigma from which Cameroon society should be spared.

Homosexuality: An Unknown Phenomenon?

The rapid explosion of this witchhunt was striking because until that time homosexuality had hardly been an important issue in Cameroon. In most local cultures the phenomenon had received little attention. Of course, it is difficult to generalise on this point because cultural variation is remarkably large in this country, even by African standards. So there are regional differences in attitudes towards homosexual patterns. In large parts of the South of the country, from where most of the elite group comes, homosexuality was seen as an abomination. Typical, for example, is that in the woodlands of South Cameroon homosexuality is associated with witchcraft, a very effective way to place same-gender sexuality outside of the order.

In this part of Cameroon - for instance amongst the Beti, the ethnic block that constitutes president Biya's mainstay - excited stories circulate among the people about nightly gatherings of witches that often go hand in hand with references to sexual escapades. The central motive of witches is cannibalism. At these gatherings they would present their accomplices with relatives to 'eat' them; in daily life the victim would fall ill and certainly die unless the *nganga* (healer) who can 'see' the witches, will 'fall upon them', and force them to break their spell. But that central motive of eating and cannibalism is often linked to unnatural forms of sexuality that would equally mark these nocturnal meetings: during such orgies men would do 'it' with men and 'even' women with women. The consequence is that insinuations concerning somebody's gay inclinations are immediately associated with occult practices, which no doubt facilitated the equation with a secret society such as the freemasons when this was introduced under colonial rule. The provocative *filles libres* in Yaoundé will still sneeringly ask a potential customer who rejects their advances, 'Tu es donc un franc-maçon?' ('Are you a "freemason"?').

In these societies travesty is also associated with the world of the occult. In practice, many *nganga* (healers) are *cross-dressers*; especially the healers who mark their healing sessions by ecstatic dancing expressly combine male and female attributes. But this does not mean necessarily that they indulge in gay practices.

One can conclude that in these societies homosexuality is present but in very secretive form, although there are regional differences. For example, in some parts of the north where since the eighteenth century Islam has begun to play an important role, there is more room for gay behaviour patterns in daily life, as is so often the case in Islamic regions (think of North Africa and Turkey). Naturally, this does not mean that there is room for openly expressing a gay identity. On the contrary, in North Cameroon the intensification of fundamentalist currents causes a sharp formal condemnation of homosexuality as conflicting with the Koran.

Homosexuality Increasingly Profiled

In spite of this general rejection, certain expressions of homosexuality manifest itself with more emphasis in Cameroon. There have been rumours for some time about gay acts in prisons and in the army, but those are often forms of rape. Nevertheless, that also makes homosexuality a subject of conversation, more so than in the old days. More notable is that in modern environments, for instance amongst students and in the big cities, some youths demonstrate behaviour that clearly deviates from traditional marked ideas about masculinity: hairstyles that are similar to those of women's, elegant ways of moving. There are also increasing rumours about certain meeting places for gays, which include bars and other gathering points. The police seem to take these rumours seriously. In June 2005 in Yaoundé, the police raided what they called a 'gay-bar', arresting eleven men. It is still in question whether there are bars in that city that can be regarded as 'gay-bars'. But, as far as can be ascertained, those arrested are still in custody.

As said before, pressure from international human rights organizations have the Cameroon authorities increasingly worried about homosexuality. Legal and religious authorities claim that this is a sin of the people in the western world that the latter try to export to other countries. Unfortunately, the effect of such foreign interventions is often contrary to their intent: they bring a tightening of police supervision, raids on gay meeting places (such as those mentioned before), and a general concern about homosexuality as some sort of creeping danger.

It is, moreover, important to emphasize that this is not special for Cameroon. Throughout Africa (as in other parts of the former 'Third World') homosexuality is quite suddenly becoming a hot issue. Early in 2008, there was a big stir in Senegal when a newspaper published pictures of a 'gay marriage' that had taken place on the outskirts of Dakar. The police arrested several young men while the couple concerned went into hiding and supposedly escaped to Mali. There they were almost lynched by an angry crowd. When they managed to get to Gambia, this country's President himself insisted publicly on their arrest. According to some sources - I rely here on conversations I had with Senegalese in Amsterdam - they managed to escape again and fled to Cape Town. A few months earlier, a similar episode took place in Morocco: pictures of a 'gay marriage' published in a newspaper, a forceful intervention by the police, arrest of several young men, and a furious debate in newspapers, on websites and in other media about this horrible abomination spread by the West, contaminating Moroccan society. In a recent article, the well-known American philosopher Judith Butler came to the challenging conclusion that 'the promiscuous gay' is becoming the pinnacle of modernity. She argues that to many people in Europe - including people who used to be quite homophobic

130 - acceptance of homosexuality has become the litmus test of being modern. The people who have to be tested on this are, of course, especially immigrants from various parts of Africa or Turkey. No wonder that this has quite dramatic consequences in the countries concerned.

Pressure on Europe

One of the consequences is an increasing influx of gays who ask for asylum in Europe on the grounds of persecution in their own country. I am involved in several cases in the Netherlands and the UK, but similar cases are increasingly being reported in all Western European countries (and also the US). The pattern is the same: refugees report on increasing risk of being arrested and tortured by the police, but also about more and more violent aggression against them in the society at large.

In all European countries the authorities try to put the dangers incurred by these asylum seekers in perspective in case they are forcibly returned to their country. For instance, the Netherlands official report of 2004 on Cameroon - the *landen report*, that on which the Immigration Service bases its refusals of asylum and that is sacrosanct when asylum cases are brought before the judge - states that in Cameroon homosexuality is not actively persecuted. (3) This was highly contestable even for earlier periods; for a long time now, the fearsome *gendarmes* have viewed accusations of gay advances in this country as a welcome opportunity to blackmail somebody. But with the recent turmoil in society and (apparently) amongst authorities as well about a supposedly hidden but omnipresent homosexuality, there are more and more examples of active police actions such as the one mentioned above. Yet, Dutch authorities persist in their refusal to accept homosexuality as a ground for asylum. In 2005, the former Dutch Minister of Integration, Rita Verdonk persisted in her plans to extradite Iranian gay asylum seekers on the ground that as long as gays kept a low profile in the country they would not be harmed. Their expulsion was only stopped at the last moment because of the shocking public execution of two young gay men in Iran.

A particular case attracted a lot of attention in 2007 in the Netherlands and the UK. The Dutch authorities decided to send a gay asylum seeker from Iran back to the UK since this was the country where he first asked for asylum. Dutch action groups protested that returning him to the UK meant he would be extradited to Iran. After much pressure a solution was reached when the Dutch State Secretary, Nebahat Albayrak claimed that the British authorities had promised her not to return the Iranian to his country; therefore he could be safely sent back to the UK. At present he still seems to be in Britain but his case is still not resolved.

Clearly European authorities are very worried that the widespread unrest about homosexuality - epitomized by gay marriage - will push many more gays to ask for asylum in the West. However, it is incorrect to evaluate a country's stance on the issue of homosexuality as if it exists in isolation. Clearly the growing turmoil about homosexuality in Africa and other continents is related to the emancipation of gays in the West and the importance this issue acquired in the context of Human Rights policies. Developments in Europe are particularly confusing in this sense: over the last decades the growing acceptance of homosexuality in ever wider circles - including among people who used to cherish quite homophobic utterances and practices - is clearly related to a growing concern about the ever more emphatic

presence of Islam within these societies. (4) Gays from African and notably Islamic countries risk victimization by this particularly complex and tense configuration. If Western governments take gay emancipation seriously and if politicians want to show that this is not just an opportunistic choice in the context of forceful 'integration' policies towards immigrants, it would be fair to pursue a more open policy for gay asylum seekers who have to flee their country because of frenzied outbursts of homophobia. These outbursts have many reasons but they are certainly also related to popular unease about a model of modernity so powerfully presented by the West. Gays from these countries should not become the victims of this.

Prof. dr. Peter Geschiere is professor emeritus of African anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He studied history and anthropology at the Free University (Amsterdam). He taught both topics at the Free University, Erasmus University (Rotterdam) and the University of Leiden. He was visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris/Marseille), University of Yaounde (Cameroun), University of Kisangani (Congo/Zaire), University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), Columbia University (New York) and New School (New York). His main interest is in the dynamics of local cultures in interaction with state formation, impact of the market economy and, more generally, processes of globalization. His main field-work is in West Africa (notably Cameroon). He published on the role of the 'local state'; the dynamics of 'witchcraft'; processes of monetization; new struggles over citizenship and belonging ('autochthony'); and the conservation of the rain-forest. Geschiere was chairman of the NWO research programme on 'Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities'. In 2002 he received the award of 'distinguished Africanist of the year' from the African Studies Association in the US. He is fellow of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Sciences and member of the board of the Prince Claus fund.

Notes

- (1) The text of the law, section 347a of the penal code of Cameroon, does not concern homosexuality as such, but 'sodomy', which supposedly includes all homosexual acts. But in practice, neither the police nor the authorities make such a distinction. In practice, 'homosexuality' is said to be prohibited by law. See also: Sabine Jansen, 'Op de vlucht voor homohaar - over discriminatie en discretie', in: *Nieuwsbrief Asiel- en Vluchtelingenrecht* ('On the run from Homophobia - About Discrimination and Discretion', in: *Newsletter Asylum and Refugee law*), vol. 3, June 2006, p. 124-146.
- (2) Cameroon plays a big role in the book *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, written by Jan-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Béatrice Hibou, published by James Currey & Indiana University Press, Oxford, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1999.
- (3) See also the article by Sabine Jansen, referred to in note 1. She writes about the official news releases of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 'Many official news releases use a strange distinction between homosexuality and homosexual acts. The official news release about Cameroon states: "In Cameroon homosexuality is not penalised. Homosexual acts are considered sodomy in Cameroon and are indeed penalised."'
- (4) See Judith Butler's text quoted above.

Urgent Goals of LGBTI Liberation

David Kuria

I am 35 years old and live in Kenya. (1) At a very young age, long before I became a sexual adult, I knew that I would not get married and this is what I told my family. Nobody took me seriously then, but they do now, because they realise that this is something I talked about long before I knew what marriage meant. When I was thirteen I went to a small seminary and later to a larger one, but left just before I became a priest. I worked for four years with a church-established NGO and later began my own business. Now that I have painted my profile I will address the urgent goals of the gay liberation movement and present my personal experiences as an illustration.

Discrimination

Before one can write about discrimination, a suitable context must be created through which the various forms of inequality and marginalisation can be rated at their true value. You should view sexual orientation as nothing more than a newcomer in an ancient social structure that depicts people as inferior based on a certain judgement by society. Before we can more deeply examine the marginalisation of the LGBTI community and the necessity of liberation, it will be helpful to look at other shameful types of discrimination in order to grasp the broader background.

Discrimination against women is probably the most conspicuous. People have become increasingly aware, particularly amongst the urban population, of the obvious forms of gender discrimination, such as girls who may not go to school, are denied particular foods such as meat, discrimination against pregnant women and domestic violence. Other forms of discrimination against women, such as the denial of rights of succession, entry to a country and capital, remain a problem, unfortunately.

Tribal and ethnic discrimination is just as endemic. Anthropologists have described this phenomenon in numerous books. However it is considered less acceptable to discriminate on grounds of ethnic origin, particularly amongst youths. Young people that have grown up in urban areas or attended multi-ethnic schools find it less threatening to mingle with people from differing ethnic backgrounds and generally find them acceptable.

Some consider sexual orientation the last undeveloped area for the application of human rights. In many parts of Africa - Kenya being a good example - people hear open statements concerning sexual orientation. It appears that the image of gays has scarcely changed with respect to the ancient perception that homosexuality was a colonial import. The *World Social Forum* in 2007 in Nairobi, a worldwide meeting of civil society organisations of all sorts and conditions was the first public event where LGBTI-people in Kenya came out facing the entire society. As a reaction the gays were heckled because they let themselves be lured into strange, foreign behaviour.



South African police taking part in the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade in 1998 - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)

When the mainstream media publishes information about gay issues it is always in a negative and damaging manner. The majority of people in society even consider it a curse to place gay subject matter in a neutral light. If someone speaks without insinuations and moral condemnation about homosexuality, he/she becomes stigmatized as a neo-colonial activist. That does not alter the fact that if you read how people today talk and write about gays, you notice an exact parallel with what people in the eighties said and wrote about the liberation of women. Back then, similar to the gays now, the advocates that pleaded for women's liberation were considered people that promoted a foreign agenda contrary to the deep-rooted values of the African culture because they undervalued the superior cultural and social order.

Although I personally have never found myself in a life threatening situation, I know men that most certainly have, just as many women in the eighties. Back then women knew that without economic liberation they would never be able to reach meaningful liberation. Therefore, they formed joint savings and credit groups and lent money to one another to start up a business. I recall women bringing money to my mother for safe keeping, otherwise they would face duress and threat of violence from their spouses and had to explain where the money came from. Unfortunately, especially in the countryside, domestic violence was still acceptable within marriage.

Perhaps most notable at the individual level is the process of undergoing traditional rituals that, as one might expect since that is what they are meant for, grant you access to acceptance in your own community. If, at a later stage your sexual orientation is revealed, that

134 access is denied because of that sexual orientation. Among the Kikuyu, all boys are circumcised at puberty as a transition ritual in which they receive an identity and are adopted into Kikuyu society. But when they reach the age of 25 or 30 they are expected to renew this social agreement by marrying. Since I did not get married, like so many other gays of my age and older, I have lost that social acceptance. On a personal level, there is a feeling of disappointment and anger toward society, because all the pain we have suffered in puberty was apparently completely useless. Circumcision is viewed in the cultural context. The value of it, as explained to us, is not limited to hetero conformity. In spite of the fact that it was assumed, how, as a little boy of that age, could one have a perception of marriage and anticipate it?

Religion

The African author Philip Mbithi referred to African men as 'notoriously religious'. Religious rites are traditionally entrenched in all activities, personal or communal, private or public, even to the extent that it is difficult to make a distinction between purely religious and secular. With such a foundation gays really feel excluded when religious leaders condemn their personal identity.

The continuing crisis in the Anglican church aggravates this desolation because the Africans, particularly the Kenyans, find themselves so fabulous morally speaking that they cannot help themselves, then take pity on those who 'lost their faith'. If you say that you are African and gay, you do not just appear to be completely on the wrong track, but it also looks like betrayal of the African opportunity at moral leadership, the only opportunity Africa has at some sort of leadership in the world.

Relations

An African only exists with the notion that he or she belongs to his or her society. Because of the traditional social context of poverty, life is shared and never lived individually. In that way, everything in society is socialised. Gays also feel the need to share their lives but they don't have a social structure in which to express that need. If I was not gay it would not be hard at all to fulfil that deep community need. However, being gay I am denied access to these social structures where this need is expressed. This primarily concerns marriage, but even more basic than that: the space to be myself, to recognize and accept who I am. These days, in the large cities of Kenya such as Nairobi and Mombasa, there are young gay couples. However, it is an unwritten rule to introduce each other as good friends that share a home. When you are in your early twenties the pressure to marry is not yet that great. When you are in your early thirties and you are living with another man then it is a completely different story. Perhaps people of my age and older just have to get used to the loneliness and learn to live with it, an exercise I am just starting to master.

Participation in Economic Life

In view of the widespread denial of homosexuality in Africa there are no specific identifiable rules or measures that discriminate against gays in employment situations. But as soon as an

individual said something about his or her different sexuality, employment is immediately ruled out. Legal review (of the dissolution of the employment agreement) and compensation are impossible. More fundamental, of course, is the psyche of the gay or lesbian who is denied the possibility to fulfil his or her life to its full potential. The forced isolated life means that a person is always worried about his or her sexuality remaining a secret and, in the long run, this necessity for secrecy requires that person to spend all his or her time and attention on it. As a result, gays perform extremely badly, both economically and socially, as individuals and as community members. For many that find it difficult to cope with the daily struggle of life, on top of the pressure that inevitably comes along with an isolated life, it is easy to give up; this explains the high addiction statistics and other forms of self neglect amongst them.

The Road Ahead

There is no doubt that the current situation may not and cannot continue. But it is the gays themselves who must take the lead in this struggle for self-liberation. Luckily, the struggle for women's liberation has shown that with persistent commitment both the traditionalists and the religious fractions can be put aside. The foundation of the 'Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya' (GALCK) is an important first step on the road to this liberation. The courage to stand up and show society our presence is a necessary condition to claim rights for LGBTI-people. Fortunately, in Kenya there are many people in the general human rights movement who are willing to cooperate with GALCK to reach this objective. Partnership between the LGBTI-people in the cities and from the countryside is also important. Even the people who lead an 'open and proud' life in the city feel the necessity to hide behind a mask when they visit their home in the countryside. This indicates that there can be no freedom and acceptance when only some are free and accepted.

David Kuria has an MBA (Master of Business Administration) from the University of Nairobi. He leads an online application and software-development business in Nairobi. In 2005 he published with Gay Kenya, the book Understanding Homosexual People in Kenya: The Cultural, Health, Religious and Legal Issues. More information can be found on the website: <http://www.gaykenya.com/>

Notes

- (1) According to the Kenyan Criminal Act, consensual sex between men that is against the order of nature is forbidden. The punishment can be as much as fourteen years of imprisonment. (The same law mentions sex with animals which is punished equally!) Also, efforts by men to seduce other men into sex that is against the natural order is considered criminal and can result in seven years imprisonment. Men who have 'gross indecency' with other men, either privately or in public areas or try to seduce them can get five years in prison.