

**LGBT
ACTIVISM AND
'TRADITIONAL
VALUES':
PROMOTING
DIALOGUE
THROUGH
INDIGENOUS
CULTURAL
VALUES IN
BOTSWANA**

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Introduction: Opening doors

In July 2013, LeGaBiBo (The Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana), Botswana's national LGBT organisation, made history in this normally unnewsworthy southern African state by participating in the country's first meeting between LGBT activists and *dikgosi* (traditional 'chiefs'). In what was calculatingly billed as a *pitsô* (traditionally, a public consultation called by a clan or village leader), *dikgosi* from all the administrative districts of Botswana met LeGaBiBo activists and discussed the experiences and needs of sexual minorities in their communities.

In the atmosphere of state-sanctioned homophobia that, to judge from the media, appears to have swept across Africa in recent years, it may seem surprising that a consultation between LGBT activists and traditional leaders should take place at all. That the meeting was respectful and constructive will perhaps seem shocking. Yet it not only went off without incident but ended with the majority of the chiefs requesting follow-up meetings.

To be sure, the *pitsô* was not a love-in. Officially, the convener was the Botswana Network on Law, Ethics and HIV/AIDS (BONELA), the legal 'umbrella' for LeGaBiBo, which has been repeatedly denied registration as an NGO, and the agenda was given out simply as 'minority rights'. Some of the chiefs were uncomfortable to find themselves in a meeting on *sexual* minority rights, but their response was nevertheless polite and attentive. This surprised even one of the organisers, who later admitted he had worried "there might be tension, resistance and ... backlash by these reservoirs of our culture and tradition" (Ndadi, 2013). Instead, as the LGBT participants at the *pitsô* spoke about their experiences of discrimination and rejection and made the case for fairer treatment, "the *dikgosi* were visibly touched ... and wanted to hear more" (Ndadi, 2013).

The *pitsô* was not a one-off. It was the latest, and arguably the boldest, move in an ongoing LeGaBiBo strategy to leverage the potential of indigenous Setswana cultural values as an approach to LGBT activism. Since 2008, the organisation has held a series of *dipitsô* with teachers, nurses, public health officials, police and legal officers, ministry of labour officials, and others to explain LGBT issues and lobby for non-discriminatory policies and services.

Although it may seem a small point, simply calling the meetings *dipitsô* is a not unimportant part of this strategy. Labels invoke values and conventions; a meeting is just a meeting, but, in Setswana, a *pitsô* is something more. Traditionally, it is convened by a *kgosi* or some other authority figure– the term derives from *go bitsa*, meaning to call or summon – and therefore implies a certain duty to attend and pay attention (Bolaane, 2014). More important, according to tradition, "in a *pitsô*, every person is allowed to speak and every person's opinion is respected" (Mosweu, 2013).

Traditional values and the ‘un-African’ argument

African ‘traditional values’ are usually seen as obstacles to LGBT rights, indeed as enemies of freedom, progress and ‘modernity’ in general, but LeGaBiBo’s strategy is based not just on a conviction that these values can *promote* as well as obstruct LGBT equality, but that neglecting them is counter-productive. As the facilitator of the chiefs’ *pitsô* explained:

“Batswana traditional leaders are often viewed as conservative [and] unaccommodative ... [but] thinking this way ... has only encouraged keeping them ... in the dark. ... [B]elieving that traditional leaders are unable to understand more controversial challenges in their community [discourages] ... dialogue.”

—(Mosweu, 2013).

The idea of leveraging traditional beliefs and practices for seemingly untraditional objectives addresses the key challenge facing African LGBT activism at the present moment – just getting a fair hearing. There is simply not much space for constructive public discussion of LGBT issues. In government departments, policy makers are often privately sympathetic but live in fear of politicians and public opinion. The media meanwhile distort and sensationalise anything about sexualities, while marches and demonstrations, if they are even permitted, are more about group solidarity and symbolic defiance than two-way communication. In workshops, film festivals, or art exhibitions, we are mostly preaching to the converted. The result is an echo chamber that struggles to make headway among the general population and leaves the movement vulnerable to moral panics.

The underlying reason for this vulnerability is the perception that ‘gayism’ is a neo-colonial Western import inimical to authentic African values and cultures. Ironically, this attitude is itself an import. Many pre-colonial African societies had their own ways of accommodating sexual and gender non-conformity, as numerous studies have shown (Epprecht, 2008), and the criminalisation of ‘sodomy’ was a colonial innovation. The roots of contemporary African homophobia are nineteenth-century European prudery and racist fantasies of ‘primitive’ black sexuality, yet, despite this irony, the power of the ‘un-African’ argument seems undiminished.

Since the 1980s, the liberal discourse of universal human rights has enabled African LGBT communities to recognise themselves as oppressed minorities entitled to equal citizenship, created a powerful sense of distinctive LGBT cultural and social identities, and empowered dynamic, outspoken LGBT activism throughout the continent. However, outside South Africa, there has been little concrete progress towards either formal or actual equality. The resilience of the un-African argument has been a key obstacle, and human rights discourse is not, in itself, capable of addressing it. As a discourse originating in the West, the concept of human rights is vulnerable to the same reactionary nationalism. Homophobic appeals to ‘tradition’, ‘African culture’, and the ‘rights’ of communities take their power from well-founded resentment of a long, and continuing, history of Western cultural imperialism.

The phenomenal growth of LGBT activism in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years has had a tremendously positive effect on the pride, confidence, and assertiveness of African LGBT communities. In many countries, Botswana included, the tiny, underground groupings limited to large cities of ten or fifteen years ago have grown into dynamic national organisations with sophisticated networks and highly developed theoretical positions and political skills. However, the new visibility and boldness of LGBT activism in Africa – together with intense publicity around military ‘don’t-ask-don’t-tell’ policies, same-sex marriage, and other LGBT issues in the West – have transformed the LGBT question in Africa from a largely private matter into a hot-button political issue connecting with intense post-colonial anxieties about social cohesion and public morality.

Under the guise of protecting traditional African values, politicians and moral entrepreneurs have quickly learned how to stoke and then exploit these anxieties to their own advantage. In a predictable feedback loop, the backlash is sensationally reported on in the West, and NGOs, politicians, and celebrities – often without consulting African activists – respond with angry public statements and even threats of aid boycotts. This highly publicised outrage, sometimes tinged with neo-colonial or, arguably, racist talk about the civilised vs. the primitive, gives many Africans the impression that ‘gay rights’ are a Western pet project, especially when other human rights abuses in Africa fail to provoke such outrage. The effect is to reinforce the perception that LGBT identities are foreign intrusions and that LGBT activism is a new form of neo-colonial bullying. African activists feel the counter-productive effects on their work and, in many cases, their own security.

Meanwhile, as the African LGBT movement matures theoretically, Western self-righteousness is increasingly seen as part of what Teju Cole (2012) calls the ‘White Saviour Industrial Complex’. For Cole, Western indignation and threats, no matter how sincere or well-meant, convey an assumption of civilisational superiority, yet the West’s enlightenment about LGBT rights is itself only a few years old. More and more African activists are, therefore, coming not just to reject Western interventionism but also to question the value of Western strategies of activism and even, as the Ugandan activist and legal scholar Sylvia Tamale argues (2011), the concepts of sexual identity and social self-understandings on which these strategies rest.

Rethinking traditional values: The case of Botswana

But what are the alternatives? A constructive way forward, especially after the most recent setbacks in Uganda and Nigeria, is not easy to imagine. However, since the backlash is driven by misguided nationalism and an African version of reactionary culturism, the alternatives need to be *African* ones. This is where a rethinking of tradition offers a possible way out of the impasse, especially in countries, such as Botswana, where the leveraging of certain indigenous values has already been a factor in postcolonial nation-building.

There are three key terms in modern Setswana social-political culture: *botho*, *morêrô*, and *molomo*. *Botho*, literally 'human-ness' (better-known in its Nguni form, *ubuntu*), is an indigenous southern African philosophy of what it means to be a social being. It is far too subtle and complex to try to define here, but the important thing for my argument – and for the Botswana state's historical deployment (or appropriation) of the term – is its emphasis on the individual's social obligations to the community and vice versa. *Morêrô* is *botho* as a political principle. It refers to the obligation of the state, community, and extended family to make decisions through consultation and consensus. *Molomo* (literally 'mouth' but, in this context, usually translated as 'dialogue') is the process of consulting and building consensus.

During the independence movement and early years of nation-building, these concepts were essential in constructing the perception of a single Setswana national identity and have continued to be used both to justify progressive public policies, such as the 2001 national rollout of free ARV treatment (the first programme of this kind in Africa), and to provide the ruling elite with a claim to authenticity. As a result, *botho*, *morêrô*, and *molomo* are seen by Batswana as the foundational principles of an indigenous and authentic Setswana form of governance and cultural cohesion. Formally, Botswana is a Western-style adversarial, majoritarian democracy transplanted into Africa with some concessions to pre-colonial polities, such as a dual Roman-Dutch/customary legal system. However, its comparative prosperity and social peace since independence, which Batswana are very conscious and proud of, are widely, if often uncritically, accepted as the rewards of staying true to *botho*, *morêrô* and *molomo*.

Successive governments have made the most of this, and over the years have tailored these values into a sort of official state ideology touting cooperation, social responsibility, dialogue, and consultation as national virtues. Thus, all Batswana 'know', for example, that *ntwa kgolo ke ya molomo* – 'the highest form of war is dialogue' – and *mafoko a kgotla a mantle otlhe* – 'all words are beautiful in the *kgotla*', (the traditional community council or town meeting) – and there are many similar proverbs and catchphrases that promote the virtues of listening, consulting, and respecting difference.

In daily life as well as in politics, these principles may be more honoured in the breach, but they *are* honoured. Their prestige can therefore be used to pry open doors that would otherwise stay shut and to create space for dialogue that would not otherwise be possible. Thus, despite the fact that sex 'against the order of nature' remains unlawful and that LeGaBiBo has been repeatedly denied legal registration, the organisation has been able to use the concept of *morêrô*, in particular, as a kind of open sesame to coax respectful hearings from a variety of community leaders, opinion shapers, and policy makers. The strategy is undramatic and has not made any headlines – avoiding headlines is part of the point – but is probably responsible for the otherwise incongruous protection of sexual orientation in the new Employment Act (2010). It has probably also helped prevent the backlash against LGBT activism seen in many other African countries, enabling LeGaBiBo and newer LGBT organisations to operate freely and an open LGBT social and club scene to thrive in Gaborone.

Traditional values and the way forward

Anyone familiar with the situation of African LGBT communities only from reports in the Western media could be forgiven for thinking that African societies are uniformly and fanatically hostile to sexual and gender nonconformity, or even, as National Public Radio's political correspondent casually asserted at the height of the furore over Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill, "innately homophobic" (Hockenberry, 2014). Yet, despite the criminalisation of same-sex relations in most African countries, many African LGBT, not just in Botswana, live more or less openly, while African LGBT organisations are increasingly vocal and visible, and consultations between activists and government officials take place even in countries with the most homophobic reputations. Without downplaying the anxiety and suffering caused by oppressive laws and political and religious demagoguery, the reality is that African LGBT cultures and activism are growing, diversifying, and making progress, slow and patchy as the progress may be. The current wave of homophobia is, after all, a reaction against these successes.

To presume, however, that African societies are – or ought to be – on an inevitable path toward contemporary Western understandings of what it means to be sexually different would be both arrogant and counter-productive. Human rights may be universal, but the sexual identities constructed in the West over the past century or so are not, and the popular misconception that 'gayism' is a neocolonial Western phenomenon is probably the single most formidable barrier to the acceptance of sexual difference in Africa. Thus, although the LGBT movement in Africa has had great success developing itself and building a sense of community using Western models of sexual identity and activism, it has made little progress in terms of mainstream public or political acceptance. Progress beyond LGBT communities and allies depends on finding ways to harmonise Western-style demands for sexual 'minority rights' with indigenous concepts of family and community obligations and in particular on a recognition that reactionary homophobic appeals to 'tradition' and 'African culture', oppressive and totalising as they may be, are based on deep-seated – and well-founded – anger at Western arrogance.

Leveraging positive and tolerant examples of traditional values in order to open doors and create space are just the beginning of a process that can only be incremental. And although no progress can be made until the doors *are* opened, there will be problems harmonising even inclusive and humanistic traditional concepts such as *botho* with the idea of universal human rights. The modern Western concepts of privacy and individual autonomy on which the human rights system has been built are at odds with *botho's* emphasis on the centrality of the community and one's obligations to it. From this emphasis, proponents of *botho* typically extrapolate a duty for the individual to conform to community standards in order to be entitled to protection, respect and acceptance.

In this interpretation, the community has a legitimate interest, and a 'right' to interfere, in matters that in Western human rights discourse fall absolutely under the individual's right to privacy. In Canada in 1968, Pierre Trudeau famously declared that the state had no business in people's bedrooms, but in *botho* the community, and by extension the state, arguably have precisely that right. In traditional society, of course, there had to be ways of accommodating individuals who for one reason or another did not conform to sexual norms, but acknowledging an out-and-proud LGBT identity was not one of them (Epprecht, 2013). Thus, no matter how many doors the leveraging of traditional values opens, the same values could still prevent any further progress from being made.

In some ways, *botho* is a more subtle and flexible philosophy than that of universal, 'inalienable' rights and autonomous individuals. For one thing, the complex, negotiable interplay between individual autonomy and community obligations in *botho* is arguably more realistic about human nature and the ways societies work. It is also less subject than human rights discourse to an abstract absolutism that can impede social justice in practice. However, by adopting the modern Western concept of sexual *identity*, seeing themselves as a minority, and moving from sexual non-conformity to sexual *dissidence*, African LGBT communities have rejected traditional forms of tolerance based on mutual pretence and 'keeping up appearances' for an open political contest over legal recognition and rights.

The problem is that the rules of engagement in this contest have been based largely on a Western model of identity politics. However, the social codes and relations of power in post-colonial African societies, though they may superficially resemble those of Western modernity, have been shaped by conflicts between indigenous norms and colonial and neo-colonial innovations into quite different things. We need to be very cautious about assuming that African LGBT communities are on an inevitable path towards Western liberal multiculturalism.

Ultimately the goal of full citizenship for LGBT Africans will depend on reconciling adopted Western concepts of personal identity, individual autonomy, and innate sexual orientations with indigenous ways of thinking about personhood and community. Western ways of talking about sexuality feel foreign, inauthentic, and threatening to many in Africa who might otherwise be open to the idea that their sexually different fellow citizens belong in the community and deserve acceptance and respect. The struggle for equal sexual citizenship in Africa is typically seen by Western activists as a conflict between individual rights and state oppression. But African leaders would not be able to use 'gayism' as a whipping horse if LGBT *rights* were not opposed by most citizens. Politicians know very well that they can rely on the issue to create politically convenient moral panics. This is why Western denunciations and threats are counter-productive and Western-style activism invites a dangerous backlash. An approach that builds public support incrementally by leveraging and reinterpreting locally meaningful cultural values may be the only way to make progress for the time being.

Neither traditional African values nor 'innate' African homophobia accounts for the extreme reactions against LGBT self-assertion we are now seeing in some countries. Rather, it is postcolonial modernity that is responsible, with its anxieties about nationality, citizenship, and gender, and its contradictions between individual and collective self-understandings and between individual and community rights. I am not advocating that African LGBT communities settle for traditional reticence and invisibility instead of full citizenship rights. Epprecht (2013, p. 16) is obviously right that "*going back to a village life where a certain amount of sexual diversity could happen under cover of a fictively universal heterosexual[ity] ... is not ... realistic ..*". The challenge that African LGBT activism poses to traditional forms of tolerance is unavoidable. But so is the backlash, unless African LGBT communities can develop strategies that do not inadvertently feed this backlash *and* that satisfy the legitimate desire of both gay and straight citizens in a postcolonial society for forms of social and cultural practice that are fully modern yet do not feel alien or imposed.

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