

CULTURE, RELIGION AND POLITICISATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Michael Tokunbo Bankole Ph. D
Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, Nigeria
tokunbobankole@gmail.com

Abstract

Homosexuality is attracting more attention like never before. In the United States of America, it is homophobia that is becoming unacceptable, while homosexuality is becoming more acceptable. According to the Pew Forum, the number of Americans engaging in same-sex marriage is continually increasing. France, Norway, and England, to mention a few, have all embraced homosexuality. However, homosexual practice is regarded in most African cultures as unnatural, un-African and a threat to social and cultural values. With the exception of South Africa, where homosexual orientation and behaviour are “cultural emblems” of some Africans, much of Africa still treat members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) organisation with much disdain. The 2009 anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda and the proscription of gay marriage in Nigeria in 2014 have received widespread attention. The International Gay and Lesbian Association asserts that homosexuality is outlawed in 34 African countries. As a result of this, some European countries have started implementing laws that limit or prevent budget support to African countries that “circumscribe” the rights of homosexuals. However, despite this pressure, different African countries have toughened up existing laws against homosexuality. Only the South African Government permits same-sex unions out of all the jurisdictions surveyed. It legalised same-sex marriage in 2006. After this legalisation, a plethora of groups have sprung up in different parts of Africa advocating for the recognition of LGBTQ. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how culture and religion shape the politicisation of homosexuality in Africa and highlight how African traditional cultural values influence homophobia. Using sociological and historical approaches, the paper submits that the politics of homosexuality in Africa is shaped by cultural cum religious ideologies and colonial-era “sodomy laws.”

Keywords: Africa, Culture, Homosexuality, Politicization and Religion

Introduction

In African societies, marriage is an indispensable factor for the continuation of the family line of descent. Africans marry to beget their own children and have a family. African traditional religion teaches the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife, leading to the union in a way of the two extended families involved. It is a lasting union between the man and his wife and, by extension, between the two extended families that have come together. For the ordinary African, marriage is sacred. The above facts are some of the reasons why most Africans do not engage in homosexual relationships. Their society forbids it. Their cultural setting forbids it. Their religion forbids it. African traditional religion teaches heterosexuality and not homosexuality. However, tradition seems to be changing in some parts of Africa. In South Africa for example, some privileged white men and women seem to have influenced a few black people into indulging in homosexual practice. There are churches in South Africa that do not speak against homosexual behaviour. They see homosexuals as acceptable members of the Christian community. This position is in sharp contrast with the traditional African worldview. Malawi is another African country where homosexual practice is gradually becoming a norm among some people. As the Western powers put much pressure on African leaders to accept homosexuality on grounds of human rights and equality, a few African leaders have begun to rethink the issue. Be that as it may, much of Africa still treats homosexuals with great disdain.

Arguments for and against homosexual orientation are becoming rife in different African societies. The discourse has assumed both local and international dimensions. The 'corrective rape' practice against lesbians in South Africa has received widespread attention. Studies show that sexual violence in South Africa is among the highest in the world¹. Several countries in the Advanced World have begun implementing laws that limit or prevent financial aid to African countries that 'promote' homophobia. Paradoxically, since imperialist countries started the move to push lesbian and gay rights in Africa, the plight of homosexuals has worsened. Consequently, Africa is considered the most homophobic continent in the world². American and European media often present homosexual cases as revealing a firmly embedded homophobia in Africa sustained by religion and cultural values. However, it was observed that the legacies of European colonisation primarily shape the politicisation of homosexuality in Africa. Anti-gay laws were generally put in place by the colonial masters. These colonial-era "sodomy laws" are still in place in many African countries. They have remained in place for more than sixty years. Interestingly, the West is now 'fighting' against the laws it handed to Africa.

Homosexuality: An African Cultural Consideration

Homosexuality is no longer viewed as a shameful practice in certain climes in Africa, and homophiles in the continent have adopted an open lifestyle describing their otherwise shameful practice in a more social term as 'gay.' The antagonists of the practice are labelled 'homophobic.' In Western societies, it is homophobia and not homosexuality that is being treated with contempt. This began with a political pressure group agitating for "social justice" and "human rights." In line with the homosexual agenda, Herd³ surmises that sexual orientation is inherently biological. Fape⁴, however, remarks that to preserve ennobling human culture, norms and values, same-sex marriage should be rejected by people of different persuasions. Africans do not need to legalise homosexuality due to any Western blackmail or neo-liberalism because gay practice is very much anathema to African culture.

In African societies and cultures, reproduction is regarded as the fundamental occurrence on which man's and life's future depend. Africans believe this is the primary reason why marriage is important to society. Proponents of homosexual orientation and people championing gay marriage or lesbianism argue that religious conservatives should accept that the primary purpose of marriage is to give social and public recognition to the intimate relationships between any two people⁵. They argue further that to ostracise gay couples is sheer discrimination. Suffice it to say that they are correct if the primary objective of marriage is to protect intimacy between two people. However, their argument is invalid. It is invalid because the primary aim of marriage is to protect the inherently procreative relationship of opposite sex. In the 21st Century, humankind needs this procreative relationship more than ever before as a result of the so-called techno-science possibilities for transmitting life. There should be limits on the use of these technologies, which contradict most cultures. Scholars have defined culture in different ways. Somerville⁶ defines it as something that marks us as human. She says it is what distinguishes us and allows us to distinguish ourselves from other animals and, in the future, from intelligent machines.

Akinola⁷ explicates that homosexuality is regarded in most African cultures as unnatural and a threat to social and cultural values. Furthermore, with the proliferation of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in Africa, the continent is witnessing a growing intolerance of gays and lesbians. Homosexuality in most Africa cultures is seen as a form of sodomy and insanity. Thus, most Africans are vociferously and violently acting against gays and lesbians. Seminars are held in some instances to make gays and lesbians straight. Anyone who renounces homosexuality is celebrated because African culture regards homosexuality as a form of madness or mental illness.

The Changing Paradigm of African Traditional Worldview on Homosexuality

It is widely believed in Africa that homosexuality is a Western form of lifestyle which is alien to Africans. This foreign concept became a colonial import to sub-Saharan Africa at the advent of colonization⁸. A few Africans, however do not concur with the above-mentioned assertion. People in this category are

mostly academics who have carried out some studies on the phenomenon of homosexuality in the continent.

While western countries have consistently relaxed their laws to fully integrate homosexuals into all the strata in western societies, African countries continue to strengthen existing laws against homosexual lifestyle in the continent. Ironically, since some countries in the West started the move to push homosexual rights in Africa, the plight of gays and lesbians has worsened. Homophobia is on the rise in Africa and the intensity of reactions by Africans against homosexuals is perhaps commensurate with African tradition.

However, there are observable changes in moral values among Africans. These changes have led to some alterations in the African worldview on homosexuality. The ever-expanding interconnection of social, cultural and religious issues is forcing African societies to conform to what is now becoming uniform moral principles within the “global village”. The effects of globalisation on African cultural norms and values cannot be overstated. Globalisation and multiculturalism are critical phenomena contributing to cultural homogeneity the world over. These phenomena are gradually eroding cultural diversity in different parts of the world. Thus, African traditional cultural values are gradually being replaced by global cultural norms. The forces of globalisation and multi-culturalism are drastically and dramatically transforming the lives of Africans, especially in the way they think and comport themselves.

A major impact of cultural imperialism and globalisation is seen in the restructuring of the traditional African family system⁹. The family is the basic unit of every society. Before the advent of Western imperialism and globalisation, the extended family system was popular in traditional African society. This type of family was the backbone of African milieus. The extended family system, which included the father, mother, children and relatives, was the basic unit in the traditional African family system. There was unity of purpose and good understanding among Africans when the extended family system was very strong. African traditional cultural values were strongly upheld at that time. Relationships were generally cordial, and family members assisted one another, thereby contributing to the growth of the society as a whole.

However, the introduction of Western cultural values into Africa led to drastic changes in the African social structure, traditional African worldview on religious and cultural issues and pattern of family life. Thus, the extended family system is disappearing in Africa, giving way to the Western nuclear family system. African dressing and even food are gradually appearing Western. In contemporary African societies, to be civilised now means to dress, eat, talk, and think like Americans and Europeans.

Politicisation of Homosexuality in the African Context

Citizens of Kenya were confronted with the issue of anti-homosexual discrimination by Barack Obama in 2015. Obama was visiting his father's Kenyan home as United States President for the first time that year. He meticulously launched an unprecedented defense for gay rights in Kenya and Africa in general. Obama juxtaposed the issue of homophobia with racial discrimination that he experienced in the United States of America. According to him,

When you start treating people differently because they are different, that's the path whereby freedom begins to erode. And bad things happen. When a government gets in the habit of treating people differently, those habits can spread. As an African-American in the United States, I am painfully aware of the history of what happens when people are treated differently under the law, and there were all sorts of rationalisations that were provided by the power structure for decades in the United States for segregation, and Jim Crow and slavery, and they were wrong. So, I'm unequivocal in this... for a law-abiding citizen who is going about their business, and working at a job

and obeying the traffic signs and not harming anybody, the idea they will be treated differently or abused because of who they love is wrong, full stop¹⁰.

Obama's comments on homosexuality were greeted with reactions from Kenyans. Uhuru Kenyatta, who was Kenyan President at that time publicly disagreed with the former American President. "There are some things that we must admit we don't share," Kenyatta replied, suggesting that gay rights "are not really issues on the foremost mind of Kenyans." According to him, "it is very difficult for us to impose on people that which they themselves do not accept." Another Kenyan who reacted to Obama's comments on homosexuality is Irungu Kang'ata, a Member of Parliament in Kenyatta's governing party. According to Kang'ata,

They are in bad taste. It is a breach of the principle of sovereignty and equality of states. What if Kenyatta goes to America and says it should abolish the death penalty? Or for example, it is like Obama goes to London or Madrid or the Hague or even Japan and says your monarchy is oppressive and a waste of money and should be done away with. In the same manner, he can't come to Kenya to tell us things that are unacceptable¹¹.

Kang'ata's comments are in tandem with the general feelings in Africa on homosexuality. In Kenya, nine out of ten people disdain homosexual orientation¹². This perhaps suggests why Kenyan politicians and religious leaders praised President Uhuru Kenyatta's dismissal of gay rights as a 'non-issue.' Homosexuality is illegal in Kenya. It is criminalised with a maximum penalty of 14 years' imprisonment.

In Malawi, Joyce Banda, the first female President of the country, echoed the rights of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community in that country when she was President. Banda was President of Malawi from April 7, 2012 to 31 May, 2014. She's reputed to have founded the People's Party in 2011. In November 2012, Joyce Banda suspended all laws that illegalised or outlawed homosexuality in Malawi. In July 2014, the Malawian government announced that the country would no longer ban homosexual activities and that the government would review the anti-gay laws in the country. A British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) report in May 2012 suggests that Banda had the support of majority of the Members of Parliament (MPs), and therefore, she was able to get the Malawian Parliament overturn the law. In 2010, Malawi was widely criticised for the imprisonment of a trans-woman, Tiwonge Chimbalanga and a man, Steven Monjeza for performing a traditional 'engagement' party. Suffice it to say that, with all the efforts of Banda to legalise homosexuality in Malawi, the general consensus among Malawians still remains that homosexuality is unnatural and un-African, hence, they do not support it. Banda's major concern at repealing the ban on homosexual practice was simply to regularise relations with Malawi's traditional development allies who were not comfortable with their "bad laws" against homosexuality.

In Uganda, conservative politicians have consistently sought to protect their nation from cultural imperialism by drafting anti-gay legislation. The Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014 was introduced as a private bill by a Member of Parliament (MP), David Bahati, on 14th October, 2009. Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni signed the bill into law that same year. The anti-homosexuality laws allow those convicted of homosexuality to be imprisoned for life, ignoring disapproval from European and American donors. Many Ugandan politicians including David Bahati, the MP who introduced the bill, became fulfilled and elated, saying, "this is victory for the family of Uganda." Immediately the bill was passed into law, the United States announced that it would begin a review of its relationship with the Museveni's government. Obama had earlier warned the Ugandan President that ties between Kampala and Washington would be damaged if the bill was passed into laws. The British Government equally

reacted to the passage of the anti-gay bill into law. The British foreign secretary, William Hague, reacted to the passage of the bill by saying:

I am deeply saddened and disappointed that the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda has been signed into law. The UK strongly opposes all discrimination on any grounds. We question the compatibility with Uganda's constitution and international treaty obligations. There can be no doubts that it will increase persecution and discrimination of Ugandans, as well as, damage Uganda's reputation internationally. We ask the government of Uganda to protect all its citizens and encourage tolerance, equality and respect¹³.

Perhaps the only notable African who spoke against the anti-homosexuality act in Uganda is the South African Nobel Peace Laureate, Desmond Tutu. According to him, the Ugandan homosexuality law recalls attempts by Nazi and apartheid regimes to enact laws against 'love'¹⁴. Homosexuality is outlawed in 34 African countries out of the 55 states recognised by the African Union and the United Nations Organization (UNO)¹⁵. The politics of homosexuality in Africa revolves around local and international actors. The local actors have to consistently speak out against homosexuality in order to maintain their relevance in a continent that is highly homophobic. It is for this reason that the majority of politicians in Africa speak publicly against homosexual practice. They have to do this to win elections. On the other hand, as a result of cultural imperialism, the West wants the extension of its influence or dominance over Africa through the 'exportation' of homosexuality. America and Europe are pressurising Africa to accept homosexuality for two major reasons, first, economic and second, political. The West wants to capture markets in Africa for her cultural commodities and, at the same time, extend and establish her hegemony by shaping worldviews in the continent.

Religion and Anti-Gay Politics in Selected African Countries

In Ghana, religious and political leaders submit that homosexuals should be arrested and prosecuted according to the law. Currently, Ghanaian laws forbid "unnatural carnal knowledge." Religious leaders in the country are threatening to mobilise their members against politicians and government officials who defend homosexuality. The action of these religious leaders inevitably affects how politicians in Ghana perceive the subject of homosexuality and gay rights.

In 2012, the United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister, David Cameron, warned African countries of the possibility of aid cuts if they continue to disrespect gay rights. John Atta Mills, who was the President at the time, denounced the threat, stating that Europeans should not impose their values on Ghana.

In Zambia, the criminalisation of homosexuality was partially inspired by a number of Christian opinion leaders. This shows the influence of religion on politics in Zambia. Christianity has always laboured to influence national politics in the country. An expression of the religious character of Zambia's social, cultural and political spheres was made on 29th December 1991 when President Frederick J.T. Chiluba declared Zambia as a Christian nation. Gordon¹⁶ observes that Chiluba's declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation reveals an obviously "Pentecostal political theology," as it subjects the whole country to the discussion of being "born again in Christ." Gordon's observation is appropriate and suitable for the present discussion because, Zambian public debates about homosexuality are profoundly shaped by Pentecostal Political imaginations. As Klinken points out,

Homosexuality first became a major public issue in recent Zambian history in 1998, when Francis Yabe Chisambisha publicly came out as gay in a three-page-long interview in the independent newspaper, *The Post*, and shortly after established the Lesbian, Gays, Bisexual and

Transgender Persons Association (LEGATRA). These actions sparked a 'mammoth scandal,' with church leaders, NGO officials, students and professors, government ministers and politicians all voicing their horror of homosexuality (Long, Brown and Cooper, 2003). President Chiluba initially remained silent on this issue, but then contributed to the debate, stating "Homosexuality is the deepest level of depravity. It is unbiblical and abnormal. How do you expect my government to accept something that is abnormal?" (Long, Brown and Cooper, 2003). As a result of this strong apposition, LEGATRA was prevented from registering as an NGO, and ceased to exist within a year of its launch. Since then, issues of homosexuality have frequently returned as a subject of public and political controversy¹⁷.

In the vast majority of cases, arguments against the acceptance of homosexuality and the recognition of gay rights are often made with reference to the notion that Zambia is a Christian nation.

A political commentator and writer, Issa¹⁸ reveals the politics behind Egypt's LGBTQ crackdown. According to him, the media, government and Islamic establishments are working in sync on a hate-filled anti-gay campaign. Many Egyptians see homosexual orientation as "terrible as terrorism," while government officials label it a "sickness and disgrace." Issa remarks that Egypt's anti-LGBTQ campaigns are repetitive in content and application¹⁹. According to him, the government, media and religious bodies often coordinate campaigns to publicly expose and humiliate members of the LGBTQ community in Cairo. Egypt is an Arab country, and it remains highly conservative²⁰. Islamic bodies – ranging from legitimate institutions to extremists, wield considerable influence on both the citizens and government in power. Government agencies and parastatals require some level of endorsement from religious authorities to acquire the legitimacy needed to coordinate the affairs of the state. This is because, majority of the nation's 95 million people are conservative and religious²¹.

That the brotherhood won elections in 2012 underscores the high level of religious conservatism in Egyptian society. Even if the Brotherhood's political bungling ultimately resulted in their downfall in 2013, conservative Islamic attitudes are still widespread among a large portion of Egyptians. Egypt is also battling an ongoing Jihadist insurgency in the northern Sinai, and Jihadists have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to strike at the heart of the nation through a series of terror attacks in main cities. At a time of high tension between the state and the nation's Islamists, reasserting Islamic legitimacy is more crucial than ever for the Egyptian government, and it turns to the old playbook of accommodating conservative Muslim views on social policy to do just that²².

The government of Egypt uses Law 10 of 1961 to prosecute suspected homosexuals. The law equally forbids prostitution and debauchery and carries up to three years in prison and three years of supervised daily release²³.

Under President Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian government began imprisoning men suspected of having sex with men under the law in the mid-1990s. But there were no large-scale crackdowns until the Queen Boat raid in May 2001, when 52 men were arrested on a Nile party boat. Several dozen men were taken into custody and brutally

beaten. The arrests and charges were accompanied by massive media coverage. During two trials over the course of five months, several men were subjected to anal examinations and 21 of the 52 put on trial were sentenced to the maximum sentence, three years in prison and three years of probational observation. Mubarak's security men continued to entice and sentence gay and trans people following the Queen Boat raid, often by using police or informants as lures. In 2008, the government arrested more than a dozen men suspected of contracting HIV and, as the law permits, forcibly tested them and convicted some of them. The 2011 protests and Tahrir square revolution interrupted the government's suppression of LGBT community²⁴.

Members of the Egyptian parliament are vocally supportive of the government's repression of the LGBTQ community, and some hope to see it increase²⁵.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the very first casualty of accepting homosexual marriage would be the very definition of marriage itself. For many centuries and millennia, marriage means the union of a man and a woman. The concept of marriage consists of the ideal of a man and a woman committing themselves to each other in a lifelong union. Every other relationship and union outside this basic definition negates the ideal concept of marriage. Altering this definition of marriage will greatly shock the fundamental understanding of human social interaction and relationships in established institutions. The politicisation of homosexual relationships in Africa stemmed from the fact that many African politicians do not have the courage to speak openly in support of homosexuality. They, therefore speak against it in most cases because their religion and culture forbid it, and they do this to win elections. On the other hand, a few political actors in Africa speak in support of homosexual practice in order to establish a strong relationship with the West, knowing fully well that through Western hegemony, they could have their ways politically without the support of the majority of their people who detest homosexual practice. Consequently, politicians in Africa speak for or against homosexual practice based on their political alliance.

References

1. Anonymous, "S.A. is a Nation of Abusers, Stats Show." *The Citizen*. <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa>. Accessed 15th December, 2018.
2. D. Smith, "Why Africa is the Most Homophobic Continent" <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/23/africa-homophobia-uganda-anti-gay-law>. Accessed 12th November, 2014.
3. T.G. Herd, *Sexual Orientation: Towards Biological Understanding*, (Praeger: ABC Publications, 1996)
4. M.O. Fape, *Knowing the Fundamentals of Anglicanism*. (Sagamu: JOAS Press, 2009)
5. R.A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).
6. M. Somerville, "The Case against Same-Sex Marriage". <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/marriage/the-case-against-same-sex-marriage.html>. Accessed 12th August 2018.
7. J.P. Akinola, "Why I Object to Homosexuality and Same-Sex Union". <https://www.anglican-nig.org/priobj-homo.htm>. Accessed 14th, December, 2018.
8. G.O. Ajibade, "Same-sex Relationships in Yoruba Culture and Orature". <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>. Accessed 14th October, 2018
9. P. Samimi, and H.J. Jenatabad, "Globalization and Economic Growth: Empirical Evidences on the Role of Complementaries". *PLOS ONE*, 9 (4), 2014
10. F. Amy, and Owen, B. "Ugandan Politicians Celebrate Passing of Anti-Gay laws". *The Guardian* (2014). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/24/ugandan>. Accessed 15th June, 2018.

11. F. Amy, and Owen, B. "Ugandan Politicians Celebrate Passing of Anti-Gay laws". *The Guardian* (2014)
12. Amy, F. and Owen, B. "Ugandan Politicians Celebrate Passing of Anti-Gay laws".
13. Amy, F. and Owen, B. "Ugandan Politicians Celebrate Passing of Anti-Gay laws".
14. Amy, F. and Owen, B. "Ugandan Politicians Celebrate Passing of Anti-Gay laws".
15. L. Ferreira, How Many African States Outlaw Same-Sex Relations? (At Least 34). *Africa Check*. <https://www.africacheck.org>. Accessed 10th December, 2018.
16. D.M. Gordon, *Invisible Agents: Spirits in Central African History*. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012)
17. A.V. Klinken, "Homosexuality Politics and Pentecostal Nationalism in Zambia". *Studies in World Christianity*, 20 (3), (2014).
18. A. Issa, "The Politics behind Egypt's LGBT Crackdown". <https://www.huffingtonpost.com>. Accessed 15th December, 2018.
19. A. Issa, "The Politics behind Egypt's LGBT Crackdown".
20. A. Issa, "The Politics behind Egypt's LGBT Crackdown".
21. A. Issa, "The Politics behind Egypt's LGBT Crackdown".
22. A. Issa, "The Politics behind Egypt's LGBT Crackdown".
23. B. Allyssa, "2017 was a Bad Year for Egypt's LGBT Community. 2018 could Even Be Worse". <https://www.huffingtonpost.com>. Accessed 10th October, 2018.
24. B. Allyssa, "2017 was a Bad Year for Egypt's LGBT Community. 2018 could Even Be Worse".
25. B. Allyssa, "2017 was a Bad Year for Egypt's LGBT Community. 2018 could Even Be Worse".