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Presentation Draft

- **Melissa Hackman**, University of California Santa Cruz: *Morality, citizenship and belonging: An “Ex-Gay” Christian ministry in Cape Town, South Africa.*

This paper addresses debates on the “Africanness” of homosexuality, looking at arguments which claim and dispute the indigenous existence of same-sex activity. South Africa is distinct regionally and globally for a number of reasons. The legal protection of GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) rights has had an important effect on ideas about belonging in the nation state. The formation of the new South Africa, under the banner of human rights, included a number of previously marginalized identities. South Africa has the only constitution in the world that has legal protections for GLBT citizens. The Equality Clause makes discrimination illegal based on gender and sexual orientation, as well as race, ethnicity and religion. Polygamy has also been legalized within the confines of what is defined as “traditional” black culture. Gayness is intimately part of the body politic in South Africa, which is not found in other parts of southern Africa, nor in most of the rest of the world. There is a much more inclusive--at least legal--notion of citizenship than one finds in places like the U.S., where there was a large gap between nation-state formation and the fight for gay rights.

Gay rights are not an add-on to national identity, but constitutive of it. South Africa’s gay citizens joined the national body as out and proud at the beginning of democracy. The inclusion of gay rights began during the anti-apartheid struggle with ANC leaders in exile adding sexuality to their non discrimination clauses after being influenced by a transnational network of activists, many who were gay or GLBT friendly.

This legalization and enshrinement of gay rights in the founding documents of democratic South Africa has been supported in the past decade with laws making it equally possible for gay men and women to adopt children, seek visas for non-native partners- and in an enormous legal victory last year- the courts decided that the government had twelve months to put measures into effect to make gay marriage legal. Partly due to the publicness of sexual identity, as well as the explosion of sexual discourses after apartheid, sexuality and sex are public in ways that are unique to the South African context. For example, the government has its own HIV/AIDS prevention program, *lovelife*, that asks youth to make informed sexual decision and have safe sex.

Paying particular attention to the political and scholarly literature on the “Africanness” or “unAfricaness” of homosexuality, I want to draw attention to both sides of this debate and look at the stakes in claims of indigenous homosexuality. Because of time constraints, below I am mostly touching on literature that has to do with black men, although there is an emerging literature on lesbianism in South Africa and southern Africa regionally.

Marc Epprecht presents the argument that although we may not find same-sex identities as we understand them in southern Africa today, there were black Africans participating in same-sex activities in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. General social norms about not discussing sex or turning a blind eye to sexual activity outside of reproduction (sex that did not lead to reproduction did not count as sex since it was divorced from fertility) are used as evidence to prove that homosexual activities were not contextually alien. “De facto tolerance” led to “indigenous cultures of discretion” where a

cultural focus on propriety and respectability meant that sexuality in general was not discussed (Epprecht 1998b).

In records from 1921 the “native custom” dictated that attempted sodomy warranted a fine of one animal. Contextually, this level of fine is in the category of a misdemeanor, and was not as serious as punishments for alleged female adultery which when prosecuted led to the payment of ten to twelve animals (Epprecht 1998a). The first sexual offense crimes Africans were tried for in colonial courts were for homosexual sodomy, not heterosexual rape. Epprecht’s point is that homosexual acts were invisible to neither Africans nor Europeans in the early years of direct rule. His focus on the beginning of colonialism is strategic, helping to prove his thesis of indigenous African same-sex activity. Colonizers therefore brought homophobia, not homosexuality with them (Kendall 1999).

The existence of indigenous terms for same-sex sexual activity are used in arguments to prove homosexuality as African and not something that came from the West or outside African influences. The existence of local indigenous words for same-sex activities is one of the criterion used to judge the cultural normality of these actions and/or identities contextually. For example, although its current use is primarily insulting in Tanzania there is a word in Swahili for lesbian, *msagaji*, translated as “grinder” that is used to describe sexual activities between women (Mohamed with Wieringa 2005).

The “Africanness” of homosexuality is also discussed in literature on *tinkonkana* (mining wives) in the gold mines outside of Johannesburg during the 20th century. Usually called “circumstantial or situational homosexuality,” these practices are presented in most of the literature as restricted to conditions where women are absent.

According to some writers becoming an *inkotshame* (mining wife) was part of an initiation from boy to manhood. Being a “wife” involved performing sexual and domestic tasks for “husbands.” Looking like a woman in appearance was important, so “wives” would alter their appearance in non-permanent ways. This included shaving to have a smooth chin or covering up that part of their face, as well as dressing in feminine clothing. Almost all of this same-sex behavior is claimed as interfemoral or intracrural sex, with friction and ejaculation between the thighs.

T. Dunbar Moodie’s functionalist work is the most cited in the literature on mining wives (*tinkonkana*). He argues that men who chose or were coerced into mine marriages did so because they were rewarded financially for their domestic and sexual duties, allowing them accrue more money to take back with them to rural areas. Mining marriages are discussed as a way to resist becoming a proletariat, since miners saved their pay to return to their “homeland,” not to become urbanites (Moodie et al 1988). His argument is also based on the fact that *tinkonkana* are said to have died out by the 1970s due to changes in the economy of desire, socio-political situations including the violence of the anti-apartheid movement, rise of African nationalism, as well as an influx of women into the vicinity of mining compounds.

It is important to note, however, that one form of sexual activity does not mean others are not taking place. Having a “wife” on the mines did not mean that one had no other source of sexual release. Daniel (a pseudonym) and a friend had girlfriends in the township, but told an interviewer “we never slept in the township, we just took a few hours with our girlfriends and then went back to the boys. We loved them better” (Ndatshe 1993: 48). The willing participation of black Africans in these same-sex

practices and relationships, as well as the claim that folks at home also knew about them and accepted their presence, are used as further proof of the Africaness of homosexuality. Since so many men are claimed to have been aware of these sexual acts and relationships, as well as participated through migrant labor and also time in apartheid era prisons, they are again read within arguments for the “Africanness” of homosexuality as part of known sexual expressions and again just not something that was openly discussed.

For those who posit homosexuality as “unAfrican,” it is a white western import that came with colonialism and polluted African traditions. Claimed to not be indigenous to Africa, homosexuality, was one more dimension of the colonial project to take over black cultures. President Mugabe of Zimbabwe has claimed that homosexuals are “worse than pigs and dogs” and stated in 1995 “Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, their stupid and foolish ways to themselves... Keep those out of Zimbabwe...We do not want those kinds of behavior in our country”

The above mentioned mining marriages are also used as a key example by those who see homosexuality as profoundly unAfrican. The link between the beginnings of black homosexual activities with oppressive and gender segregated apartheid era labor and political practices are seen by many, including black nationalists, as proof of how the perversion of apartheid became embodied in sexual practices. Men who were unable to bring their families with them to mining camps are presented in this literature as having to “make do” with men posing as women sexually and domestically. The arguments above that see biological men becoming social females as part of a fluidity of sexual identities and the possibility of changes in sexual activities over time are read here as emerging because they were as close as men could get to having a traditional relationship

with women when they were absent. Of course, the above quote about having access to multiple sexual partners across gender and “loving the boys better” would be read as part of the effects and contagion of apartheid. Homosexuality is also seen within this framework as becoming a viable and desperate option because the worsening of black economies led to the delay or even inability for black men to pay *lobola* (bride-price), support a family and establish a household.

As both sides of the debate note, the men and women who drastically changed sexual practices (those physically confined in mining compounds, prisons and labor camps) were the most “emasculated” and “detrribalized.” Underlying these arguments are ideas about what constitutes “real” Africaness- here the rural, links between masculinity, family provision and patriarchal power and connections and accountability to elders and ancestors. Men who have sex with men in this framework were forced into European and “non-traditional,” thus unnatural, norms of behavior by either lack of options or from the dehumanization of labor practices that led to increases in “vice” and crime, especially having to do with sex.

Of note in trying to understand discourses on the African-ness of homosexuality is that the sides are often drawing on the same data, i.e. the mining marriages, although drawing very different conclusions. What we find is *agreement* on changes in sexual activities and identities from apartheid, in particular migrant labor practices, but *disagreement* on the morality of these acts and how much choice was involved. Discussions about homosexuality as “forced” or imported denies the fluidity of sexuality and gender, as well as the ability of Africans to incorporate, change and also be changed by contact with whites and Africans from other places. This denies the possibility of

same-sex behavior to include love and general feelings of affection, which reinscribes racist colonial ideas of black Africans as oversexed and not able to make conscious sexual choices. In their work on the interactions between Tshidi Zionists and non-conformist British missionaries, the Comaroffs are clear about both colonized and colonizer both being changed in the colonial and missionary encounter. New hybrid cultural forms emerged that conformed to neither strict colonial nor Tswana pre-colonial norms. The same argument about the agency of Africans in creating new forms of culture can be made about changes in South African sexual practices and identities. Debates on the “Africanness” of homosexuality lock Africans into static definitions of personhood and community and deny Africans the ability to change as part of what is “African.”