**Out in Africa; “Take your eyes off my thighs”**

**Let’s talk about Colonisation, Baby**

Sex in Africa. African sex. Gays, lesbians, bi’s, dandies, tommy boys, Les Sapeurs…..all in Africa. The terms alone are explosive, heavy with colonial history, religious castigation, racism, institutional fear, moral panics, repressed fantasies and projection. The continent is alight as right and left try and define, legalise or ‘own’ the true essence of sexuality.

Since Kenyan Intellectual Binyavanga Wainana came out in January 2014[[1]](#endnote-1), African sexuality is once again up for grabs. Belligerent African leaders make more insane pronouncements. Homosexuality, (often mis-characterized as “unnatural carnal acts” or “acts against the order of nature”), is currently a crime in 36 countries in Africa[[2]](#endnote-2). Attacks on gays and lesbians have increased as vigilante groups take matters into their own hands, recently four Nigerian men have been whipped and tortured in Bauchi. In Response European bureaucrats threaten to withdraw vital funds[[3]](#endnote-3). The World Bank is withholding $90 million from Uganda, Norway suspending over $8 million while Sweden, the US, UK and the Netherlands are reportedly reviewing their donor commitments[[4]](#endnote-4).

The poles are in danger of ossifying, as cynical incompetents attempt to ‘dismiss’ LBGT rights as a Western post colonial interference.

These binaries are pointless[[5]](#endnote-5).

It’s always been there, this obsession with African sex. The Black (Hottentot) Venus. Leni Riefenstahl’s image of beautiful men in Benin anointed in makeup for ‘traditional’ festivals, recent ‘exotic photos’ of the effeminate Nuer men. The dandified Congolese gents ‘Les Sapeurs’- technicolour in bright suits for Guinness adverts… the Nigerian men Yan Daudo who dress as women (but operate as heterosexual men)… [[6]](#endnote-6).

Real, pulsing women and men who love each other, are not the stuff of elite photo exhibitions of adverts ‘celebrating’ a fictional African sexuality. Not the stuff of HIV victim tropes either, or laws about the length of their skirts or the appeal of our booty.

As Melanie Judge, LBGT activist in South Africa writes,

“ Homophobia in Africa represents a set of complex and intersecting issues …violent inscriptions of race, sexuality, ethnicity and gender took place under colonialism and are linked to present-day norms around sexuality. This history, and how sexuality is racialised, are mostly entirely absent in discussions on homophobia”[[7]](#endnote-7).

For women living as lesbian, queer, bi or undecided, the terrain is bumpy, and coming out often requires a great deal of courage, conviction and bravery. There are subtle, and tangible state manoeuvres and physical threats for women who love each other in East Africa. Getting stripped down in the street, or harassed for wearing short skirts, being accused of witchcraft and/or getting raped, is real. Lesbian visibility is lower than gay men’s. The services available, particularly for women, are not prolific. Says Melanie,

“Sexual violence against lesbians needs to be located within the broader context of sexual violence against women, in relation to which the criminal justice system, and the police services in particular, systematically fail women survivors. This is partly because of dominant discourses in society that represent men has having sexual license to access women’s bodies. Also, the objectification of women, as sexual objects at the service of male desire, reinforce the ‘common sense’ position that women will be raped”.

**Out In Africa**

Some activists believe the situation in East Africa echoes the USA and Europe in the sixties, where sex is strictly a ‘private affair’. Mussevini famously said he would never openly kiss his wife of 36 years. Amanda\* is small, Ugandan, in her early 20’s, has thick rimmed glasses and rather shy…months of phone calls, emails, friends vouching for my authenticity, the ‘queer web’ and I’ve tracked down women in East Africa who are willing to talk

“Very few people are fully out of the closet and I can only hope for the best for them. …Only a few close friends know that I am gay. In 2012 I found an LBGT organisation, when I went to the first meeting I was in awe. Everybody there was like me, men and women; it was like a rainbow heaven to me!”

She sits fiddling with her blackberry, and shows me the sites she uses: whatsapp, snapchat, and the facebook page she uses to hook up with women… lesbians in Nairobi…. There are harrowing evocative blogs, for example:

“Her beauty hacked through me like a machete…. I knew she was the sort of woman I would want to start a family with”[[8]](#endnote-8).

We scroll through photos of women pouting at the camera, looking suspiciously straight (almost completely femme).. and she remarks that it’s not always easy to determine what is genuine, and what’s a set up. The content is raunchy, and along with some (factually dubious) accounts of University students, who fund their studies by working as ‘bar girls’ or hostesses which cater for women, the local media in East Africa still has work to do, to promote ‘the reality’ for lesbians and queer women.

“It’s a very big deal, still, in my society, to reject getting married, so many people I know go through it anyway, then have affairs on the side, or live these secret lives, or join the army or a convent. Of course we have gays and lesbians in Africa, of course it’s not a ‘Western Disease’ – We’ve had gays and lesbians in our culture forever, including the famous King (Kabaka) Daniel Mbwaka II, (in Uganda) who openly had male lovers, opposed the political colonial British rule, and perhaps was responsible for provoking those colonial laws that actually legalised homophobia!”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Portia\* is an older woman, now based in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, she explains, laughing often,

“It gets much easier if you’re out, and older, ironically. And financially independent. Perhaps that’s the most vulnerable time for young lesbian women here, there are no role models, nothing saying ‘it’s ok, you’re not crazy. You’re not the devil. There’s no difference in the ‘amount’ of lesbian women in the cities, or the rural areas”

She continues,

“What is different are levels of education of our communities, visibility, and that affects whether you’ll be targeted. You could say that the attacks on gays and lesbians in Mombassa (a coastal area in Kenya) are because these are areas where there are complex economic problems, and issues around Muslim fundamentalism anyway. Homophobia and violence are just smokescreens, to cover up for the huge problems our devious politicians have”.

For lesbians and gay men, out or not, the assaults come from diverse angles, with invented plots to ‘recruit’ lesbians in African media and churches. After the infamous Westborough Baptist Church evangelical homophobic hate speak, came a very worrying tendency to conflate terrorism with homosexuality. Or the absurd suggestion that lesbians had ‘infiltrated’ the Kenya Sports scene[[10]](#endnote-10). Musevini’s recent Anti-Homesexuality Act, recently accepted in Uganda, and Nigeria’s legislation[[11]](#endnote-11), legitimise a climate of hatred and hysteria.

Lorna Dias of GALCK (Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya) says,

“The situation for any persons perceived as 'different' (read non-hetero-normative) has been precarious, our tommy boys have been attacked / assaulted in various places in the capital Nairobi by assailants known and unknown simply because of their gender expression”.

She continues,

 “I take my father's advice - I don't argue with fools... (on a less abrasive note though) the information's out there... and there are two types of audiences 1. the converted and 2. the narrow minded. Race, class, ethnicity make not an iota of difference to the price of tea in China. Maybe we should throw intelligence combined with exposure at the equation and see what happens?”

Since the murder of Ugandan gay activist David Kato in 2011, bill is being constitutionally challenged. Resistance is growing every day[[12]](#endnote-12). Yvonne Odour, a Kenyan, notices there are far more people coming into Kenya seeking political asylum, because of their sexuality.

“The Kenyan organizations through GALCK have partnered with a number of organizations in Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda. GALCK organized a demonstration outside the Ugandan high commission to protest the signing of the Anti-homosexuality bill. We are working with organistions like IceBreakers, SMUG from Uganda to handle the number of LGBT refugees streaming into Kenya.”

However ‘sexual exiles’ often have a herculean task proving that they are being targeted solely on the basis of their sexualities, and for the IOM, the situation is relatively new, and legally complex. For ‘havens’ like Kenya, there are still pitfalls. Yvonne continues,

“Although Kenya is relatively liberal, there are no dedicated lesbian clubs. Our culture permits women to be affectionate in public, nevertheless, you can’t be openly sexual. Since 2010 we turn straight clubs into gay clubs by force! The gay community just rally up, walk into a new club make the straight/homophobes so uncomfortable they leave and soon enough we've taken over!”[[13]](#endnote-13)

For LBGT activist with Human Rights Watch, Monica Tabengwa, it’s essential to get more LBGTI organisations registered and offer positive meaningful role models to the next generation LBGTI. She explains why lesbian bi and queer women often do not have the ‘luxury’ of being gay without it becoming a political thing. The support and social/professional solidarity between lesbians, transpeople, and gay men is very apparent:

“We’re minorities, and we are strongly affected by these human rights issues. Lesbians, gay men, trans people, we are all marginalised groups, so there’s a sense that we just should stick together, we have to, for survival, strength and community. And for access to services condoms and advice. There’s also the important issue that many men who have sex with men are also incredibly vulnerable to HIV and related illnesses. The gay and lesbian groups can work in conjunction with these organisations, benefiting not just from the medical care and support, but from the fact that these are safe spaces, where your sexuality, and your whether you work as a sex worker- straight or not- is not going to be condemned.”

**The Face of Queer Africa**

The East African lesbian and bi scene is impressive and striking for many reasons: It is extraordinarily diverse, and some Queer Africa acknowledges religion. Despite the church’s problematic relationship with sexuality, It includes women who actively identify as lesbian, church-going, and religious. The ‘movement’ is noticeably free of the divisive splits that often bedevil European and North American movements. There are even churches that provide sanctuary and protection for LBGT people, in the most unlikely situations. [[14]](#endnote-14)

Says Gertrude, who is now in exile in the US, (because of homophobic attacks)

“There is no contradiction between me being a Catholic, and me being a lesbian. The church (in Africa) is rampantly, aggressively whipping up support for hating gays and lesbians, but that is not my faith, and I refuse to believe that is really what my God wants. My god is tolerant, and accepts lesbians and gays.”

There are many who feel the church has overstepped the mark by galvanising such homophobic sentiments. Famously, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Ugandan Bishop Senyonjo are vocally supporting gay rights, challenging the timidity of other Anglicans (although has had his state pension cut, for his pains)[[15]](#endnote-15). South Africa continues to be the confident ‘Big Mama’ of lesbian and Gay rights, and many East African lesbians turn to for ICT, ideas and inspiration. Says Melanie Judge,

 “I think for some African political elites there is an appetite for the hysterical, homophobic rabble-rousing that the evangelical US movement facilitates in their countries. It serves as a convenient deflection from the real issues their citizens face, including, amongst others, basic livelihood needs being met; unaccountable leadership; inequitable development; and state restrictions on democratic participation and inclusion.”

The idea that homosexuality is ‘Western’ seems to have more purchase in Europe than in Africa. All the interviewees dismiss this tack. Says Yvonne,

“ I am sooo tired of hearing this argument. What I say is whether it's western or not, we are here now, and we are African! This is our Africa too… we’re here.”

**“Corrective Rape”**

Many, perhaps most, rapes against lesbians go unreported. And local media does not report lesbian homophobic attacks, accurately or enough. So far there have been no convictions at all in East Africa for men attacking lesbian women. The legal systems need to change, to acknowledge the frequency of rape, and attacks motivated by homophobia.

The offensive term ‘corrective rape’ is highly problematic. Says Melanie Judge,

 “Only one rape in nine gets prosecuted. The rape of lesbians is an act of punishment and control. The term “corrective rape” tries to justify for attacks on women who defy socially prescribed gender codes. The term subtly reinforces this, and diverts attention from the fact that sexuality and gender cannot be “corrected”. This misconceived “explanation” disguises vicious homophobia and misogyny. The disproportionate media focus on the images of the broken bodies of Lesbians does not take us any closer to the actual reasons for these crimes..”[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Lessons the North must Learn- Listen to LBGT Africa**

Lesbian, bi and transgender queerness, outside of South Africa, is emerging. Queer Africa has a rich history of diverse sexualities, unrestrained by Western categories. Queer Africa is more tolerant, polyvocal, more mature, embraces religion, works closely with gay men and understands solidarity and community action. It might be funny, irreverent, rude, brave. Photographer Solange Dos Santos sees Mozambique exemplifies this:

“ I love this about Mozambique, it’s very tolerant, there’s a big transvestite and lesbian and gay scene. My next project is gay and lesbians in Mozambique. We have dancers who are trans who compete professionally as women, they identify as female, live, dress and work as women. It’s not drag. They appreciate and love the cleavage, the female body, the dance, the pasada…. you see it as sexual, it’s not. It’s about appreciation, the latin-African fusion, beautiful women’s bodies…”

There is still work to be done, not least in educating the public, globally. For those in Europe and North America, the messages are helpful, and clear. Sensitivity is needed. Says Lorna,

“If the world is wondering why we have been deathly quiet amidst our own version of hellish craziness, it's been very deliberate, a lot has been going on beneath the surface and we would like to keep things relatively low key for just a while longer….”

Says Melanie,

“The Global North has to be led by local human rights defenders and activists, who have a much keener sense of the in-country political terrain and the implications of particular interventions. Local actors also have to bear the brunt of some of the grandstanding, and self-serving interventions by global North players – who sometimes intervene based solely on their own interests, and with scant regard for the negative consequences on the growth of LGBTI movements in Africa”.

For Sitawa and Yvonne, the key is awareness, wrenching open the closets, discarding taboos. Both want a world where sexual education, and sexual choices and possibilities are taught in schools, which inevitably will contribute to declining suicides, and less depression and violence against young people coming out. Yvonne writes cheerfully

“That's my dream...and I'm sure it is every queer person’s in Africa. A day when my sexuality will be about me and not the whole country and government! When politicians will not use my life and those of my friends to gain political millage.”

The ‘Global North’ can continue to provide steady and consistent support and finances, and a mainstreaming of the legal and social issues. Amnesty has been vocal, saying recently, “These poisonous laws must be repealed and the human rights of all Africans upheld.[[17]](#endnote-17)” Combatting the isolation of vulnerability ofLBGT groups across Africa is also vital, whilst recognising that most people can’t get on a plane and walk away from harassment or death. Monica says we in the Global North mustn’t get side-tracked :

“Listen to us, let us direct and shift the agendas, define the paradigms. Accept that we are the ones living these lives, and will pick up the consequences. We need and appreciate your funding, your interest and without it, lives are lost. But these are **our lives**, so listen to us.”

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Without whom this would not have been possible.

* Some Names have been changed.
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