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Populist Hatred: Homophobia and Political Elites in Africa

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REBECCA HODES, JUL 25 2012

At a political rally in May 2008, the President of the Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, announced that gays had twenty-four hours to leave the country (BBC News, 2008). He stated: 'sinful and immoral practices [such] as homosexuality will not be tolerated', and that he would 'cut off the head' of any gay person found in the Gambia.

Homophobic statements of this kind have been made by a range of African statesmen over the last few years, key leaders of post-colonial liberation struggles – and thus national heroes – among them. In 1996, Namibia's Sam Nujoma stated:

'Homosexuals must be condemned and rejected. Homosexuality is a behavioural disorder that is alien to African culture' (Goering 2004; Operario 2012). And in 1999, Kenya's Daniel Arap Moi said: 'It is against African tradition and biblical teachings, I will not shy from warning Kenyans against this scourge'.

Perhaps the most renowned homophobic statement made by an African leader is that of Robert Mugabe, who said in 2011 that homosexuals are 'worse than pigs and dogs', and threatened gays that, 'We will punish you severely' (Laing, 2011). Why did Mugabe's statements garner the most attention, when similar sentiments have been expressed by numerous African statesmen? Perhaps because, in his attack on gays, Mugabe also criticized the West for sewing the moral depravity that homosexuality is believed to represent. Mugabe later branded David Cameron as 'satanic' for his suggestion that Western states should consider reducing aid to African countries that support homophobic discrimination. His statements therefore found a particular resonance with Western publics for their allegation of Western corruption, first in 'bringing' homosexuality to Africa, then for 'blackmailing' Africans who wish to cleanse their nations of this alleged sickness.

At the latest count, homosexuality was illegal in 38 African countries (Ottoson and ILGA, 2009). It was punishable by death in Mauritania, Sudan and northern Nigeria, and by life imprisonment in Uganda. This makes Africa one of the more homophobic continents. But, when viewed on a regional basis, legally entrenched homophobia in parts of Africa is comparable to that of the Middle East and Asia – in the sense that consenting sex between adults of the same sex is illegal, while the laws in other regions are more similar to Eastern Europe or South America – in that homosexuality is legally allowed, if not publicly condoned.

The notion of 'African homophobia' must be interrogated, implying, as it does, a form of ideological uniformity between nations which are, in most other respects, vastly different. Keguro Matcharia made this point in an article for *The Guardian* in 2010, in which he criticized the 'single story' of African homophobia, and explained that homophobia in Africa was shaped by a range of forces, 'including nationalism, globalisation, migration, ethnicity, and religion'. He wrote: 'African homophobia does not exist, nor does European homophobia, Asian homophobia or South American homophobia. Acts of homophobia occur in each of these spaces. We must question the idea that homophobia in Africa is unique. And we must understand homophobic acts within their specific local histories as these intersect with broader global histories.'

Macharia was correct to warn against banal, universalizing portrayals of homophobia in Africa, but his list of the

factors that explain its causes is so all-encompassing as to determine the reasons for virtually every socio-political phenomenon. His request for greater depth in reporting on homophobia in Africa thus reminded me of Andile Mngxitama's call for a blanket ban on requests for greater 'nuance' and 'complexity' in social science writing about Africa. So common are these in the conclusions and recommendations in academic and policy briefs that they are now a cliché.

The nature and the effects of homophobia in the African states mentioned above – Gambia, Namibia, Kenya and Zimbabwe – and the context and ideologies of the leaders whose remarks are cited – differ widely. There are, however, numerous similarities in the messages emerge contained within these statements. The first is that homosexuality is immoral, a sign of depravity or disease, akin to – or even worse than – the behaviour of animals. The second is that homosexuality is alien to Africa, a Western – or sometimes Arab – imposition that did not exist prior to African encounters with outsiders (Epprecht, 2008). The third message is a threat – that the public response to homosexuality will be violent and punitive, and that it will be deserved. Perhaps President Jammeh's threat to behead homosexuals was mere rhetoric – an attempt to boost his political popularity through a fusion of moral posturing and scapegoating. But it was also an eerie forewarning, and a promise that was eventually fulfilled, albeit transcontinentally.

In June of this year, Thapelo Makutle, a 23 year-old, openly gay man, living in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, was murdered in his home after an argument in a 'shebeen' (an underground bar) about his sexual orientation. The crime garnered international attention because of its brutality – Makutle had been followed home by his assailants, his throat was slit so deeply that his head had been almost severed from his body, and part of his genitals cut off and stuffed into his mouth. It is also the latest in a series of homophobic hate crimes in South Africa, including the stabbing and setting alight of Neil Daniels, the stoning of Zoliswa Nkonyana, and the stabbing and virtual beheading of Hendrietta Thapelo Morifiand (Davis, 2012). It is unclear whether these incidents signal a national increase in homophobic hate crimes, or whether a combination of civil society interest, public awareness, and the heightened focus of the media has rather revealed the extent and nature of these crimes. What is clear, however, is that homophobia has a long and brutal history in South Africa, and that its political and public expedience spans both the Apartheid and post-Apartheid eras. The remainder of this article focuses on the case of South Africa, which has among the globe's most progressive laws regarding homosexuality, but is also the site of a recent spike in homophobic hate crimes as well as other ongoing and vociferous forms of public opposition to gay life.

Homophobia in historical context

Apartheid paired its racist ideology with an obsessive focus on sexual conformity and the policing of 'errant' sexual behaviour. The emergence of a supposedly 'permissive' sexual culture in the West from around the 1970s saw the passage of a spate of laws regarding aspects of sex, fertility and morality – on abortion, contraception, divorce and homosexuality. As with Apartheid legislation in general, these laws aimed to assert the material and ideological dominance of the state. But their focus on the intimate and subtle issues of morality and sexual behaviour reveal something else about the state's ambitions to control even the private lives of its subjects, and to fortify itself against the moral dissolution that seemed to be spreading in the West.

The Immorality Act of 1957 (later renamed and revised as the Sexual Offences Act) went further than criminalising interracial sex. It also outlawed prostitution and consensual sex between people of the same gender (Retief, 1995, p. 100). In 1985 the racial provisions of the Act were changed, but its other restrictions remained. Thus, while the state accepted and gave legal sanction to sex across supposed racial lines, gay sexuality remained legally and politically intolerable to white South Africans at this time.

The question of whether this homophobia was echoed and endorsed by key actors and members of the anti-Apartheid resistance is controversial, challenging nationalist framings of African National Congress (ANC) history as characterized by only the highest commitment to the ideals of freedom and equality. Hugh Mclean and Linda Ngcobo (1995) have written about the emergence of a gay movement in the townships in the wake of the 1976 uprising. They argue that black anti-Apartheid activists used the opportunity provided by their political mobilisation to resist the sexual conventions of their elders, resulting in greater sexual liberation. But others contest this, arguing that the

necessity of moral consensus among leaders of the anti-Apartheid movement, and fear of security police exploitation of any supposed weakness, resulted in the repression of gay identity and the denial of queer behaviour in black communities.

Simon Watney (1987, p. 26) argues that homosexuality is usually understood and represented as either an *absence* or an *excess* of 'manliness'. In the South African context, it appears that the latter perception is primary. The word 'stabane', a slander denoting gayness, means a hermaphrodite when applied to a lesbian (Khumalo, 2005, p. 292), and a man who wishes to be a woman when referring to a gay man (Gevisser, 1995, p. 70). Mark Gevisser describes the homophobia of South African liberation movements as the result of deep-seated beliefs about the rightful assignations of gender within the struggle. The 'effeminate, limp-wristed *stabane*' subverted these assignations and therefore threatened the ideology upon which they were based. This ideology was founded on black consciousness notions that colonialism had emasculated black men by disempowering and enslaving them, and that the struggle against Apartheid was a fight to reassert black virility through the reclamation of social, economic and political rights. In the discourse of the anti-Apartheid struggle, homosexuality was portrayed as a result of Apartheid's unjust labour systems, the perverse outlet of sexually deprived priests, or the decadent lifestyle choice of white gay activists seeking to align themselves with the anti-Apartheid movement in order to validate their cause (Gevisser, 1995, p. 69).

As documented by Saskia Wieringa and Ruth Morgan (2005), in their study of seven sub-Saharan African countries (including South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe), homosexuality is widely perceived to be a 'western import'. Wieringa and Morgan have recorded how, prior to colonial contact, a range of same-sex practices existed between both women and men in numerous African societies, and that these were socially sanctioned (for example in the cases of women marriages of rain queens or traditional healers). They argue that colonial policies and the missionary imposition of Victorian social mores led to a ban of these practices. Same-sex relations were increasingly regarded as sinful or depraved, in keeping with European beliefs of the nineteenth century. Wieringa and Morgan conclude that, far from being a colonial import, same-sex practices existed in Africa long before the onset of colonialism, and that it is homophobia rather than homosexuality that has been imported from the west.

But while research increasingly shows that same-sex practices are indigenous to many African societies, numerous South African political leaders have homosexuality as a Western perversion. The statement of ANC Executive member, Ruth Mompati, in London, August 1987, is probably the most famous example. In an interview with journalist and gay rights activist, Peter Tatchell, Mompati said: 'I hope that in liberated South Africa people will live a normal life. I emphasise the word normal… Tell me, are lesbians and gays normal? No, it is not normal. I cannot even begin to understand why people want lesbian and gay rights. The gays have no problems. They have nice houses and plenty to eat. I don't see them suffering. No one is persecuting them… We haven't heard about this problem in South Africa until recently. It seems to be fashionable in the West.'

In this statement, gay nationals were part of a privileged social class, assumedly white, whose behaviour did not warrant social or legal acceptance, and whose existence in South Africa was the spin-off of a European trend, alien to 'native' communities. That these beliefs continued to command public currency was evident during Winnie Mandela's kidnapping and assault trial of 1991, during which gayness was portrayed as 'a decadent white contamination of black society' (Gevisser, 1995, p. 70). Homophobic slander even bridged the political divide between the ANC and political rival the Pan-Africanist Congress when, in 1992, Bennie Alexander (the PAC's leader) stated: 'Homosexuality is un-African. It is part of the spin-off of the capitalist system. We should not take the European Leftist position on the matter. It should be looked at in its total perspective from our own Afrocentric position.'

By the mid-1980s, homophobia provided a common ground for both black and white interpretations of the origin and spread of HIV in South Africa. Both white and black communities blamed gay promiscuity for the spread of HIV (Gevisser, 1995, p. 31). The media described the disease as the 'gay plague'. By March 1985, however, the press reported that HIV had made its way into the black community of Soweto. True to the public understanding of HIV as a gay disease and of gayness as a foreign phenomenon, these articles described HIV-positive Sowetans as black gay men who had been infected by their white sexual partners (Gevisser, 1995, p. 50).

Homophobia in democratic South Africa

South Africa is a forerunner among African states regarding the rights and protections it gives to gays and lesbians, and it is also the first country in the world to offer explicit legal protection to gays and lesbians (Gevisser and Cameron, 1995, p. ix). In his first public speech as the newly-elected president of democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela stated that the persecution of gays would no longer be tolerated under the new political dispensation.

In December 2006, amidst fervent opposition from a range of interest groups, South Africa became the world's fifth country to legalize marriage between partners of the same sex. The Civil Union Bill was greeted with jubilation by human rights activists, who framed the Bill as the natural outcome of Section 9 (3) of the Constitution which forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The Bill's opponents, on the other hand, argued that the Bill was undemocratic because most South Africans do not believe in equal rights for gay people. They maintained that legislation on sexual equality had been pushed through by gay lobbyists and sympathetic jurists who were out of touch with the beliefs and values of the general population.

Also in 2006, and during his tenure as the Deputy President, Jacob Zuma told an audience: 'When I was growing up an *ungqingili* (a gay) would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out.' *The Sowetan* quoted Zuma as saying that same-sex marriages were 'a disgrace to the nation and to God'.

Zuma later apologized for his comments, explaining that he had made them in his private capacity as 'a man', rather than a political leader. The political pressure on Zuma to revoke these statements, so clearly at odds with the South African Constitution, was exerted by a range of forces including powerful figures within the ANC Youth League. The exact reasons for this pressure are unclear, although they likely relate to the ANC's desire to avoid the negative repercussions that attend when high-raking leaders make statements that threaten or contradict the values of the Constitution.

In 2005, Ruth Mompati wrote a brief statement about her homophobic comments of 1987. She believed that her remarks had ultimately had a 'positive outcome', because the ongoing debate that they sparked had led to the inclusion of 'sexual orientation' in the Bill of Rights, and later the Constitution.

Some scholars have argued that the gay rights clause was 'slipped quietly' into the interim Constitution, and that certain elite figures within the ANC, who shared political networks with civil society activists, progressive jurists and gay rights advocates, exercised their dominance to ensure that the clause went unchallenged (Luirink, 1998). Subsequent events have shown that there are important figures within the political elite who remained unconvinced by the ANC's official commitment to non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. A recent example of this is the public call by Contralesa (the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa) for a review of the section 9 of the Constitution, which precludes discrimination on the basis of sexuality. In explaining Contralesa's position on gay rights, its President, Patekile Holomisa, stated: 'the ANC knows that the great majority of South Africans do not want to promote or protect the rights of gays and lesbians' (Davis, 2012). Patekile's invocation of popular support for homophobia among the South African public to support Contralesa's call for a Constitutional Review reveals the expedience of homophobia as a moral and political enterprise. Despite South Africa's constitutional protections and other explicit legal sanctions, gays in South Africa continue to be persecuted on the basis of their sexuality and society remains, in general, deeply intolerant of gay sexuality.

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