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# Interventions

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## Is Homosexuality Un-African?

Efemia Chela delves into lesser-known African LGBTQ+ histories and the colonial origins of transphobic and homophobic legislation across the continent. She highlights vital opportunities for solidarity between people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities to fight against economic misery, social marginalisation, and political repression experienced by all.

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INTERVENTIONS — ISSUE 02

# IS HOMOSEXUALITY UN-AFRICAN?

BY EFEMIA CHELA



## Introduction

Questions of whether something is African or not has been debated in depth for generations. To illustrate the complexity of this provenance issue, I would like to use an example of something which is perceived as intrinsically African but has more complex roots based in international trade and empire – wax print fabric.

This cornerstone of African fashion and décor carries regional names such as *ankara* (Nigeria), *kitenge* (East Africa), and *wax hollandais* (Democratic Republic of Congo). Yet, wax print designs originally derived from modern-day Indonesia. Indigenous designs were taken from the Dutch East Indies (as it was known from 1799–1940) and introduced to West and Central Africa by Dutch colonisers in the 19th century. Large-scale commercial trade in wax print on the continent appears to have started around the 1880s.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, wax print became 'Africanised' as textile-makers in the Netherlands, such as Vlisco who continue to operate today, relied on African merchants to suggest patterns that would be popular in their markets and which reflected the evolution of consumer tastes and style.<sup>2</sup> Traditional proverbs were selected and printed on the edges of the cloth, and based on their meaning, certain pieces became reserved for special occasions such as weddings and funerals. From depictions of African flora and fauna and everyday objects, to faces of key political figures, the fabric has been marked with elements representing African life. In this way, wax print has been imbued with African customs and become a point of African pride, intertwined with our lives and traditions.

It is unlikely that anyone would say that wax print fabric is un-African despite its foreign origins. I argue that we should have a similar approach to dealing with concepts such as gender variance, homosexuality, and other sexual identities.<sup>3</sup> While much of the English terminology used for LGBTQ+ people derives from foreign languages, African cultures have a wealth of indigenous terms to describe concepts such as gay (in Swahili, '*kuchu*'), lesbian (in Fante, '*supi-supi*') and transgender, third gender, or those who are gender-nonconforming (in Amharic, '*wandarwarad*'; in Hausa, '*yan daudu*').<sup>4</sup> Queer Africans have always existed.<sup>5</sup>

When people ask, 'Is homosexuality un-African?', what are they actually asking? It is possible that this single question includes a range of queries: how long have there been LGBTQ+ people in Africa, does gender variance exist in traditional African cultures, where does homophobia in Africa stem from and, why is there anti-LGBTQ+ legislation across the continent? This pamphlet is an intervention into these ideas and questions.

## **Sexual and gender diversity in ancient Africa**

Before the Scramble for Africa in 1884 changed the continent forever, Africans displayed various ways to fall in love, have sex, and build families. Archives that survived colonialism are filled with examples of 'both erotic and non-erotic same-sex relationships'.<sup>6</sup> As in heterosexual couplings, these occurred for many reasons including pleasure, personal choice, the acquisition of wealth and status, spiritual worship, and securing lineages. Homosexuality has a long history in Africa: near Guruve in Zimbabwe, ancient San cave paintings from around 2,000 years ago illustrate two men kissing.<sup>7</sup> Amongst the Zande group which existed in Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Congo, women in polygamous marriages with men were known to satisfy their sexual desires with the help of their sister wives, as their husbands spread between many homesteads were not always able to attend to their physical needs.<sup>8</sup> Women soldiers in the kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin) married younger women (often called 'female husbands'), created families, and the children born of these kinship structures were allowed to inherit wealth and property.<sup>9</sup>

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***YET IN OTHER CONTEXTS, LGBTQ+ PEOPLE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP STYLES WERE VALUED, REVERED, OR ACHIEVED A LEVEL OF SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY AND THEY LIVED PEACEFULLY ALONGSIDE THEIR HETEROSEXUAL PEERS.***

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A prominent historical figure, who we might describe as gender-nonconforming in modern terms, was Nzinga (1581-1663), the warrior king of the Ambundu Kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba (present-day Angola) who successfully fought off 17th century Portuguese intrusion in the region for decades. Dutch records describe how foreigners perceived Nzinga as a woman, yet she dressed in masculine clothing, ruled as a man and was 'surrounded by a harem of young men who dressed as women and were her "wives"'.<sup>10</sup> Her power was supported by the cultural context of the time, where gender was viewed 'as situational and symbolic as much as a personal, innate characteristic of the individual', which allowed for transition into different gender roles.<sup>11</sup>

In 19th century Ethiopia, amongst the Maale, there were '*ashtime*', people who were 'assigned male at birth' (AMAB) dressed femininely, performed tasks often reserved for women, and had sex with men. Some *ashtime* described their identity as 'neither male nor female' perhaps in the realm of agender, non-binary, or a third gender.<sup>12</sup> AMAB diviners, called '*zvibanda*' or '*chibados*' in Namibia, who we might describe as transgender or genderfluid in our era, performed rituals integral to their communities 'to guarantee bountiful crop yields and hunting, good health, and protection from evil spirits.'<sup>13</sup>

There were varying attitudes towards queer Africans in the pre-colonial era. Some sources describe hostility or pity directed towards LGBTQ+ people by the rest of African communities. Homophobia in Africa does predate colonialism. For instance, the behaviour of the aforementioned Zande women was conducted clandestinely as 'in the past a prince did not hesitate to execute a wife whose homosexual activities were discovered.'<sup>14</sup> Yet in other contexts, LGBTQ+ people and their relationship styles were valued, revered, or achieved a level of social acceptability and they lived peacefully alongside their heterosexual peers. Melville J. Herkovits who studied Dahomean marriage practices in the 1930s noticed that women who founded their own lineage with a female husband and brought in 'a buck' (a young man to help the couple produce children) were 'respected not only by the members of her own compound, but by Dahomeans in general.'<sup>15</sup> The buck, too, was proud of his role. Despite these differing attitudes, it does not appear that homosexuality was legally prohibited in any African societies, until they were made colonies.

## **Colonial inheritances in our legislation**

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, in their analysis of settler colonialism in North America, divide the concept into external and internal forms, and here we will focus on the latter and how it applies to the African context. 'Strategies of internal colonialism,' they write, 'such as segregation, divestment, surveillance, and criminalisation, are both structural and interpersonal.'<sup>16</sup> They describe how forms of control such as surveillance and schooling are used to enact colonialist ideals. By policing the kind of interpersonal relationships Africans could have with each other, colonial powers changed the nature of our families and managed our populations in ways that were convenient for them and reflected their romantic, religious, and cultural ideologies. Europeans marked diverse African intimacies as proof of our racial inferiority.

Homosexuality was never criminalised in Benin, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda. In the other 43 countries, colonial powers outlawed homosexuality and in practice, due to legal interpretations, gender variance or transgender people as well. Today, South Africa and Namibia are the only places where transgender and non-binary people can change their gender markers on legal documents.<sup>17</sup> South Africa is the only country to afford the LGBTQ+ community full rights to marry, adopt children, and protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and has done since 1994.<sup>18</sup>

While the wording differs from country to country, repressive laws introduced in the colonial era often refer to queer people and sexual practices or dressing transgressively as 'gross indecency' (Nigeria), 'acts against the order of nature' (Gambia), and 'unnatural offenses' (Tanzania).<sup>19</sup> Other countries such as Egypt, do not specifically ban homosexuality but use other morality provisions in the law to punish people for up to seventeen years if they are indicted on those grounds.<sup>20</sup> Even in parts of Africa that technically have legal freedoms, violence and prejudice towards sexual minorities exists.

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How did we get here?

Africa was subject to 'the imposition of settler heterosexuality' which prized monogamous marriage, cisgender identity and conservative British Victorian sexual mores.<sup>21</sup> One of the ways Western outlooks on romantic and sexual relationships gained prominence was through formal education. In Zambia, for example, from 1885 to 1945, 'nearly two dozen different missionary societies' were established by

denominations such as Protestant and Roman Catholic; the majority of them had affiliated religious mission schools.<sup>22</sup> Being educated in these institutions enabled Africans to access better socio-economic opportunities and opened up possibilities of class ascension and through Christian teachings at school, white settler morality and British ideas of respectability and normality proliferated. Post-independence, the legacies of internal colonialism remained intact in the law and the kinds of sexualities that are deemed legitimate and conversely, those that are believed to be immoral.

## **Decolonisation unfinished**

Many important battles were won during the independence era of the 1960s and 1970s. Greater economic access for the masses, the partial reclamation of African sovereignty, voting rights and an end to the colour bar, in countries where it had existed, were great achievements. However, many newly free African countries were restrictive in their conception of the ideal post-colonial citizen – it was assumed everyone would be cisgender and heterosexual. This political orientation, which was inattentive to intersectionality, affected rights for women and queer Africans and pushed those holding alternative identities further into the margins. From the 1990s, leaders such as former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and former Namibian President Sam Nujoma asserted that homosexuality was an ‘imported Western depravity’, a lie which continues to be circulated today.<sup>23</sup>

Many Africans remained ignorant about queer traditions because those narratives were maligned.<sup>24</sup> A large percentage of the LGBTQ+ population died during the HIV/AIDS epidemic from the 1980s onwards and our histories disappeared with them. While internal colonism was imposed by European powers, post-independence many Africans continued to perpetuate it, often unconsciously, by not questioning the status quo.

As a result, old colonial laws that criminalise same-sex activity and are used to discriminate against diverse forms of gender identity and expression remained.<sup>25</sup> The role of Christian and Muslim institutions which encourage intolerance of these groups is rarely interrogated since political leaders rely on the social influence of the clergy to bolster their power. There is also evidence to suggest that taking a hard-line stance against LGBTQ+ rights increases African leaders’ popularity with the public and encourages transnational alliances with foreign religious groups.<sup>26</sup> An incomplete form of decolonisation has occurred.



## A wave of intolerance in which we all could drown

Repressive laws render LGBTQ+ Africans 'vulnerable to violence at the hands of ordinary citizens as well as law enforcement officials.'<sup>27</sup> Out of 55 countries, 33 criminalise queer people. Some countries like Ghana had broad legislation which did not explicitly mention homosexuality but have recently sought to amend the law to more precisely target queer communities and allies who defend their rights on their behalf.<sup>28</sup>

A worrying trend for national sovereignty is the rising prevalence of new legislation across Africa, which fuses homegrown local homophobia with foreign evangelical funding and ideology. In the 21st century, Western influence has intensified existing state-sponsored homophobia in Africa. This form of neocolonialism mimics the initial colonisation of Africa through Christian missionaries. Since 2007, at least US\$54 million from right-wing U.S. churches has flooded the continent to fight 'against LGBT rights and access to safe abortion, contraceptives, and comprehensive sexuality education.'<sup>29</sup> Prominent anti-LGBTQ+ politicians such as Ugandan Minister of State for Trade, Industry, and Cooperatives David Bahati have received US\$20 million to campaign heavily for more draconian legislation. It is perhaps no surprise then that in Uganda, on 21 March 2023, a new law was passed that made 'homosexual acts punishable by death.'<sup>30</sup>

Despite allowing their LGBTQ+ citizens to enjoy civil rights in their own countries, from 2016–2020, 'US and European donors spent at least US\$5.1 million of taxpayers' money' on religious organisations who are mobilising against the same rights for LGBTQ+ people living in Ghana.<sup>31</sup> Several of the European countries implicated, such as Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden announced the implementation of a feminist foreign policy, during the period of the disbursement of these funds, which presents a typical level of hypocrisy.<sup>32</sup>

A ripple effect of homophobic laws is that they can eliminate support for those with HIV/AIDS and sex workers, two groups that sometimes, but not always, overlap with the LGBTQ+ community. Any outreach may be misrepresented as promoting homosexuality, and in the case of the new Uganda law, anyone 'abetting homosexuality' will be punished. With a continent already facing the repercussions of the US-imposed 'global gag rule' that decreased overseas funding for sexual and reproductive health and rights, this will certainly affect health care for both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual people alike.

Once particular sexual orientations are demonised and accompanied by harsh punishment it sparks witch-hunts which sweep many innocent lives into a whirlwind of destruction. A leader of the opposition party rising in popularity might be accused of

being gay, and imprisoned by the ruling party to prevent any competition at the ballot box. A businesswoman looking to expand her premises might accuse the business owner next door of being a transgender woman, and seize their property once they are arrested. Heterosexual people who possess an effeminate or macho demeanour may find themselves under suspicion and forced to provide evidence proving their innocence – a difficult task. Opportunities for extortion and blackmail abound; stereotypes about sexuality and rumours can be used to wreck lives irrevocably.

A society that encourages ordinary people to turn on their neighbours, surveil others' intimate lives and report on them to the state is one riddled with fear, paranoia, and intolerance. Authoritarian governments, as well as democratic but incompetent ones, thrive in this climate where they expand their powers at will and use sensationalist moral panics about LGBTQ+ people to distract from their own failings as leaders. Once the scapegoated community is suppressed, the target shifts to another group. Thus, it is worth thinking about sexual orientation and gender identity rights, not as standalone issues affecting an isolated minority, but ones which intersect with a number of grassroots demands for a better society, and as potent issues that can be weaponised to enact nefarious political strategies.<sup>33</sup>

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***HOMOPHOBIA - LIKE OPPRESSIONS  
SUCH AS RACISM AND SEXISM -  
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Rights for LGBTQ+ people are freedom of expression and freedom of association issues. Freedom in its fullest sense includes the right to privacy, and the right to love and build family structures of one's choosing without undue interference. Many of the African countries that restrict LGBTQ+ non-governmental organisations from registering officially also restrict social movements from organising freely, or the media from reporting independently, indicating that homophobia is linked to different forms of intolerance to diversity, whether gendered or political, which hold our development back.

Rights for LGBTQ+ people are a migration issue. Often transgender people 'are forced to migrate to seek refuge in countries that offer them better legal protec-

tion, perceived safety and access to [gender-affirming] healthcare.<sup>34</sup> Forced migration is one of the continent's greatest social and economic challenges: hostile countries from which people flee experience brain drain and broken families, while those who leave are affected by precarity and host countries grapple with fairly processing and integrating refugees. Instability in one region affects several.

Rights for LGBTQ+ people are an economic issue. Lack of social acceptance for queer people leads to their exclusion from the labour market and lower income. Legal protection from discrimination would promote better social inclusion and allow them to contribute to economic development which benefits all Africans. If queer people were better integrated into the workforce, there would be more incentive for them to participate in working-class struggle, and a united working class would have greater bargaining power.

Rights for LGBTQ+ people are an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist issue. Homophobia – like oppressions such racism and sexism – are intermingled with and entrenched by an economic system premised on structural inequality. Those who work to produce the wealth of the world do not benefit, while those who own capital reap all the benefits. The principal threat to the survival of humankind is capitalism that thrives on the economic and social reproduction of inequality. The poverty-stricken and working-class African majority have a common interest. Addressing one form of oppression can challenge the economic basis of the exploitation of all.

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## ***HOMOSEXUALITY HAS NEVER BEEN UN-AFRICAN AND NEVER WILL BE.***

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### **The challenge before us**

Nations such as Angola, Botswana, and Mozambique moved to decriminalise same-sex relationships in the last decade and stop old colonial laws from oppressing their modern citizenry.<sup>35</sup> This shows there is space for communities to evolve in their attitudes towards sexual minorities and redefine what is perceived as African. Homosexuality has never been un-African and never will be. Ugandan feminist scholar, Sylvia Tamale writes that decolonisation's main goal is the 'restoring the dignity of African people.'<sup>36</sup> A sincere decolonisation process, one that the exploit-

ed working majority in Africa all deserve, would repeal all the unjust laws, reject foreign influence in our law-making bodies, dismantle neocolonial economic and political systems, and bolster the dignity of all Africans, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. We must demand that our leaders divert their focus from persecuting LGBTQ+ communities and become inventive with policy and proactive with implementation to safeguard us from the effects of climate collapse, war over natural resources, hunger, and increased economic uncertainty.



## **About the author**

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## Endnotes

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- 3 By gender variance, I mean gender expression that does not match masculine or feminine gender norms. People who embody gender variance may consider themselves neither men nor women or encompassing aspects of both. I use this term to include people who are non-binary, agender, two-spirit, and others.
- 4 LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and the plus sign denotes others such as intersex, asexual and pansexual people.
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# Interventions

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