ASR FORUM: HOMOPHOBIC AFRICA?

Introduction

Ayo A. Coly, Guest Editor

An antigay propaganda bill is currently in the works in Russia. On January 25, 2013, the Russian Lower House of Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favor of legislation that would make punishable, by a fine of up to US $16,000, the dissemination of information and organization of public events about sexual minorities.[1] The bill is now awaiting final approval by the Parliament and president of Russia. I have been interested in the international attention (or lack thereof) to the proposed antigay propaganda bill in Russia and similar legislation projects in Ukraine. Anyone who has been following the spectacularization in the Euro-American media and the blogosphere of antigay vigilantism and legislation in Senegal, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Uganda knows where I am headed with this comparison. The international attention paid to the Ukrainian and Russian bills is at best tepid, especially when compared with Uganda's "Kill the Gays" bill for which the bill's sponsor, David Bahati, received ample and prime airtime on major U.S. and British televisions shows, including MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Voice of America's *In Focus* and *Straight Talk Africa*, Current TV's *Vanguard*, and ABC's *Nightline*. The international frenzy surrounding the Ugandan bill undergirds an existing difference in the discursive translations of African

African Studies Review, Volume 56, Number 2 (September 2013), pp. 21–30

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doi:10.1017/asr.2013.39

and European homophobias. On the one hand lies the hypervisibility of homophobias in Africa as "African" homophobia. On the other hand is the tepid international attention to the violated rights of sexual minorities in Eastern Europe and the perception of homophobias in Eastern European nations as homophobias *tout court*.

This *ASR* Forum, entitled "Homophobic Africa?"—a deliberate echo of Marc Epprecht's *Heterosexual Africa?* (2008)—is concerned with the concept of African homophobia, as it prevails in non-African but also African engagements with LGBTI rights on the continent.[2] In the columns of *The Guardian* Keguro Macharia has critiqued the discourses on homophobias in Africa, contending that "homophobia in Africa is not [the] single story" that some analysts are making it out to be. "Homophobia in Africa is a problem," he writes, "but not as *African* homophobia, a special class that requires special interventions. And certainly not the kinds of special interventions that reconsolidate old, ongoing and boring oppositions between a progressive west and an atavistic Africa" (2010). According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972:54). This injunction to focus on the doings and not the sayings of discourses permeates Macharia's attention to the constitutive effects of the single story of African homophobia. Discourses prescribe ways of knowing, inscribe their objects of knowledge, and construct knowledge. Hence the kind of global shaming campaign that has been directed to Africa in the form of online petitions, calls for boycotts, or threats of political and economic sanctions has not been applied to Russia and Ukraine.[3] Homophobic Europe cannot exist, because homophobia has become a conceptual cognate for Africa. There is homophobia in Europe—but Europe is not homophobic. There is homophobia in Africa—and Africa is homophobic.

African homophobia was the inevitable and indispensable framing narrative in the BBC's *The World's Worst Place to Be Gay* (2011), a documentary on homophobia in Uganda. In the early minutes of the film, a visual montage of antigay vigilantism and homophobic vitriol in various unspecified African countries fixes the predetermined notion of homophobia in Uganda as African homophobia. The documentary also illustrates, unwittingly, how the concept of African homophobia has its raison d'être in Western "homonationalism," a narrative of sexual exceptionalism championed by LGBTIs from the global North and consonant with the neo-imperial politics of their nation-states (see Puar 2007). Indeed, the BBC's story of homophobia in Uganda steadily refurbishes the old paradigm of advanced "us" versus backward "them" into a narrative of a European gay-heaven versus an African gay-deathtrap. As the end credits of the documentary roll, a programming announcement about BBC's forthcoming *The World's Worst Place to Be a Woman*, a documentary on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, puts homophobic Africa in context. Homophobic Africa supports the larger overarching concept of Africa, a system of signification through which the West invents itself in relation to what Achille Mbembe—following Valentin

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994) —calls the "absolute otherness" of the continent (2001:2). Mbembe is worth quoting at length here because he helps illuminate how the concept of African homophobia pertains to the idea of Africa: It is in relation to Africa that the notion of "absolute otherness" has been taken the furthest. It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what is supposed to be its identity. And Africa, because it was and remains that fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it thinks it signifies, is not simply *part of* its imaginary significations: it is *one of* those significations.

Having said this, I will proceed to argue that homophobic Africa is in fact a Euro-American-African *co*-production. David Bahati's generously apportioned prime time appearances, as not only the author of the Ugandan bill but also the face of African homophobia, is a case in point. Bahati himself has been eager to embrace this identity. In his European and North American appearances he often gives his interviewers the lead by stressing the "un-Africanness" of homosexuality and casting himself as a defender of true "Africanness." By means of this repeated script, well-rehearsed and performed by both Bahati and his media hosts, David Bahati becomes Africa and Africa becomes David Bahati. This co-production of African homophobia was particularly evident in March 2011 in a BBC-hosted debate titled *Is Homosexuality Un-African?* The panel was composed of Bahati, former Botswana President Festus Mogae, two gay rights activists from South Africa and Rwanda, and an antigay Muslim youth leader from Nigeria. The framing question of the debate was premised on the existence of African homophobia. This framework preempted a critical engagement with the concept of African homophobia, and the panelists' participation in such a debate already meant that they endorsed the concept. Throughout the discussion, the framing question remained unchallenged, reifying the totalizing notions of "Africanness" and "un-Africanness" and reinforcing the concept of African homophobia. The panelists and the audience were left to either challenge African homophobes by proving the "Africanness" of homosexuality or stand with African homophobes by proving the "un-Africannness" of homosexuality. But as Veronica Sigamoney and Marc Epprecht argue in their article in this issue (83–107), in South African contexts, for example, the statement "homosexuality is un-African" may not be an articulation of homophobia; in South Africa, as they explain, the term *homosexuality* is not used consistently and may not even refer to same-sex sexuality. When LGBTI activists in the BBC debate discussed the "un-Africanness" of homosexuality without challenging the very premises of the concept, they were inadvertently lending support to the preconceptions they should be challenging.

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Frantz Fanon's argument that colonialism determines the form and content of anticolonial resistance (1965:47) is applicable to the predicament of LGBTI activism in Africa. African LGBTI activists cannot but engage with the assertion that homosexuality is "un-African." Similarly, in order to gain access to "pink money (the financial power of LGBTI communities in the global North) and international LGBTI advocacy networks, LGTBI activism in Africa finds itself needing to use—and hence obliquely promote—the concept of African homophobia to boost their visibility to potential Western donors (see Hoad 1999:572–73). This dependence on outside resources also dictates the use of Western gender and sexual identity terminology in African LGBTI activism. Sexual minorities in Africa have the burden of making themselves intelligible and legible to Western donors and audiences, and Western NGOs, in fact, often fund gender and sexual identity workshops to familiarize African sexual minorities with Western terminology (see Lorway 2008:86). But as Martin Manalansan points out, this privileging of Western terminologies itself codes homophobia into the discussion of non-Western same-sex practices (2003:209). A case in point is Evelyn Blackwood's homonationalist statement that African sexual minorities are better served by the terms *gay* and *lesbian* because African indigenous terms for same-sex acts "cannot be recouped in a positive manner at this point in time" (2004:106). I am specifically concerned here with the way Western sexual and gender categories are offered to (and accepted by) sexual minorities in Africa as lifelines. Ultimately, the need for proficiency in Western identity categories, acronyms, and strategies bolsters the dominance of Western sexual and gender categories and thus gives further credence to the concept of African homophobia. Henriette Gunkel's article in this issue (67–81) addresses such concerns. By examining the effects of anti-homophobia and anti-homophobic discourses in online petitions against homophobias in Africa, Gunkel pinpoints the geopolitical mapping of homophobia.

The irony in the concurrent Western patronage of LGBTI activism in Africa and the Western patronage of antigay vigilantism, via the work of U.S. evangelist pastors, can hardly be missed here. The function of Africa as a battleground for the conflicts between different Western parties certainly complicates the concept of African homophobia; so do the British colonial origins of antisodomy laws currently on the books in Anglophone Africa. In his article in this issue (109–28), Babacar M'Baye produces a detailed analysis of homophobia in Senegal, tracing some of the roots of that homophobia back to the colonial era when French colonial discourse asserted that homosexuality did not exist in Africa. Yet any attempt to unravel the narrative of African homophobia by pointing to external influences must also take into account the reality of homophobia in contemporary Africa and the agency of African actors in the development of these homophobias. For instance, the colonial legacies argument is severely limited by the fact that homosexuality is criminalized in Francophone as well as Anglophone African nations. And in Anglophone African nations the existing antisodomy

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

laws were dormant until the last two decades. Probably the more productive question to ask of homophobias in Africa is—why now? In other words, why is antigay legislation and "re"-legislation taking place on the continent now? Why are American antigay Christian groups gaining traction in Africa now?

As Sylvia Tamale shows (31–45), homophobia is a political resource for African leaders. Embattled leaders throughout the continent use the figure of the homosexual as a scapegoat and opportune diversion from the issues of high unemployment, rampant poverty, and bad governance. Tamale argued in an earlier publication that the homophobia of the postcolonial African patriarchal state serves to perpetuate the institution of patriarchy and the subjugation of women (2007:18). Patrick Ireland's article (47–66) discusses the phenomenon of state homophobia in Africa and explains the ways in which it is more complex and unpredictable than most scholars have assumed. Indeed, state-sponsored homophobia has been on the rise on the continent since the mid-1990s, coinciding with the so-called wind of democracy and the collapse of African economies under the World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment policies. But state-sponsored homophobia in Africa has also responded to the "no discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation" clause in the postapartheid South African Constitution (1996) as well as South Africa's legalization of gay marriage in 2006 (see Epprecht 2008; Hoad 2007). In the aftermath of these developments, African state leaders' vigorous assertions of the "un-Africanness" of homosexuality were declarations about the "un-Africanness" of South Africa. Furthermore, these declarations were denigrations of South Africa's aspirations for a moral leadership role on the continent. Neville Hoad has teased out a strong connection between South African President Thabo Mbeki's HIV/AIDS denialism and this perceived "un-Africanness" of South Africa (2007:xiii). Similar insecurities about South Africa's gay exceptionalism resurfaced in 2006 when ANC Deputy President Jacob Zuma criticized same-sex unions at a public event, adding that when he was growing up no gay person would have dared approach him (see *IOL News* 2006). Mbeki and Zuma apparently felt the need to defensively assert, by way of homophobic statements, their and the Africanness of South Africa. Meanwhile, Uganda is emerging as a model for some African state leaders who plan to copy the Ugandan bill (Ekine 2013:79). These copycat African leaders from Nigeria, The Gambia, and Liberia are motivated by the opportunity to cast themselves as guardians of an embattled Africanness, in the hope of again winning the confidence of their constituencies.

So-called "gay internationalism"—the imposition of universalized Western sexual frameworks and agendas on the world (see Massad 2002)—and the threats of donor sanctions against homophobic African states have also more than ever facilitated the workings of state homophobia in Africa. State homophobia is now able to present itself as a savior of the population and guardian of the moral integrity of the nation. In the wake of the British government's threat to implement donor sanctions against homophobic

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

African states, a statement from a collective of one hundred African social justice organizations warned that such sanctions would exacerbate hostilities against sexual minorities, support the notion that homosexuality is a Western-sponsored idea, and, most importantly, garner popular support for state-sponsored homophobia and homophobic African leaders (African Social Justice Activists 2011). The potential political capital of state homophobia is perhaps best illustrated by the predicament of President Macky Sall of Senegal, whose alleged laxity toward sexual minorities has become a political resource for his political foes. The subject is a recurrent theme in social media and online forums and in daily conversations in Senegal, and Senegalese newspapers regularly announce an impending decriminalization of homosexuality. The visit of President Obama to Senegal in June 2013 intensified speculations that a decriminalization of homosexuality was in the works.[4] The members of "Y'en a marre," a movement of young social activists who helped Sall defeat former President Abdoulaye Wade, have positioned themselves as defenders of morality and crusaders against the global gay agenda of Western neo-imperialism, threatening to oust President Sall from power if he capitulates to international pressure and decriminalizes homosexuality. Homophobias on the continent have thus allowed for new forms of political leadership by way of moral leadership. Christian conservatives in Uganda (see Demange 2012) and fundamentalist Islamic groups in Senegal (see Bopp 2008) are using homophobia similarly to position themselves on the political scene. Patrick Awondo has argued in the pages of *ASR* that this politicization of homophobia on the continent dictates a more nuanced approach to homophobias in Africa and, most importantly, debunks the narrative of an inherently homophobic Africa (2012).

Same-sex sexualities have thus entered African public discourse in a way that jars with the cultures of "silence" (Arnfred 2004:73) and "discretion" (Epprecht 1998) about sexual matters that characterize many African societies. The adoption of Western categories of identity, forms of collective mobilization, and languages of sexual rights has positioned sexual minorities in violation of the cultural codes of their communities (Epprecht 2005:253–45). Homophobias in Africa thus need also to be considered as responses to these perceived cultural infractions. In an article in *Politique Africaine* (2012), Christophe Broqua revisits the episode of Robert Mugabe's homophobic vitriol in 1995 when the Gays and Lesbians Association of Zimbabwe (GALZ) set up a stall at the country's annual international book fair. GALZ had been around since 1989 and the Zimbabwean government had never paid any attention to the organization. Broqua insists that state-sponsored homophobia in Zimbabwe in the aftermath of the book fair episode was prompted not by the matter of same-sex sexualities, but rather by GALZ's attempt to force sexual matters into public discourse. A similar reframing would help explain the unprecedented homophobic hysteria that has taken over Senegal. When a tabloid journal published photographs of a local gay wedding ceremony in February 2008, a witch hunt ensued and periodic outings and public beatings of alleged gays became daily

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spectacles. On the one hand, I agree with Codou Bopp (2008) that homophobia in Senegal is related to the country's economic depression and political turmoil. I also agree that the unprecedented homophobic hysteria in Senegal needs to be seen in the context of intensified gender violence, the backlash against educated women and women's rights organizations, and the aggressive rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country. On the other hand, an important consideration that Bopp misses is that same-sex marriage and its public performance were catalysts for this unprecedented form of homophobia in Senegal. The adoption of Western LGBTI's "politics of visibility in the public sphere" (Gopinath 2002:152) is probably at issue here. Bopp also challenges the Senegalese construction of homosexuality as a novelty, writing that homosexuality has always existed and been accepted in Senegal (Bopp 2008:5). Granted, but homosexual marriage, as depicted in the tabloid, is indeed a novelty for the Senegalese population. The pictured gay wedding ceremony—complete with a full spread in a glossy tabloid, an exchange of wedding rings, and the ritual of wedding cake feeding—reframes local Senegalese same-sex intimacies in a way that renders them illegible and unintelligible to Senegalese society.

In a 2011 interview with Voice of America, Paula Donovan, a co-director of AIDS-Free World, warned that homophobia was "spreading like a contagion from country to country in Africa" (DeCapua 2011). The brutal murder of the Ugandan gay activist David Kato in February 2011, the Ugandan antihomosexual bill, the unprecedented persecution of gays in Senegal in the last three years, the violent homophobic rhetoric spewed by Presidents Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Jammeh in the Gambia, and the overall rise of antigay vigilantism throughout the African continent have indeed cast homophobia as Africa's new "epidemic." Perhaps as noteworthy as the intensification of homophobia across the continent is the level of discursive engagement with the phenomenon. Many discussions of homophobia on the continent barely stop short of conflating "Africanness" and homophobia; missionary discourses and savior imperatives are quick to surface in some analyses. Conversely, the field of African studies has yet to vigorously and comprehensively address homophobia in Africa, although some scholars have been paving the way. This *ASR* Forum, therefore, was conceived as a response to Keguro Macharia's injunction to tell the multiple and complex stories of homophobia in Africa. It brings together scholars from various disciplines (literature, history, law, political science) to examine the roots, catalysts, and various uses of homophobia in Africa. All of the authors share the common goal of reading critically the current wave of homophobia that is sweeping the continent.

One final note: As we were putting the finishing touches on this issue, Nigerian lawmakers, on May 30, passed a bill that bans gay marriage and outlaws any groups actively supporting gay rights. The lawmakers also endorsed a ten-year prison sentence for any "public show" of affection by a same-sex couple.

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Notes

1. 388 members voted in favor, one member voted against, and one member chose to abstain.
2. In African contexts, LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex), rather than LGBT, is the preferred acronym (see Ekine 2013:90 n.1).
3. The European Union and the United Nations have issued statements condemning the bill. But this critique is not nearly as harsh as the chastising statements about Nigeria and Uganda.

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4. See Seck (2012); Diop (2012); Ledakarois.net (2013); Ndiaye (2013); Rewmi. com (2013); Leral.net (2013); Senego (2013); Seneweb.com (2013); Xalisman.com (2013); Dakaractu.com (2013); Senegal8.com (2013); ChildFund International (2013); XibarTamba. com (2013).

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