Homosexuality in Africa:
The Myth of Western Decadence Exposed

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I.

Introduction to

Homosexuality in Africa

The issue of homosexuality in African culture remains complex and controversial. According to afrol.com, a website intent on presenting news from the African point-of-view, homosexuality is outlawed in 29 countries. Recently, leaders in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Uganda openly condemned homosexuality and are seeking measures to eliminate it. In extreme cases, same sex couples have been sentenced to death as approving crowds celebrated in the streets. (http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Gay/backgr_legalstatus.htm) With homosexuality gaining legitimacy in much of the developing world, these statements seem evermore disturbing.

Such disquieting reports beg far-reaching questions that offer no conclusive answers. Are such actions in violation of basic human rights? Should the Western world, through the United Nations, aim to protect homosexual individuals who feel threatened by the intolerant governments of Namibia, Zimbabwe or Uganda? Does Western intervention suggest a neo-colonial mentality while infringing on the sovereignty of such nations? Does the advancement of basic human rights take priority over the sovereignty of states?

This paper examines such questions. It will look at recent actions of intolerant governments in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Somalia; homosexuality in “traditional” sub-
Saharan Africa; gay rights movements in Africa; and the status of homosexuality in South Africa. It will offer conclusions drawing parallels between the actions of governments in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Somalia with pre-independence African colonial governments and recommending that the United Nations curb aid to countries in gross violation of such basic human rights.
II.

Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Somalia

Condemn Homosexuality

Recently, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Somalia have made radical statements openly condemning of homosexuality. This section will examine how the actions of these three nations are obvious examples of the homophobia epidemic sweeping through Africa.

The nations of Namibia and Zimbabwe are linked. Their presidents, Sam Nujoma and Robert Mugabe respectively, are close. According to a recent article in the Sunday Times (South Africa), many feel that Nujoma’s “rhetoric” on homosexuality seems to “mimic” Mugabes. (Amupadhi, 23) Most of their radical, intolerant sentiments regarding homosexuality stem from their anti-imperialistic, anti-colonial ideology. While their cause seems noble, their actions seem more ignorant. The Rainbow Project, an organization that represents sexual minorities in Namibia, charges that Nujoma “still pretends to operate from a position of ignorance about sexual diversity and identity...under the misconception that all gays and lesbians within this country are white.” (BBC, 28 August 2002) Despite such criticism, Nujoma and the rest of the government remains vehemently opposed to any issues regarding homosexuality. Some go so far to describe Nujoma’s anti-homosexual tirades as “[verging] on open hysteria.” (BBC, 28, August 2002) Such tirades trickle throughout his government. In September 2000, his Minister of Home Affairs, Jerry Akandjo, urged graduating police officers to “eliminate... [gays and lesbians] from the face
of Namibia.” (http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Gay/backgr_legalstatus.htm) While the legal status of homosexuality remains ambiguous in Namibia, Nujoma’s leadership has certainly hindered the advancement of gay rights issues there.

Despite Namibia’s extreme right views, local gay and lesbian organizations remain present and visible and contribute to the national discourse on the subject. (http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Gay/backgr_legalstatus.htm) The same is true in Zimbabwe. And like Nujoma, Mugabe has openly attacked homosexuality. However, homosexuality is illegal in Zimbabwe. Some individuals, including the country’s first president, have been prosecuted and convicted for their sexuality. (http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Gay/backgr_legalstatus.htm) In fact, Mugabe extends his anti-imperialist ideology to homosexuality contending that it is “not an African phenomenon but a Western decadency.” (http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Gay/backgr_legalstatus.htm). Mugabe, like many African leaders, feel that the rise of homosexuality in Africa stems mostly from Western influences. Many feel that it is indeed un-African. There is even a message board on AfricaOnline.com wholly dedicated to the question of whether or not homosexuality is an “African phenomenon.” (http://www.africaonline.com/jive/viewThread.jsp?forum=5&thread=111) Despite evidence to the contrary, Mugabe feels that there is not, and never was, a place for homosexuality in Africa. He remains highly vocal about his disgust for homosexuality, calling those engaged in such sexual behavior “lower than pigs and dogs.” (BBC News, 1999)

While Zimbabwe, under Mugabe, openly prosecutes homosexuals, Somalia has taken even more extreme measures to end homosexuality. One case, in particular, is highly disturbing. In February 2001, the Muslim court in Somalia sentenced a lesbian couple to death for “exercising unnatural behavior.” According to
afrol.com, Somalia has no laws regulating homosexuality. Rather, general legislation is based on the Shari’ah law (Islamic sacred law). Furthermore, this brutal case shows that there is “often little connection between legal status and legal practice.” Further criticism on the Muslim court is that it based its sentence on “wide formulations” and, to “a big degree, the cheering crowd outraged by the mere existence of homosexuality in Somalia.” This case illustrates the life-threatening implications of homophobia. Like in Namibia and Zimbabwe, it shows that homophobia (in its most dangerous incarnations) is not relegated to certain sectors of conservative thinkers, but is widespread throughout whole countries, trickling down from top government officials and sweeping through the rest of the population.

While this section concerns only three specific countries, it illustrates broader issues of how homophobia is gaining legitimacy in Africa. Similar statements have been made by leaders in countries ranging from Uganda to Guinea to Egypt to Kenya. The issue of homosexuality in Africa, like in most of the world, remains controversial. What separates Africa are widespread, seemingly accepted, and oftentimes life-threatening condemnations of homosexuality by some of Africa’s more visible leaders.
As noted in the previous section, many Africans feel that occurrences of homosexuality in Africa are “un-African,” and the result of Western influence. In other words, leaders like Mugabe argue that mere words, much less acts, relating to homosexuality were absent in pre-colonial times. This section refutes such ideas. In a report titled “Homosexuality in ‘Traditional’ Sub-Saharan Africa and Contemporary South Africa,” author Stephen O. Murray looks at the history of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa. He notes that …very little has been published about female or male homosexuality in post-colonial Africa. Absence of evidence...[should be taken as] an absence of research in contemporary, urban Africa. (Murray, 13-14). This section highlights a few of the many occurrences documented of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa to establish that homosexuality, contrary to what some believe, is not the result of colonization.

Murray further notes that especially where Western influences (notably Christian and Marxist) have been pervasive, there is now a belief that homosexuality is a decadent bourgeois Western innovation forced upon colonial Africa by white men, or, alternately by Islamic slave traders. Contrary to this belief, pre-Colonial evidence of homosexuality, while scattered and unclear, exists. In Ethiopia, for example, there exists reports of “uranism” and sodomy among the Semitic Harari people. (Murray, 13) Further evidence of homosexuality among Swahili speakers on the Kenya coast
exists. According to Murray’s report, “In Mombasa, both male and female homosexuality is relatively common among Muslims; involving perhaps one in twenty-five adults.” Murray stresses that rank and wealth is more important than gender. Most occurrences of homosexuality occur between a “younger, poorer partner” and an “older richer one.” The act can be brief, like prostitution, or “a more lengthy relationship.” Murray, drawing from other works, notes that while economics plays a key role in homosexuality, boys also engage in homosexuality on the basis of “effeminacy [or] prettiness.” He suggests, therefore, that more than economics might be invalid in such relationships. (Murray, 12-13) Clearly, from this evidence, one can conclude that homosexuality existed in pre-colonial Africa.

Furthermore, there is evidence that some African hold homosexuals in high regard. This is evidenced by the sentiments of some spiritual vocations in Western Africa. Among the Dagara of southern Bakina Faso, gay men act as gatekeepers. Dagara believe that survival of the cosmos (not just of the earth) depends on such gatekeepers. According to Malidoma Somé of the Dagara, a gatekeeper decides that he is a gatekeeper prior to being born. In speaking with one such gatekeeper, Somé finds that he “was very well integrated into the community.” (Murray, 14-15) This gatekeeper further notes that among the Dogon, “a tribe that knows astrology like no other tribe...the great astrologers...are gay” and [generalizes] that outside Christendom, “everywhere else in the world gay people are a blessing.”(Murray 15) While one might find fault in this particular gatekeepers generalizations, he succeeds in illustrating that homosexuality existed in pre-colonial African culture.
IV.

The Gay Rights Movement

and South Africa Today

Having established in the previous section that homosexuality existed in pre-colonial Africa, we will move on too briefly look at the state of the gay rights movement today. In the introduction, we saw that homosexuality is illegal in 29 countries. By contrast, homosexuality is legal in 10 countries. The legal status in many other countries is ambiguous. Likewise, the implications of vague laws are ambiguous. Nonetheless, many groups and even some countries are making great strides toward increased tolerance and acceptance of homosexuals.

The country of South Africa stands as a beacon for gay rights movements not just in Africa, but all around the world. There, homosexuality is not only legal and visible, but national legislation exists which bans discrimination on the basis sexual orientation. Furthermore, the Anglican Church of the Province of South Africa recently affirmed a resolution welcoming Gays and Lesbians. Bishop David Russel proclaims that Homosexuals have suffered cruel rejection in the past in society and especially so by the church. This has been wrong and the church acknowledges that it has been wrong! (East Cape News, 27 September 2002)
Furthermore, the country’s highest court recently ruled that gay and lesbian couples can adopt children. (Cauvin, 8) Clearly, South Africa is leading Africa towards a more tolerant and accepting future.

In other countries, gay rights organizations are speaking out, though their words are falling on deaf ears. In Zambia, for example LEGATRA, a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender organization has repeatedly failed in its attempts to registrar with the Zambian registrar of societies or raise money to promote its interests. (Numwa, 2000) As noted before, other gay rights movements in intolerant countries like Namibia and Zimbabwe have been ignited. Whether the fire will continue to grow remains an unanswerable question. Perhaps, as African development will allow more Africans to gain access to information and education about homosexuality.
V.

Conclusion

Clearly, the continent of Africa must make great strides in recognizing the need for increased tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality. As shown by the evidence regarding homosexuality in traditional Africa, allegations by leaders like Mugabe and Nujamo that homosexuality is a Western innovation corrupting traditional African beliefs is wrong. As a result, these leaders, whose anti-colonial battle cries form their ideological foundation, are hypocrites. Their rhetoric becomes a sort neo-colonization of the mind of their people. Like the colonists, they condemn a certain society for being backward and wrong by order of some false decree. It seems fundamentally wrong that while these leaders remain bent on anti-homosexual tirades, their people suffer in poverty. Their status as leaders has recently come under fire within their countries, and both are currently on the verge of retirement.

Meanwhile, the gay rights movement continues. To help them, countries like the South Africa where homosexuality is gaining daily more support, can work with the United Nations in spreading awareness of violations of human rights in different countries. United Nations support in regards to homosexual issues is not unheard of. Recently the UN criticized Tasmania in regards to homosexual issues. The UN, specifically the Human Rights Commission, can work with countries like South Africa and wealthy countries like Germany and the United States, to curb aid to
countries which are in gross violation of basic human rights. According to the CIA website, combined economic aid to Namibia, Zimbabwe and Somalia was around 387 million dollars. (http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/) The prospect of losing some or all of that money will force such countries to re-examine their tyrannical rhetoric on human rights issues in general, including homosexual issues.
Bibliography


