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LGBT Challenging and Reproducing Sexual Hegemonies: Stories from the Kenyan LGB Communities

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Abstract

LGBT studies in Kenya are unpopular since they are considered 'uncomfortable territory'. This paper covers stories of people in same-sex relationships against a backdrop of homophobia in Kenya. It is based on a study which explored same-sex practices in traditional Kenyan communities, homophobia and same-sex practising individuals. The methodology involved focus group discussions with 20 elders, and face-to-face questionnaires administered in eight towns through a random sampling of 605 people. Twelve same-sex practising people were selected through purposive sampling. They gave their stories with consent, and names were changed to maintain confidentiality. Research findings revealed that homophobia was more common in older than younger individuals. Same-sex practising people and gender minorities accounted for 22 per cent of the population subjected to questionnaires. From the same-sex practising stories, ten of which are featured here, it was found that the respondents had gone through difficult phases in their lives where they struggled to find acceptance and fulfilment. They had challenged explicitly or implicitly, the sexual hegemonies within the wider society breaking away from either a heterosexual existence or finding a more balanced harmonious existence, where they could allow themselves to question and explore their sexualities, in relationships of their choice.

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Résumé

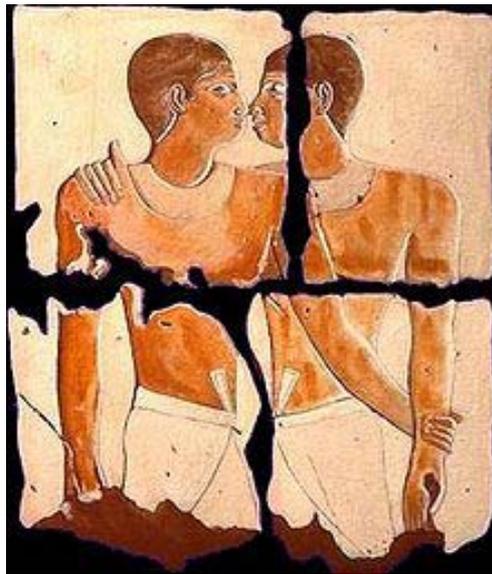
Les études relatives aux LGBT au Kenya sont impopulaires car elles sont considérées comme une « zone de non confort ». Ce papier met en exergue le vécu de personnes homosexuelles dans un contexte d'homophobie au Kenya. Il est fondé sur une étude qui a exploré les pratiques homosexuelles dans des communautés kényanes traditionnelles, l'homophobie et les personnes homosexuelles. La méthodologie comportait des groupes de discussion avec 20 anciens et des questionnaires directement administrés dans huit villes selon un échantillonnage aléatoire regroupant 605 personnes. Douze personnes homosexuelles ont été sélectionnées par un échantillonnage raisonné. Elles ont consenti à raconter leurs histoires sous des noms d'emprunt afin de préserver l'anonymat. Les résultats de la recherche ont révélé que l'homophobie était plus fréquente chez les personnes les plus âgées que les plus jeunes. Les personnes homosexuelles et les minorités sexospécifiques représentaient 22 pour cent des enquêtés. Les récits des personnes homosexuelles, dont dix sont consignés ici, ont révélé que les répondants avaient connu des périodes d'adversité dans leurs vies, et où ils ont dû lutter pour forcer l'acceptation et le respect. Ces personnes avaient contesté explicitement ou implicitement, les hégémonies sexuelles au sein de la société au sens large, soit en rompant avec une vie hétérosexuelle ou en trouvant une existence harmonieuse plus équilibrée qui leur permet de remettre en question et d'explorer leur sexualité dans des relations de leur choix.

Background

Instances of same-sex relations in traditional societies in Kenya have been cited by several researchers. Murray and Roscoe (1998) wrote that about thirty Bantu societies provide for marriage between two women, including a dozen Kenyan ethnic groups. Among these were the Kisii, Nandi, Kamba, and Kikuyu. As these scholars point out, in other parts of Africa this was characteristic of status of women, such as royals or political leaders, but in East Africa, it ordinarily represented a surrogate female husband who replaced a male kinsman as jural 'father'. The wife may bear children for her husband, in whose clan line they then belong. In other cases, women marry women to achieve economic independence, and a bride price is paid. These autonomous female husbands are accepted as men in male economic roles. This dual-female marriage was economic, and illustrated the separation of sex and gender in African societies (Murray and Roscoe 1998). Murray and Roscoe (1998) also reported that women in Lesotho engaged in socially sanctioned 'long term, erotic relationships' called *motsoalle*. Evans-Pritchard recorded that male Azande warriors in the northern Congo routinely took on young male lovers between the ages of twelve and twenty, who helped with household tasks and participated in intercrural sex with their older husbands.

Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum were ancient Egyptian royal servants. They shared the title of Overseer of the Manicurists in the Palace of King Niuserre during the Fifth Dynasty of Egyptian pharaohs, c. 2400 BCE, and are listed as 'royal confidants' in their joint tomb. Niankhkhnum means 'joined to life' and Khnumhotep means 'joined to the blessed state of the dead', and together the names can be translated as 'joined in life and joined in death' (see photograph below). They are believed by some to be the first recorded same-sex couple in history. The proposed homosexual nature of Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum has been commented on by the popular press, and the idea seems to (partially) stem from the depictions of the two men standing nose to nose and embracing. Niankhkhnum's wife, depicted in a banquet scene, was almost completely erased in ancient times, and in other pictures Khnumhotep occupies the position usually designated for a wife' (Wikipedia, 2012).

Figure 1: Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality> (accessed 23-09-12)
Illustration from photograph © 1999 Greg Reeder

Boellstorff (2007) mentions same-sex desire and sexuality in Africa and how these have over time been interpreted by others. See also Aarmo (1997); Donham (1998); Morgan & Wieringa (2005) and Renaud (1997). Previous researchers (such as Latour, 1993 and Lykke & Braidotti, 1996)

have clearly separated analysis regarding biological sex, gender/gender roles, sex/sexuality and same-sex relations. Lykke (2010), however, states that 'gender/sex in its intersections with other power differentials and identity markers can pass not only as a "proper object" of study but that it need not have a fixed and essentialized understandings or definitions'. There has been a danger of oversimplifying ' "Gender" and "Sex" studies and making them reductionist' (Butler 1997). For instance, some researchers prefer to clearly separate 'Gender studies' and 'Gay and Lesbian' studies where the former are defined as a socio-cultural gender whilst the latter have to do with sex in the sense of sexuality. According to Butler, 'sexual practices and identities are gendered, and therefore, interesting for "Gender Studies"'. Likewise, "'Lesbian and Gay Studies'" become unsustainable when they neglect the meanings of gendered subjectivities and sexed embodiments, and focus on sexuality only' (Butler 1997).

A critique of past studies, particularly studies on same-sex relations in traditional communities, is that they frequently seem to be simple explanations, usually 'objectively' given, as to why persons of the same sex or gender would enter into same-sex relationships. Butler (1990) speaks of the danger of the 'god-trick'. She mentions that 'researchers, politicians and citizens alike always think, act and speak *in media res*', i.e. from hindsight or whilst in the middle of a situation. Though people may try to remain objective, they are always fooled by the god-trick – i.e. the illusion of 'looking in' from the 'outside'. In actual fact, people, including researchers, often interpret objects of study through a coloured lens which consists of their own prejudices, cultural leanings, preferences or world views.

Hegemonic discourses present themselves in the rules, norms and values of societies. They are, however, not always accepted as 'God-given law'. People who identify as homosexual or same-sex loving have over several centuries defended their identities and in the past century established a movement, highly focused on questioning, redefining, deconstructing and reconstructing the hegemonic descriptions of their 'category' as described by Foucault (1978). Furthermore much of the contest against hegemonic discourses revolved around questioning the seemingly 'God-sanctioned' 'common good' that same-sex loving persons apparently did not fulfil, namely that of procreation (Lykke 2010; Bryld 2001; Bryld and Lykke 1982).

This paper focuses on stories of same-sex practising individuals and on the ways in which they have challenged and re-produced sexual hegemonies. It is part of a larger study, 'Uncomfortable Territories', which

explores the prevalence of same-sex relations in traditional communities, people's perceptions of same-sex practices and stories focusing on lived-experiences of same-sex practising individuals.

Methodology

An ethnographic investigation was undertaken in order to ascertain the existence of same-sex relations in traditional Kenyan society. The research team conducted focus group discussions with elderly men and women in every community. These elderly men and women were identified through purposive sampling. The researchers identified a focal point within the community, which acted as the entry to the community. The larger study involved 605 people who were subjected to face to face structured interviews with open and closed-ended questions. A stratified random sampling technique was used in order to ensure that the respondents were drawn from different age groups and sexes. Purposive sampling was used to identify twelve individuals in same-sex relations whose life stories are presented in this paper. The individuals were subjected to interviews as a way of exploring their life experiences and challenges.

The study was conducted in five major ethnic communities: Abagusii, Akamba, Maasai, Luo, and Mijikenda. The towns visited were Gede, Malindi, Mombasa, Nairobi, Makueni, Kisumu, Kajiado, and Kisii.

Findings

There were denials mostly from older respondents that same-sex practices had existed in traditional communities and many respondents lacked awareness of its existence (362 out of 605 or 59 %). Yet, as many were Christians, they also noted that homosexuality must have existed in the past because the Bible mentioned it. There were a few older respondents (over 50 years – 10 % of the sample population), however, who acknowledged the existence of same-sex practising people in the past. About 22 per cent of the sample population identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Against this backdrop of homophobic statements and a lack of knowledge we recorded twelve stories of LGB persons (Muchoki et al. 2010). Ten of these stories are featured here showing the struggles and triumphs experienced by the men and women. For ethical reasons, the names of those interviewed have been changed in order to protect them.

Stories from the same-sex community

Rebecca

Rebecca is Luo. She was born and grew up in Migori and has resided in Siaya, Kisumu and Nairobi. She is in her forties and says she has felt attracted to the same sex since she was very young. She grew up in a strict Seventh Day Adventist family. She says that she was attracted to her female primary teacher, admiring her very much whilst doing physical education in the playground. Rebecca is also quick to note that she has three other cousins, one of whom is transgender and two who are bisexual. Rebecca also says that she was attracted to boys too. In high school, she met girls similar to herself. Rebecca was an active choir member and sports woman. Later on, she married a man and had a beautiful daughter, but the marriage did not last, due to infidelity on the husband's part. Then she decided to focus on being happy and to follow her heart. She has since been in three long term relationships with women and does not intend to date men again. Recently someone told her family that she is a lesbian and Rebecca faced a lot of discrimination from her brothers and sister. They declined to talk to her, where previously they were warm and open. Her sister agreed for Rebecca's daughter to visit her, but not Rebecca. This caused a lot of tension between them. But slowly, Rebecca says that some of her family members are starting to accept her for who she is and some of her cousins even ask curious questions about what it means to be lesbian.

Irene

Irene is Kamba and was born in Kitui, and now resides in Nairobi. She is thirty years old and had a difficult beginning in Ukambani. She became an orphan whilst still very young and well wishers became her guardians and raised her. After many years of searching for people like herself, Irene managed to locate a local lesbian and gay organization and through it, the local lesbian community. Irene has been very actively involved in building up her skills as a young professional administrator and helping the LGBT community. She says that poverty, discrimination and both internal as well as external homophobia have made the lives of many gay, lesbian and transgender individuals very difficult. Some resort to alcohol and drugs and even petty theft just to make ends meet. Recently Irene recalls, she went to a local health centre for treatment and was abused and discriminated against once the nurses and doctors became aware that she identified as a lesbian. The reason they knew she was a lesbian was because of her insurance card which carries the name of a

prominent LGBT organization. During several visits she was asked by the doctor, 'Are you one of them? What kind of drugs do you take? Do you sleep with men? Do you have a girlfriend? How do you do it? Do you need counselling? Do you believe in God? Can I pray for you?' He also proceeded to tell Irene she should buy a Bible and should change her ways. Irene felt very uncomfortable during her visits to the health clinic and felt as though she would never be accepted for being who she is. Today Irene says she is in a stable relationship and always treats her girlfriends well. She also feels that she is making a valuable contribution to the larger society in her work with LGBT people.

Amanda

Amanda was born in Sweden, has Luo and Swedish heritage and resides in Nairobi. She is a human rights activist. Amanda is in her mid-thirties and has had feelings for girls since she was eight years old. She was very attracted to her best friend in those early years but even though she told her about her feelings, her friend did not understand the depth of those feelings until many years later. Amanda continued to feel deeply attracted to girls even in primary school but did not act on them. In Fourth Form of High School, she fell in love with a girl younger than herself and a deep friendship blossomed. However she says that she did not sleep with the girl. It was not until her early twenties that Amanda started dating men and though she loved them, she still felt attracted to women. She says that when her last boyfriend found out that she was bisexual, he grew so insecure that the relationship broke up. Amanda also felt that the men she dated were hoping for her to be the feminine-skirt-wearing, long-haired woman of their dreams, but that the image did not fit her own personal construct of herself. She was more comfortable with trousers and short hair. Furthermore she feels that relating emotionally with women is easier than with men, and the sex is great. Amanda describes herself as technically bisexual but a practising lesbian. This is because she knows that she is attracted to both women and men but feels more satisfied in relationships with women. Amanda has also had problems with the term 'lesbian', feeling that it did not sound right. If she could create another label for herself, she would.

Jane

Jane is Kikuyu, born in Kiambu and living in Nairobi. She is in her late twenties or early thirties. She says that she became an orphan very early in her life and had to move from one orphanage to another while she grew up in Nairobi. Jane was attracted to girls from early on, but every

time she showed any kind of affection to girls or tried to kiss them, she would be thrown out of the orphanage. Eventually she had a child with a man, and two other children followed. Jane is unemployed and because she never completed her education, she finds it very hard to find work. So she says she has turned to sex work, offering services to both men and women. However she is currently trying to make ends meet through manual labour. She says she feels deeply attracted to women.

Danicho

Danicho, a 27 year old Luo man, was born and resides in Kisumu. He says that he is not 'out' to his family about his sexual orientation. He has a boyfriend and he says that the larger LGBT community in Kisumu admires his relationship because it seems very strong and stable. He attributes this to good communication between the two of them. Danicho is a medical student and says that when ever his dad brings up the topic of marriage, he tells him that he wants to finish his studies and maybe even do his doctorate. His father apparently married at age 25. Fortunately his father is understanding, but Danicho still feels pressured by society into conforming and marrying, because many of his friends are married.

James

James is Kikuyu and was born in Mombasa, and now resides in Nairobi. He is in his thirties and grew up in Mombasa but later moved to Nairobi. He says he felt attracted to other guys from early on. He also has a cousin who is a lesbian. James has been working in the modelling industry, teaching models how to strut the catwalk and also had a boyfriend for a few years. He says that his boyfriend was very abusive to him, often hitting him and verbally insulting him. Eventually they broke up. James is now very active in highlighting the challenges faced by gay men, and he offers guidance and advice to people who are HIV positive.

Ngacha

Ngacha is Kikuyu and resides in Nairobi. He is in his forties and says that after he returned from further studies in the 1980s, he was earnestly searching for the LGBT community, only to be surprised to find many gay men hanging out around the public toilets in the central business district. He says the gay men met to socialize but some also formed very strong long term relationships. They came from as far as Garissa and other towns. Ngacha has been actively involved in the human rights arena, offering consultative advice and support on issues like HIV and general health of the LGBT community.

Larry

Larry is Luo, grew up in Nairobi. Larry is twenty-seven years and says that he grew up with his grandmother and uncle and family. He says that he too has always been attracted to men and boys as he was growing up. His sexual orientation was unfortunately exposed in the media and when his uncle found out, he was so angry, that he kicked Larry out of the house and withdrew financial support for his university degree. For a while Larry, says he depended on hand outs and support from his friends. Fortunately his grandmother never gave up on him and she eventually bridged the rift between him and his uncle. During some of his discussions with her on homosexuality, he says that his grandmother mentioned the name 'Nyalhana' (he is unsure of the exact word) which she said meant bisexual people or those who did not conform to any gender identity – who made advances to people of one sex and sometimes to the other sex.

Felicity

Felicity is Kisii. She used to live in Nairobi and over the years has been faced with numerous homophobic incidences. First she had a flower selling business but when clients found out that she was a lesbian, they shunned her, so she was forced to look for other work. She got a job teaching children at a school. One day her employer found out that she was a lesbian and fired her on the spot, claiming the children's parents would not allow her to teach. She also called her a sinner.

Then Felicity set up a business making bead craft work, employing some people to help her. She started to export the crafts two years ago. Business was hard and in 2009 she was attacked by a homophobic person in a disco in Nairobi. She was hit on her forehead and bled profusely. She ended up in hospital, received several stitches and had bleeding in and around her eye. Around this time, while she was in hospital, her crafts shop was broken into and she lost her materials and documents. The assault case went to court, but Felicity had to disguise herself so as to avoid the media attention. Her friend, who was witness to the attack, abandoned her for fear of the media attention and the security risk. She had been represented by a lawyer, whose services had been used by another gay man because of his willingness to work with LGBT people. It turned out that this lawyer had been deregistered, yet he had continued to offer services. He even demanded payment and at one point suggested to Felicity that she pay off the prosecutor so that he would be more interested in pushing her case in court. Felicity says that she refused to do this. Eventually she stopped engaging his services.

Finally she made one last attempt to try to get her business back on track and went to the US to sell her crafts. The accumulated trauma she had been carrying with her prevented her from doing much and she was stuck for a while without money, relying on hand outs from people. She sought asylum and does not want to return to Kenya until she has rebuilt her life.

Jody

In her early forties, Jody is Kikuyu. She lives in Nairobi, and runs an IT business. She says that the story of her exploration of her sexuality and sexual orientation is short and that she has not quite made up her mind about it. She says that she did not initially have feelings for women when she was growing up. She had always been a staunch Christian. However, when she returned from the US, she was pursued equally by several Kenyan women and men. She dated men at first but got tired of them. Eventually she started getting interested in the women and even found some of them attractive. Jody says after dating both men and women, she grew tired and was none the wiser about where her affiliations lay. She says she is bisexual but still not sure which side of the fence she will land with regards to sexuality and orientation. Jody would like to have children some day and so is still working on her 'baby project'.

Discussion

The stories above show similar patterns. The gay men or women often start feeling attracted to people of the same gender in their early years but are often afraid to act on them. Later in life some succumb to societal pressure to conform and date or marry persons of the opposite sex. This is reflected in other studies such as KNCHR (2012) and Beyrer et al., (2011) as quoted by Mbote (2011). Interestingly, the case stories above, however, show that most of the individuals have resisted this pressure. In the case of bisexual persons, the marriage may or may not be a result of force – sometimes out of love. Feelings of attraction to people of the same sex, however, still persist even during these heterosexual relationships. When the heterosexual relationships end these men or women may feel no real obligation or inclination to try again. Instead they move on to explore their more dominant attractions, i.e. to people of their own gender. In a sense they defy the predominant sexual hegemonies in their communities. More in-depth information on bisexuality may be found in Klein's 'The Bisexual Option' (Klein 1993).

Of interest is the case of Danicho who exerts his power to get his way. By telling his father, who may not have gone on to university level, that he must finish his undergraduate and even postgraduate studies, Danico

is taking advantage of the socio-cultural value of 'education' to counter his father's value of 'marriage'. Though a man, Danico's confidence may well be a reflection of a phenomenon in which education levels affect the age at which a young adult woman gets married (Jejeebhoy 1995). Being a strong man in his late twenties, with an advanced education gives him leverage over his father. Jody is interesting here in that she chooses not to make a decision about where her affiliations lie regarding sexuality or sexual identity. She keeps all her options open – marriage, children, and a satisfying sex life. Again this could also be a reflection of education, being a strong determinant for age of marriage and choices made in life (Jejeebhoy 1995).

Jane's story is special in the sense that she seems to have been open and free about her sexuality from very early in her life. She received numerous hard knocks from unkind and 'mis-educated' people at various stages in her life but must have found courage and perseverance from within herself to push on. Felicity, Rebecca and Irene too have overcome economic, physical and emotional hardships – realities for many LGB persons in Kenya (KNCHR 2012:94), but have persisted in finding same-sex partners throughout their lives. A life-long identity with ones sexual orientation has been found with several researchers (including Shere Hite 1976, 1981, 2004). Larry's story shows that an open discussion regarding non-hegemonic sexuality can take place between a grandmother and her grandson, and that acceptance can be found in the home even when one least expects it. Amanda's story exposes the insecurities that people feel when confronted with a phenomenon that negates normative sexual hegemonies. This is common amongst people who fear or hate homosexuals or bisexuals, dating back around 1200s during the life of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Amanda's discomfort with wearing frilly feminine clothes and conforming to normative gender behaviour means that finding a partner will be determined by that individual's open-mindedness and ability to see beyond external appearances. James and Rebecca's stories show that sexually non-hegemonic persons can appear in numbers within extended families and may not be isolated cases. Still the development of sexual orientation is complex (Rosario et al. 2006). James's story also indicates that relationships between same-sex loving persons are as pre-disposed to the complexities of gender-based-violence as heterosexual relationships are. All stories, ranging from the youngest individuals to the oldest, Ngacha, show the intergenerational existence of same-sex loving persons who continuously challenge sexual hegemonies throughout their lives.

Conclusion

All the individuals have made positive contributions to society. By confronting homophobic speech, and actions from persons in their lives, these gay or bisexual men and women eventually build the courage to stand up for themselves. They explore same-sex relationships, with both negative and positive results. Ultimately, however, they work towards being in full control of their relationships and lives. The pursuit of happiness can be a painful one but has its rewards in the end.

This study recommends that in order for us to get a deeper understanding of the issues relating to same-sex relations in Kenya, it is important to carry out more studies into same-sex loving persons from the Abagusii, Maasai, Mijikenda communities. In addition, a further in-depth study on the lives and experiences of these and other individuals from the LGB community would expand the knowledge we currently have on same-sex relations. Lastly, more in-depth interviews of elderly persons over 60 years on sexuality in traditional communities would help us put same-sex relations in Kenya into a proper historical context.

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