

# AZANDE Press ZINES



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LGBTQ prisoners

## Liberated Facts SIX

Africa

If you say being gay is not African, you don't know your history

Bisi Alimi

The idea that homosexuality is 'western' is based on another western import - Christianity. True African culture celebrates diversity and promotes acceptance

During his visit to Africa this summer, the US president, Barack Obama, addressed legal discrimination against LGBT individuals.

Meeting the Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta, Obama said:

"When you start treating people differently not because of any harm they are doing to anybody, but because they are different, that's the path whereby freedoms begin to erode."

Unfortunately, the response from Kenyatta was that "there are some things that we must admit we don't share [with the US]. Our culture, our societies don't accept."

As I dug deep, I realised that African culture is no stranger to homosexual behaviours and acts

This is the same argument that Robert Mugabe used to suppress the human rights of LGBT people in Zimbabwe; that the former president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, used when he signed the most dangerous law against LGBT people in the modern world; and that President Yoweri Museveni used in a ceremonial signing of the anti-gay bill in Uganda. This year Gambia's president Yahya Jammeh called for gay people's throats to be slit

When I was appointed by Berlin's Humboldt University this year to teach the course "Pre- and post-colonial sexual orientation and sexual identity in Africa", I knew I had a huge task before me. I had to teach students about a history that is mostly unwritten.

In digging up facts I found that, while many Africans say that homosexuality is un-African, African culture is no stranger to homosexual behaviours and acts.

In the northern part of Nigeria, yan daudu a Hausa term to described effeminate men who are considered to be wives to men. While the Yoruba word might be more about behaviour than identity, this Hausa term is more about identity. You have to look and act like a yan daudu to be called one. It is not an identity you can just carry. These words are neutral; they are not infused with hate or disgust

For example, in my local language (Yoruba), the word for "homosexual" is adofuro, a colloquialism for someone who has anal sex. It might sound insulting and derogatory, however, the point is there is a word for the behaviour. Moreover, this is not a new word; it is as old as the Yoruba culture itself.

Barack Obama tells African states to abandon anti-gay discrimination

In the Buganda Kingdom, part of modern-day Uganda, King Mwanga II was openly gay and faced no hate from his subjects until white men brought the Christian church and its condemnation. Though King Mwanga is the most prominent African recorded as being openly gay, he was not alone.

In Boy-Wives and Female Husbands, a book examining homosexuality and feminism in Africa, the researchers found "explicit" Bushman artwork that depicts men engaging in same-sex sexual activity. There have been other indicators that the transition from boyhood to adulthood within many African ethnic groups involved same-sex sexual activities. So what accounts for the

current dismissal of homosexuality on the continent?

One factor is the increased popularity of fundamental Christianity, by way of American televangelists, since the 1980s. While Africans argued that homosexuality was a western import, they in turn used a western religion as the basis for their argument. When I have challenged people who are anti-gay, many have said

However, when you probe further, they argue that homosexuality is not in the Bible. But the Bible is not our historical culture. This shows there is real confusion about Africa's past.

Reinforcing this is the fact that populist homophobia has kept many politicians in power. Across Africa, if you hate gay people, you get votes.

As a Nigerian gay man, these myths about homosexuality create a dark cloud over my head. They leave me trying to navigate my way through self-denial, rejection, love and the burden of guilt.

While to many people the assertion "homosexuality is un-African" might just be words, to all African LGBT people it puts our lives in imminent danger. It is used in South Africa to

rape lesbians. It is used to pass laws and to jail, threaten or kill gay rights activists. It is used to dehumanise LGBT people across Africa and legitimise the hate that we face. It is the reason I receive death threats, which ultimately drove me into exile from my home in Nigeria.

As long as the notion that homosexuality is un-African persists, Kenyatta will receive applause,

Mugabe will win elections, and parliaments across the continent will reintroduce harmful laws.

To stop all this, we need to start by re-telling our history and remembering our true African culture, one that celebrates diversity, promotes equality and acceptance, and recognises the contribution of everyone, whatever their sexuality.

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BOOK

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# BOY-WIVES AND FEMALE HUSBANDS



STUDIES IN AFRICAN

HOMOSEXUALITIES



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Find a  
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