

**Postcolonial Amnesia:  
The Construction of Homosexuality as ‘un-African’**

Binta Bajaha

The GI422 conference was by far the most fulfilling experience I've had at the LSE. The conference was a meaningful pedagogical experience as it benefitted me twofold: receiving knowledge and sharing knowledge. As a learning opportunity, there was a tremendous breadth of different topics presented by my fellow peers which featured an array of topics on sexuality. My research topic “Postcolonial Amnesia: The Construction of Homosexuality as ‘un-African’” was done with the aim of deconstructing several myths surrounding homosexuality emerging within and outside Africa's borders. The positive and valuable feedback from colleagues and the course lecturer Professor Clare Hemmings added to my confidence researching something considered taboo and not worthy of acknowledgement in The Gambia, my home country. The conference papers presented – some personal, others not – seemed to allow the GI422 class to become more intimately connected and this will forever stand out as my best experience pursuing my postgraduate degree at the LSE, and for that I will be forever grateful.

**Postcolonial Amnesia:  
The Construction of Homosexuality as ‘un-African’**

“We will fight these vermin called homosexuals... the same way we are fighting malaria-causing mosquitoes, if not more aggressively.” This statement by The Gambia’s president Yahya Jammeh echoes the revival of a peculiar discourse that constructs homosexuality as a foreign element and thus an ‘un-African’ perversion. The rejection of homosexuality as wholly un-African is part of a complex and charged debate on sexuality, which exposes various cultural and political logics that reveal tensions and contradictions that surround such a discourse. Jammeh’s sentiment has divided local, regional and international opinion. People are either outraged by the homophobia espoused by another African leader, or supportive of his stance as it aims to guard against westernisation through upholding religious doctrine, morality, tradition and law.

Contextualising the government’s stance concerning homosexuality in The Gambia as moral panic, I hope to analyse this discourse through the lens of pre-colonial and postcolonial understanding and construction of African sexualities. By seeking to examine the intersection of sexual panics and the re-imagination of a hegemonic ‘African tradition,’ this paper will examine the many contradictions that accompany the notion that homosexuality is a foreign import and part of a neocolonial imposition which is bent on destroying the moral and social fabric of African societies.

Three main narratives to counter the Gambian government’s public discourse on the mantra ‘homosexuality is un-African’ will be presented. First, the characterisation of homosexuality – rather than colonial laws and religion – as a colonial imposition speaks to the postcolonial amnesia being suffered. Secondly, the heterosexual panic and the government’s sudden and excessive prurient nature are reflected on the increasing restriction of basic human rights; excessive control over the private realm is an extension of the immense social control over public affairs. Lastly, I will show how the arguments of homosexuality being ‘un-African’ are not only false, but inherently contradictory. This immense and illogical hatred towards

homosexuals is not a spontaneous phenomenon. It is no gut reaction, or some recently discovered passion for morality and need to preserve a sacrosanct Gambian and African tradition. Rather, it is political manipulation at its finest, created to mask the growing hardship Gambians face as the nation struggles with nepotism, neopatrimonialism and gross human rights violations.

On 25 August 2014, the Gambian National Assembly passed the Criminal Code (Amendment) Bill, 2014. This Bill was to introduce three new amendments to the constitution – barring persons on government missions abroad from absconding, extending the law on homosexuality and prohibiting pornography. Sodomy laws, like many Commonwealth countries whose legal codes are based on colonial English law, already existed in The Gambia under the Criminal Code first enacted on 1 October 1934, and again in the 1965 Criminal Code after the country gained independence (Jammeh, 2011). Largely inspired by repressive Victorian-era laws, homosexuals were handed a 14-year sentence if caught. The Code states that a “person who has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature... or permits any person to have carnal knowledge of him against the order of nature” commits a felony seen as an unnatural offence (Criminal Code of 1965, Section 144). The Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, 2005 extended the punishments of homosexual acts to include women that engage in lesbianism, acknowledging for the first time that homosexuality is not an exclusive ‘male-only’ club.

The Gambia was not the first to enact a bill against homosexuality in Africa nor was it the first to have a leader that seems quite obsessed with the sexuality of the nation’s citizens. The renewed crack down and interest on homosexuality continues to spread beyond The Gambia’s border and reflects the wave of homophobia sweeping the continent – from Uganda’s Anti-Homosexual Bill to Nigeria outlawing same-sex relationships to Malawi’s harsh penalty on homosexuals. The provocative question here is why and how African governments seem so keen on regulating sexuality, especially homosexuality? Opposition to homosexuality, though based on spurious arguments, becomes the common denominator that fuels the belief that

‘homosexuality is un-African.’ Ranging from misplaced accusations of neocolonialism and the responsibility to uphold and protect ‘traditional African culture,’ an analysis of The Gambia’s stance against homosexuality vis-à-vis other African countries will create an analytical framework that goes beyond cultural values or even sexuality.

Before engaging with arguments being presented in this paper, it is important to clarify the terms that get used unreflectively in labeling homosexuality. Though this paper presents the myth surrounding the claim that homosexuality is ‘un-African,’ it is important to note that that concept of homosexuality, not the act, might indeed be foreign to Africa. As Michael Foucault pointed out in his groundbreaking three-volume study of sexuality in the Western world, *The History of Sexuality* (1978), the social construction of homosexual identity is a recent Western concept due to its unique conceptualisation of male-to-male sexual bonding that “assumes a life-long predisposition” (Yee, 2003) Within Africa, the issue of same-sex desire has been complex and has not been historically personified as an identity. Marc Epprecht (2008: 8) alludes to this by stating that the word homosexuality

suggests a clarity arising from a specific history of scientific enquiry, social relations, and political struggle that did not historically exist in Africa and still does not very accurately describe the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women in Africa.

A disconnect seems to occur within contemporary African imaginations between homosexual acts and homosexuality as an identity. The vitriolic responses being witnessed from African leaders “have to do largely with the personification of the gay identity” (Msibi, 2011: 69). The rhetoric of patriotic heterosexuality has been backed by the power of the state as legislation against “aggravated homosexuality” has been enacted in countries – from The

Gambia to Uganda to Malawi – that otherwise have little in common. The “cultural intimacy,” as described by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2005), gives a false legitimacy to the phrase ‘homosexuality is un-African’ as one African leader after another seems to pledge their homophobic stance in a secret fraternity.

This contemporary trend of growing homophobia and its discourse is traceable to colonial times as European colonial powers erased part of Africa’s history to justify their ‘civilising mission.’ Using Foucault’s concept of genealogy in conjuncture with historical analyses of pre-colonial Africa, I will be troubling the notion that same-sex desire is a Western import and thus ‘un-African.’ Foucault largely focused on deconstructing notions of the truth, particularly on accepted facts. Analysing the pre-colonial history on African sexuality from this perspective will disturb “what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (Foucault, 1977: 147). Sexuality in pre-colonial Africa was quite complex; the organisation of gender, sexuality and even reproduction are incomparable to the rigid structures of today. Caution must be taken so that the notion of sexuality in that era is not romanticised as unrestricted and unbridled.

Colonial ethnographic studies by Europeans offer two separate discourses on the practice of homosexuality within different African tribal societies. These discourses, albeit biased and contradictory, help us restore the erased history concerning African sexualities. The first discourse portrayed Africa as untouched by the abomination of homosexuality. As reflected in the words of Sir Frederick Jackson (1930), homosexuality is not to be found in Africa because of the “‘good sense of the natives and their disgust’ toward the bestial vices practiced by Orientals” (cited in Epprecht, 2010: 771). This apparent lack of homosexuality within parts of Africa was apparently one of the few unambiguously positive things that could be said about African morality. The opposing narrative constructed by colonisers used sexuality in the reverse as it frowned upon the pederasty and perverted actions of the natives. The image of the

‘uncontrollable’ and ‘insatiable’ African was juxtaposed against the ‘prim’ and ‘morally superior’ European. The ‘unnatural damnation’ of homosexual sex practiced amongst men and the unimaginable act between women who use ‘unlawful lust’ as described by European travelers were more than enough reason to penetrate Africa in the hope of transforming its peoples into ‘noble savages’ (Purchas, 1614). The false claims of a unitary African sexuality that is either pure or tainted cannot be solely attributed to colonial authorities and their blatant racism and cultural ignorance. African nationalists and sympathisers worked hard in creating an image of an erotic yet moral Africa in contrast with a neurotic and immoral West. As Africans took up the pen in European languages to correct the wrong done in defining who they were, the main mission seemed to be reclaiming the story surrounding Africa and its inhabitants, even if it meant concealing some historical truths. Western discourse always seems to treat Africa as a “homogenous socio-political bloc” (Patton, 1990: 25) despite the 11.5 million square mile continent being “vastly more culturally, linguistically, religiously and socially diverse than North America or Europe” (ibid.). Despite widespread criticism that Western discourse always seems to collapse the diversity of a continent into a singular idea of ‘one monolithic Africa,’ the same is being done by many African leaders to create an idea of a normative heterosexual Africa. As Achille Mbembe argues:

What is called Africa is first and foremost a geographical accident. It is this accident that we subsequently invest with a multitude of significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives. (cited in Hoad, 2007: 15)

Homosexuality can thus be seen as the many imaginary contents and fantasies that are used to produce distinct African sovereignties and identities. The claim that homosexuality is

‘un-African’ is quite difficult to digest because with no single African culture, it is near impossible to label anything as fluid as sexuality as solely African or not.

The re-imagination of Africa employed tropes of a romanticised and androcentric colonial past that contributed to the notion that a ‘sodomite-free’ Africa existed before contact with Europeans. The Gambia’s president’s insistence that homosexuality is anti-God, anti-human and anti-civilisation (Jammeh, 2013) reflects other African leaders’ bigoted stance on homosexuality. President Mugabe of Zimbabwe described homosexuals as “worse than pigs and dogs” and believes homosexuality to be “a scourge planted by the white man on a pure continent” (cited in Dubin, 2012: 77). The ex-president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi made it clear that “homosexuality is against African norms and traditions” (cited in Hoad, 2007: 137). Even South Africa, pioneer in Africa for its legal recognition and protection of homosexuals, is not immune to such homophobia as President Zuma describes equal marriage rights for gay couple as a “disgrace to the nation and to God” (Munro, 2012: 17). The reification of homosexuality as ‘un-African’ appeals to a shared albeit false sense of tradition, customs and ethnicities that paradoxically accepts the colonialists narrative.

Why are African leaders regurgitating colonial stereotypes and erasing evidence that points to diverse sexuality within African traditional societies? Why the sudden intensity of moral panic concerning sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As Saskia Wieringa (2009: 205) argues, the historical repurposing of sexuality within Africa simply represents postcolonial amnesia that is “built on the manipulation of the fear... of same-sex practices.” The political convenience of selectively memorising certain aspects of Africa’s pasts is part of a controlling mechanism that creates a hegemonic society with the intention to strengthen social and political control. The domination and subjugation of Africa through the push of structural adjustment programmes, unfair trade deals and the depletion of natural resources has created catastrophic crises: food is unaffordable, health care unavailable and education unattainable for the most disadvantaged. The failure of African governance in countries like The Gambia needs distractions that will play into

the psycho-politics of the nation and its citizen. The virility of a ‘true’ African man and his masculinity must be maintained as gender parity and homosexuality are seen as legitimate threats to the power structure of a heteropatriarchal society, because both rattle and question the legitimacy of the social hierarchy. The attempt to police African masculinity and the criminalisation of homosexuality all in the name of tradition leads to an odd appeal by African leaders to protect the ‘traditional African family.’

In his infamous UN speech, President Jammeh equates promoting homosexuality to promoting the end of humanity as what good is advocating human rights for homosexuals when it spells a “definitive end to human reproduction and procreation” (Jammeh, 2013: 9). President Museveni of Uganda also commented on how “an attempt at social imperialism” by the West seeks to destroy the traditional African family unit (Biryabarema, 2014). Both statements by Jammeh and Museveni point to a biopolitical rationalisation of the law; the paradox of biopolitics is explicit as the attempt to promote one life over another results not only in the death – literal death and political death – of homosexuals, but the death of heterosexuals as well.

Over the span of human existence, it will not be an exaggeration to state that no tactic has been more successful in stirring up hysteria and moral panic than the appeal to protect traditions. Because moral sex panics are deeply political constructions, the notion of tradition is manipulated by sitting powers to further a specific agenda. Moral sexual panics are used as political manipulation to uphold dictatorial postcolonial regimes and deflect growing economic hardships. Robert Lorway’s (2008: 150) observation in Namibia is applicable to The Gambia and other African nations as homosexuality is “linked to a multitude of emergent social problems and tensions of the postcolonial era, such as criminality, national identity, authenticity, globalisation and neocolonialism”. The growing intolerance of homosexuality can be seen as “displaced resistance to perceived and real encroachments on neocolonial national sovereignty by economic and cultural globalisation” (Hoad, 2007: 8). The Jammeh administration has taken up the role as ‘defender of Gambian culture’ extremely seriously. While Jammeh’s strong anti-colonial stance



and insistence on self-sufficiency is at times commendable, targeting homosexuals in his bid to protect the morality of the Gambian nation is laughable when the country is seen as a popular sex tourist destination as young Gambian men and women turn to the sex industry for survival (Saine, 2012: 115). Additionally, the paradoxical attack on homosexuality as an abomination by Islam and Christianity – religions that are foreign to Africa and were instrumental in eradicating African traditions – showcases one of the contradictions of labelling homosexuality as something ‘un-African.’ A disputed quote attributed to Jomo Kenyatta says, “when the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible” (Adogame, 2013: 207). It stands as a contradiction that African leaders who challenge neocolonialism, continue to use reformulated colonial laws and religion that historically oppressed Africans to tyrannise other Africans. The apparent contradiction presents a dilemma in comprehending the insistence of a ‘sodomite-free,’ ‘pure’ Africa.

Africa has become the par excellence of homophobia and the debate surrounding homosexuality has been an acrimonious one. The Gambia’s amended law that targets “aggravated homosexuality” is similar to other laws across the continent; especially the infamous tabled Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda. The primary objective of such draconian laws scattered across the continent is to deal with the ‘un-African’ abominable act of homosexuality that offends culture and religion. Moral panics have served as an effective decoy that distracts away from socio-economic crises. By creating artificial scapegoats, African leaders are using a formula that has been tried and tested throughout history to displace social anxieties. The current reinvention of Africa as a heterosexual continent is done intentionally to juxtapose the continent against the ‘sexually democratic’ West. The continuous condemnation from the West seems to strengthen the resolve of African leaders in rejecting homosexuality as a Western imposition. The contradictions and paradoxes shown in this essay prove that the repetition that

homosexuality is 'un-African' is part of a complicated political ploy by the likes of the Gambian government to conceal the economic catastrophe that is gripping some Africa nations. The claim that homosexuality is 'un-African' simply becomes a metaphor for the propagation of conservative agendas that promote a heteropatriarchal society under the guise of protecting tradition, culture and religion. Homosexuality is not 'un-African.' The tools being used to strengthen such false claims are 'un-African.'

### Bibliography

ADOGAME, A.U. (2013) *African Traditions in the Study of Religion, Diaspora and Gendered Societies*. Surrey: Ashgate.

BIRYABAREMA, E. (2014) Uganda's Museveni Signs Anti-gay Bill. *Mail & Guardian*. [Online] Available from: <<http://mg.co.za/article/2014-02-24-ugandas-museveni-signs-anti-gay-bill>> (11 April 2015)

DUBIN, S. (2012) *Spearheading Debate: Culture Wars & Uneasy Truces*. Chicago: Jacana Media.

EPPRECHT, M. (2008) *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea From the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

EPPRECHT, M. (2010) The Making of 'African Sexuality': Early Sources, Current Debates. *History Compass* 8(8), p. 768-79.

FOUCAULT, M. (1977) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

FOUCAULT, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. New York: Pantheon.

HERZFELD, M. (2005) *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge.

HOAD, N.W. (2007) *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (2014) *Gambia: President Should Reject Homophobic Law*. [Online] Available from: <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/10/gambia-president-should-reject-homophobic-law>>. (11 April 2015)

JAMMEH, O. (2011) *Constitutional Law of The Gambia: 1965-2010*. Bloomington: Authorhouse.

JAMMEH, O. (2013) Statement at the 68<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly. [Online] Available from: <<http://www.statehouse.gm/Speeches/UN-68th-Gen-assembly-statement.pdf>> (11 April 2015)

LOWRAY, R. (2008) Myths of Science, Myths of Sex: Homophobia and HIV Vulnerability in Namibia. In: Feldman, D.A. (ed). *AIDS, Culture, and Africa*. Miami: University of Florida Press.

MSIBI, T. (2011) The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality In Africa. *Africa Today* 58(1), p. 55-77.

MUNRO, B.M. (2012) *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come: Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

PATTON, C. (1990) Inventing 'African Aids'. *New Formations* 18(2), p. 25-39.

PURCHAS, S. (1614) *Purchas: His Pilgrims or Relations of the World and the Religions*. Glasgow: J. MacLehose and Sons.

SAINE, A. (2012) *Culture and Customs of Gambia*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood.

WIERINGA, S.E. (2009) Postcolonial Amnesia: Sexual Moral Panics, Memory and Imperial Power. In: Herdt, G. (ed). *Moral Panics, Sex Panics, Memory, and Imperial Power*. New York: New York University Press.

YEE, N. (2003) Catching The Phoenix: The Social Construction of Homosexuality. [Online] Available from: <[http://www.nickyee.com/ponder/social\\_construction.html](http://www.nickyee.com/ponder/social_construction.html)>. (11 April 2015)