

CHAPTER 3

EVALUATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN EAST AFRICAN CULTURES

In this Chapter I would like to reflect on the question of homosexuality in East Africa. The rationale for surveys, questionnaires, and interviews is given. First, the greatest need was to secure information from Adventist Christians in East Africa about homosexuality, whether it is new or not and as to what their normative basis is for the ethical evaluation of homosexuality in their societies.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church emphasizes morality in society as a core value. Through this core value, the church intends to nurture and unify its diverse membership and commit each believer to take God's word seriously as they demonstrate their love and compassionate service to the wider community in the world. According to Dudley and Cumming: "Churches will not help such people and grow numerically unless their members are nurtured in spiritual growth, preserved from apostasy, and incorporated as responsible members of the body of Christ who will gladly share their faith."¹

The questionnaires were strategically designed to discover how the SDA Church in East Africa relates to this core value stated above and homosexuality.

¹ Rodger, L. Dudley and Des Cummings, Jr., *Adventures in Church Growth* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983), P. 16.

3.1 The Field Surveys of Homosexuality in East Africa.

Findings from nine East African Seventh day Adventist churches randomly selected are presented with the data collected by means of the instrument (questionnaires). This survey on homosexuality in East Africa was targeted on Adventist members.

Methodologically, the survey research is descriptive, and the research instrument is questionnaires (close-ended questions). A sampling plan was utilized to select churches to be surveyed. The questionnaires were designed to gather information from individual church members and some selected leaders. After consultation with leaders of the East African Union of the SDA church in Kenya, the Ugandan Union in Uganda and Tanzanian Union in Tanzania, questionnaires were administered to nine selected churches from the forty two churches in the capital cities of East African countries.² Selection of churches to be surveyed was based on the location of the church and how well it represented different ethnic groups. The researcher carefully selected participants and the volunteers at a given midweek prayer service.

Random sampling resulted in 312 respondents. Out of 312 respondents 221 were analyzed and 91 were left out by the researcher since they did not address the questions.³ The questionnaires, which served as valuable instruments on the

² Due to time constrains, the researcher decided to analyze only six churches (two from each union). Out of the nine churches surveyed, the researcher left out three churches especially the ones that were in proximity to each other.

³ All the responses were checked for major errors and those that were improperly filled out were dropped, so as not to distort the result of the surveys.

study of homosexuality in East Africa, sought information on the following questions. An example of the questionnaire form used is attached in Appendix

A.

1. What is homosexuality?
2. Is homosexuality new in East Africa?
3. Was homosexuality practiced before the coming in of the missionaries?
4. What is the normative basis for the ethical evaluation of homosexuality in East Africa? The Bible and/or culture?
5. What role should culture play in the evaluation of homosexuality in East Africa?
6. What role does the church play with regard to those who declare themselves homosexuals?

Of the 221 respondents who were analyzed in relation to question 1 above, 99 said homosexuality is immoral and shameful conduct of human beings of the same sex who have sexual intercourse with one another. 110 said homosexuality is anal intercourse between males, a practice which they think is a Western practice. And 12 said homosexuality is a sexual relation between people of the same sex and according to them they regard it as a part of the general evil which exists/existed since the fall of man.

Out of the 221 respondents that were analyzed, responding to question 2, 211 said homosexuality is new, pagan and foreign to them, 6 said it is a Western

practice; and only 4 thought it was part of the African culture during those old days before the arrival of the agents of modernity.

Responding to question 3 above, out of 221 respondents who were analyzed, 191 said homosexuality was never practiced in their societies in East Africa, it is only recently that they started hearing about it, and they believed that it was an immoral practice. 11 respondents, the majority being elderly people, said they used to hear of homosexuality practiced in specific cases such as bachelors who were attached to traditional courts or military camps and were allowed to marry young boys and treated them as their wives. The remaining 19 respondents said they did not know whether homosexuality was practiced in society or not.

Among the 221 respondents to question 4, 150 said Christians and the rest of the people of East Africa should use the Bible for ethical evaluation of homosexuality in East Africa and the world as a whole. 10 said both the Bible and the cultural standards of East Africa should be used as the normative basis for the evaluation of homosexuality. And 61 thought that since they are Africans with their own culture, then East African cultures should be the only normative basis for the evaluation of homosexuality. They said “the Bible was introduced to them by the missionaries who tried to distort their African culture and therefore it is not a reliable tool to be used to evaluate homosexuality.”

Out of the 221 respondents to question 5 that were analyzed, 160 said East African cultures have no adequate role to play in the evaluation of homosexuality in East Africa. 61 strongly felt that to be fair to the people of East

Africa, cultural standards should play the major role in evaluating homosexuality in East Africa, failure to do so will be destroying the cultures of the people of East Africa, at the expense of the Bible and the Western culture.

Out of the 221 respondents to question 6, 191 felt that the Bible is definitive for what the church should think and do, because they take the Biblical standards as the objective revelation of Gods eternal will and therefore it is the work of the church to nurture its members spiritually and preserve them from apostasy and extend the service of love and kindness to the community at large with the intention of teaching them the truth of the Bible. The church must accept the individuals of homosexual orientation who need help and support and struggle against same sex tendencies. But those who insist on and promote the active homosexual life style as natural, normal or even superior to heterosexual relations by that very act disregard and undermine the sole authority upon which the church's very existence and mission is based, namely the Scriptures and therefore they should not be accepted by any Christian church as its members.

The remaining 30 addressing the above question felt that the Bible and the Christian church, being part of Western culture, should not play any role in the lifestyle of the homosexuals and therefore the church should leave them alone to do as they please.

3.2 The Silence and Secrecy Regarding Homosexuality in East Africa.

Sexuality in East Africa is one of the most difficult topics to tackle or discuss openly, because “traditionally except under ritually constrained circumstances, it

is not publicly discussed and this makes the whole subject to be encircled by a lot of secrecy and hedged around with many taboos.”⁴ When this silence on sexuality is combined with the absence of written materials on the cultures and histories of many people in many parts of East Africa as a whole, the difficulties of accessing traditional understanding of sexuality becomes very great and sometimes you wonder where those who argue that homosexuality was traditionally not a part of life in East Africa get their information from. Certainly, oral historians have made significant gains in advancing our understanding of various aspects of the past of non-literate societies, however one area which remains heavily under-researched, and on which no books are written is the area of sexuality. The question is how to deal with these silences in such a way that we can avoid being prevented from writing about sex and sexuality at all.

In this chapter I intend to argue for a connection between sex and other forms of cultural experiences in East African cultures and then attempt to show how that connection allows a discourse on East African sexuality to emerge. I would like to begin with the premise that the parameters which define the domain of desire are a silent commentary on the moral codes governing not only sexual practice, but also and perhaps more importantly, the nature of social identity. In other

⁴ Simon Ottenberg, *Boyhood Rituals in an African Society: An Interpretation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), P. 124 – 131.

words, the silences which mark the discourse on sex in East African cultures are socially linked to other aspects of experience and are thus an important part of the general cultural discourse. This means that a discussion of sexuality outside the bounds of the manner in which sex is made to articulate with the structure of social concern cannot tell us anything about the expression or regulation of desire in traditional Africa. The way sex is linked to other aspects of culture points to an important fact which has great bearing on how many Africans today think about homosexuality. In traditional communities matters of sex were never disembedded from culture; that is, the form and content of desire as well as the character of its manifestations were carried through publicly sanctioned rituals and symbols. Proper forms of sexual activities were those that conformed to those rituals and symbols. To speak of the latter as always publicly sanctioned is to recognize the extent to which the legitimacy of sexual activity depended not on individual choice (it was not a matter of individual conscience) but on a whole range of social prescriptions, which served to give sex itself social character. This presents something of a paradox. Sex and sexuality are maintained through a code of silence and secrecy but their meaning is mediated through institutional practices (like bride wealth, which are maintained publicly). May I therefore say that it is in the context of this seemingly paradoxical link between sex and culture, as distinct from individual choice, that we must place misunderstandings of homosexuality in East African cultures today. Claims that homosexuality did not exist in traditional East Africa can be seen, on this

account, to express a basic confusion between homosexuality as it is manifested in individuals today as an activity linked to choice and sex as an expression of culture. One characteristic of this confusion is that what is culturally recognized, is used ideologically to deny any other activity which, whether it actually occurs or not, is deemed 'perverse' by virtue of standing (or rather of being placed) outside the circle of the culturally acceptable. In other words, the problem of operating with notions of the 'culturally acceptable' is that such notions invariably confuse questions of morality with questions of acceptability. Something is not necessarily immoral because it is not culturally unacceptable, nor can the existence or non-existence of an activity in a certain culture simply be predicted upon what is considered publicly legitimate. This is an important point because those who argue that homosexuality is new in East Africa do so not in order to draw attention to a historical novelty but rather to condemn it as immoral.

Therefore, the assumption is that because Africans or East African traditions did not know the existence of homosexuality, the latter is therefore morally problematical. It is as if something being African is equivalent to its being morally legitimate. This is an obvious example of a category mistake in which East African tradition is the equivalent of moral outlook. Such an assumption involves a particular reading of the notion of East African cultures. At first it might seem that East African tradition is being used metonymically to represent that part of East African culture which is concerned with moral discourse on the

regulation of sexual matters. “A metonym is a word that carries a transferred sense by which it relates to another word, phrase or object through customary usage.”⁵ “The important thing about metonyms is that the sense which they convey depends on the relationships of substitution and transference which create the metonym in the first instance.”⁶ The elements involved in those relationships must be logically approximate to the meaning that words have when used in an ordinary sense.

Similarly, there is no customary usage to render the putative non-existence of homosexuality in East African culture as an approximate of anything immoral. This can be shown quite easily. The very denial that such a practice ever existed traditionally removes the possibility of any such metonymic approximation. African tradition cannot be used to judge a practice with which it was unfamiliar since to do so would imply either familiarity or the fact that East African culture is a moral category, one comprehensive enough to cover all unforeseen cases. But we know that African tradition, whatever else it may be, is not a moral category. “Yet those who employ it to proscribe homosexuality in its name are involved in an ideological move intended to secure some moral high ground against alleged perversion. The ideological character of this move can be brought out in several ways. First there is absolutisation of heterosexuality,

⁵ Jacques – Alain Miller, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III* (London: Routledge Publishing Association, 1993) PP. 214 – 230.

⁶ *Ibid*, P. 229.

which is read back into African identity.”⁷ Of course, the argument against homosexuality is made to take on a historical form which gives the appearance that culture has developed in such a way as to guarantee the moral uniqueness of heterosexual practices. Heterosexuality is then presented as historically or culturally valid while homosexuality is deprived of any historical validity. The ground of the authority of the argument against homosexuality is thus shifted from the realm of metonym to that of historical memory. This shift is made possible by the power of Africa as sign or name for tradition and moral authority.

Michael Riffatte has argued that “the description of dated activities is the more effective if the text is marker of fame ‘since in a time code fame is the equivalent of durability, and therefore a hyperbole of ancient if the time code is actualized in the past tense.”⁸ It is of course significant that the use of African tradition to negate the historical possibility of homosexuality is always actualised in the past tense. “The name achieves its power by being mortgaged to time which reduces history and truth to the same level.”⁹ A name as sign becomes the bearer of moral commandment.”¹⁰

But this is of no interest to those advancing the argument, since for them historical tradition and African tradition coincide in ways that make the authority

⁷ John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) P. 61.

⁸ Michael Riffatte, *Interpretation and Descriptive Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1981).

⁹ *Ibid.*, P. 110.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy* (New York: Zone Books, 1992) P. 57.

of metonymy depend on history. However, the shift is fraught with problems. If homosexuality did not exist in traditional consciousness we can safely take it that heterosexuality would have had nothing to say about it; it would, in other words, not have served as a basis for condemning any practice existing outside the purview of its consciousness. The fact that it is now being so used only indicates a reading back into the past of the pretended absoluteness of a historically determinate practice.

3.3 Selective Forms of (Homo-) sexuality Rejected in East Africa.

The second way in which the ‘Africanist’ argument against homosexuals is ideological is in its implicit rationalization and justification of a particular form of heterosexuality “(polygamy, the pledging of minor girls to much older men, and practice of inheriting the wife of a deceased sibling) in the absence of any recognition of their problematical nature, particularly in the experience of women.”¹¹ The point here is obviously not that an ideal form of heterosexuality would justify homophobia but rather that the ‘Africanists’ reduce the morality of heterosexuality to the sexual act. What their argument abhors is what they imagine to be the form of the sexual act between two people of the same sex. Conversely, “what justifies heterosexism is the false belief that two people of the

¹¹ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1979) P. 58.

opposite sex can only have vaginal sex. In other words, it is anal sex which cause offence.”¹² It is this preoccupation with imagining the sexual act between same-sex persons which, as I shall show below, has led to a male-centered definition of homosexuality, one which has almost completely overlooked the existence of lesbians. Rejecting homosexuality in terms of anal sex shows the power of patriarchy to define sexuality. It also reveals a highly truncated imagination which can only think of sex in one-dimensional terms that is of sex as penetration.

Moreover, the result of this equation between anal sex and homosexuality is that the social and political problems inherent in certain forms of ‘African’ heterosexuality are glossed over since what matters is not the wider relationship between couples and the social context in which it unfolds but the physical way in which they express their desire. The irony, however, is that in practice this is not how those who condemn homosexuality in the name of Africanness consciously

evaluate relationships between men and women. In traditional culture sexuality, as I have indicated, is linked to other social practices which are not in themselves sexual. In fact, coitus was something rarely ever talked about openly, not even among men themselves.

Given this, it might seem strange to suggest that what worries the Africanist

¹² Joshua, Sempebwa, African Traditional Moral Norms and Their Implications for Christianity: A Case Study in Ganda Ethics (St. Augustine: Steyler Verlag, 1983), P. 93.

homophobes is the imagined nature of the sexual act between homosexuals. This impression might be reinforced by what appears to be arguments to the contrary, arguments which claim that homosexuality causes social disruption, family breakdown and corruption of the young. But we should not be misled by this appeal to the well-being of society, the family and the youth into thinking that African traditional societies were not prone to social disruption caused by various ways in which desire was regulated, e.g. practices such as clitoridectomy, pledging of young girls to older men, polygamy itself and the inheritance of wives.

The third sense in which explaining homosexuality away in the name of Africa identity is ideological can be seen in the partiality with which those who use Africanness for this purpose use tradition.¹³ It is tradition or rather the historical absence of a certain practice within tradition that is used to deny the cultural legitimacy of that practice. Historical absence, whether imagined or real, is then taken to be synonymous with ‘otherness’ or foreignness. Clearly, this is an imagined ‘other’ since its identity is nothing but the shadow of a reconstructed absence.¹⁴ Yet the rejection or critique of “otherness’ in this is highly selective. African homophobes do not reject everything foreign or everything they claim to be foreign. Let us take prostitution as an example. It has often been claimed that prostitution is just as foreign to Africa as homosexuality.¹⁵ If so, we should

¹³ John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), P. 66.

¹⁴ John Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), PP. 25-27.

¹⁵ John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), P. 249.

expect to see the same kind of hysteria that has been expressed towards homosexuals applied to sex-workers. But what we see, instead, are some African business executives, politicians, intellectuals, priests and otherwise very ordinary African men hiring sex-workers (sometimes of either gender, though often they hire those of the opposite sex) for pleasure. Of course, from time to time the police are sent out to round up the sex-workers, who are either detained overnight or are made to pay a token fine. Indeed, governments spend millions of dollars in foreign currency on condoms to be handed out to 'prostitutes'. Yet there is no public outcry (in high or other places) of the sort applied to homosexuals, let alone of the kind that appeals to Africans.

My point here is neither to compare the nature of homosexuality with that of prostitution nor to condemn the latter. What is of interest, given the claim that both prostitution and homosexuality are foreign to Africa and the claim that both are socially disruptive, is the unevenhandedness or the partiality shown in the treatment of the two. How is this explained? Once again, the answer lies in what is perceived to be the nature of the sexual act itself between persons of the same sex. Perhaps the tolerance of female prostitution derives from its heterosexual character. But all this aside, why is it that the morality of marriage taught by the missionaries and the medical and educational practices introduced in the wake of colonialism are acceptable to most Africans, including those who condemn homosexuality, when those practices are clearly foreign themselves? It

is being assumed that all those practices existed in African culture or that they are fundamentally compatible with it?

I suggested earlier that the function of Africanness in the statements of those who would dispose of homosexuality in its name is metonymic; that is, the conviction that African tradition entails an ethical position which is capable of assessing the morality of homosexual practices is, as I have tried to show above, basically ideological. I have also argued that the authority of this metonymic substitution depends on the manner in which Africanness is read as both the history and tradition of heterosexual uniqueness. But this appeal to the past invites a historical analysis of the empirical feature that expresses the social patterns through which sexuality has traditionally been regulated in East Africa. We have seen that appealing to history or tradition to validate heterosexuality fails, because the social pattern through which this form of sexuality manifested itself were often unjust. The appeal to tradition by homophobes, however, causes a second problem. History and culture move through time; they change and are not fixed. Thus to use the past to deny the legitimacy of current practices on the grounds that such practices were not formerly known is to halt the movement of history by closing it to any possibility of change. African culture is then presented as fixed, closed and impervious to external factors – a culture that can somehow be imported from the past in its unadulterated form, to be lived in the present (without due regard to the ways which the present makes its own demands on the past in reshaping that past). But such a culture only exists

in the minds of those who want it. The reality is otherwise. Once we accept, as we must, the inevitability of historical change in all cultures, the question of the status of homosexuality in East Africa appears different. The question is no longer simply whether or not homosexuality existed in African cultures but also how, confronted by its existence in the present, African cultures are responding to it.

This entails two things. First, accepting the presence of homosexuality, and second, examining the forms of its present manifestations. To this task I now turn by looking at homosexuality in East Africa – in Kenya, to be more specific. In doing this I shall follow a twofold strategy. On the one hand I shall describe different forms of homosexuality in the country. Since it is from Kenya that the non-existence of homosexuality in East African culture has been claimed most vociferously, I shall, on the other hand, draw counter-examples of its existence in other parts of East Africa, thereby showing that the presumed universality of heterosexuality in East Africa and Africa as a whole entailed in that claim is false.

3.4 Homosexuality in East Africa (Kenya)

In Kenya, there are a number of current manifestations of homosexuality. I would like to distinguish and point out a number of different categories in the following manner: (1) homosexuality in prisons and other same-sex institutions, (2) gay and lesbian culture, (3) male prostitution and (4) homosexuality and ‘street children’. The order in which I present these categories is of no moral

significance. What is important is the fact that each of these categories represents an aspect of the reality of homosexuality in East Africa, particularly in Kenya. One mistake made by those contesting the right of homosexuality to exist in Kenya is to fail to distinguish between different aspects of its manifestations. The effect of this failure is to class together discrete sexual acts which are not bounded by meaningful relationships between people with acts so bounded. “The activity of a male prostitute or the prison rape of a 18 year-old are held to be of the same moral order as the sexual activity of a gay or lesbian couple of twenty years standing.”¹⁶ This is obviously done to deny all forms of homosexuality moral validity. Yet, as I indicated earlier, heterosexual activity is carefully differentiated: sex with a consenting adult of the opposite sex, sex between a married couple, rape of an adult, statutory rape, prostitution, polygamous unions and so on are each positively or negatively recognized. The point of my classification of homosexuality into different categories is to argue that no single judgment based on the analysis of a particular sexual act can serve as the yardstick for evaluating all sexual acts, including those which are falsely supposed to be ontologically different from ‘normal’ practice. Different forms of the expression of desire require different standards for judgment, and these standards derive not from the sexual act but from the overall social and political context in which human relationships are inevitably worked out. Thus

¹⁶ Ibid; P.178.

the transaction between a sex-worker and her client is predicted on a range of motives (personal as well as social) which surpasses the capacity of any single moral perspective to impose morally exhaustive limits on the content and experience of sexuality. Once we grasp that the sexual act always represents a complex ensemble of relationships which are criss-crossed by the social and political constraints of power, and is thus a site of struggle for the control of the self and its body, “we can appreciate not only that desire inhabits a multiplicity of differently gendered bodies but also that the multiplicity of sexed bodies in different social spaces attests to the need for an open-ended ethic of sexuality.”¹⁷ For like interpretation, desire is intractable, and like meaning, it refuses to be fixed. This is not to license all sexual activities but simply to acknowledge that area of experience in which a mature consciousness must distinguish between fantasy and reality.

No one can deny that in Africa ritual represents such an area. Indeed, “the imitation of the sexual act in many forms of African dance, apart from symbolizing the invigorating and creative power of sex and gender, is a public acknowledgement of the difference between fantasy and reality.”¹⁸ After all, the thrusting of the pelvis and the buttocks by the man and the responsive gyrating of the hips by the woman are merely choreographed signifiers of something else.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Invigorating and creative because the sexual act is the means by which the community reproduces itself.

“These signifiers mark the borderlines of temptation and moral repression where desire threatens to strike but is kept in check by that ensemble of relationships which act as the force of taboo and prohibition.”¹⁹ Similarly, certain ritual occasions allow the transgression of those borderlines of temptation and repression. “Here anything goes, including things like homosexuality.”²⁰ To be sure, and we must be absolutely clear on this point, “this is not a case in every African community, perhaps not even in the majority of communities in East Africa.”²¹ But “homosexuality has been known to take place under certain ritual circumstances in certain communities in East Africa.”²² This should warn us against generalizing from the particular to the universal.

Those who deny that homosexuality existed in precolonial East Africa make precisely this mistake. They seem to think that the absence of homosexuality in one African culture Tanzania is a universal phenomenon. This clearly represents another sense in which the idea of Africa is used ideologically, African culture is defined as one single thing by all the inhabitants of the continent. But again, “this conceals social and cultural differences by reducing them to a pre-established homogeneous totality.”²³ Of course no such

¹⁹ Simon Ottenberg, *Boyhood Rituals in An African Society*.(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989) P. 110.

²⁰ John Beattie and John Middleton, *Spirit Possession among the Lugbara*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), P. 224.

²¹ Arlene Swidler, *Homosexuality and World Religions* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Trinity Press, International, 1993), P. 21.

²² Renee Pittin, *House of Woman: A Focus on Alternative Life Style in Katsina City* (London; George Allen & Unwin, 1990), P. 280-285.

²³ Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, P. 64.

homogeneity exists, least of all in the area of sexuality. Baum has recently noted the existence of different forms of homosexuality in various parts of the continent. He discussed three forms: “egalitarian, transgenerational and transgenderal.”²⁴ The first of these he describes as natural and says it used to be prevalent during adolescence among the Luos, Nyakusa and the Kikuyus. Apparently, “Nyakusa society tolerates egalitarian same-sex intercourse among boys as well as girls until marriage. It is understood as a substitute for heterosexual pleasure. After marriage the practice is stigmatised.”²⁵ Although Baum calls this form of experience natural it clearly cannot be understood in terms of sexual orientation since it is used as surrogate for something else and, in any case, superseded by heterosexuality.

“On the other hand there seems to have been adult egalitarian lesbian activity among the Meru.”²⁶ It is true that the Meru stigmatized it and, like the Baganda, equated such behaviour with bestiality and witchcraft. “It was perhaps partly because of the stigma attached to lesbian conduct that nobles sometimes procured slave girls for their daughters to sleep with after painting and anointing them”.²⁷ As we have already hinted, lesbian relationships in Meru traditions have been explained as a function of large polygamous marriages in which certain wives were deprived of sex for long stretches of time because of lack of regular

²⁴ R. M Baum, *Homosexuality and Traditional Religions of the American and African*, P. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 22-33.

²⁶ G. Kaunda, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Meru* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), P. 189-190.

²⁷ G. Kaunda, *Sexual Inversion among the Meru* (Kendu Bay Adventist Press, 1977), P. 178.

contact with their husbands. Perhaps the custom of the Masai and Kisii's, "whereby two women publicly entered into close and ritualized friendship with each other, was the basis of lesbian sex and also an expression of dissatisfaction with polygamy."²⁸ "Lesbian practices are not unique to the Meru. Boris de Rachewiltz mentions the presence of lesbians among the Nandi of Kenya, the Mbundu, Nama and Bobo. Bobo women who were barren and mature sometimes married young girls."²⁹

The other two forms of homosexuality discussed by Baum are transgenerational and transgenderal. Maybe the clearest example of transgenerational homosexuality in East Africa is that described by G. Kaunda in his famous paper, sexual inversion among the Meru. The Meru practiced what Evans-Pritchard has called 'boy marriage': bachelors attached to the traditional court or the military in Meruland married young boys and treated them as wives. Indeed, "bridewealth arrangements applied to these unions just as they did to heterosexual ones, thus guaranteeing public recognition of homosexuality."³⁰ It appears that there was similar practices in the Kisii society of Kenya, "where older men entered into Obosani or 'friendship marriage' with younger boys with whom they shared the same bed."³¹

Transgenderal experience, the final form of homosexuality mentioned by Baum,

²⁸ Ibid, P. 184.

²⁹ Ibid, PP. 184 – 185.

³⁰ Ibid, PP. 189 – 197.

³¹ Robert Mochache, *Homosexuality and the African Culture*. (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1998), P. 22-23.

is linked to traditional religion. I define transgender homosexuality as the temporal and symbolic transformation of human sexuality through the corporeal individuation of the sexual ontologies of spirit beings. It is manifested in certain outward forms such as cross-dressing and reversal of gender behavior and roles. In some East African traditional religions this is a state normally associated with diviners and other religious functionaries. Philip Peek has noted how throughout East Africa “female diviners possessed by male spirits often dress like men and behave like men, whereas men possessed by female spirits take on the appearance and roles of women.”³² “Such men are sometimes married by other men.”³³ In this way transgender sexuality serves as the basis for same-sex acts. But it must be remembered that such acts are always associated with the liminal or ritual status of the people engaging in them and that it is this symbolic element which makes transgenderal sexuality socially acceptable in some communities. Of course, we must be careful not to reduce the mechanism of this transformation to a one-dimensional structure concerned only with the displacement of gender by sexual activity of one biological gender by another. The point about transgenderal sexuality is that it symbolically reconstitutes the traditional biological division of sex into a dialectic of multiple genders which are rendered possible by the variability of the sexual ontology of spirit beings as sometimes male, sometimes female and at other times asexual.

³² Philip Mike, *African Divination Systems*. (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1995), P. 201.

³³ Robert Mochache, *Homosexuality and the African Culture* (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 2000), P. 29.

We can conclude from this that corporeality of the diviner is the site on which the multiplicity of desire grows since the same body is inhabited by different genders at different times or even simultaneously, depending on whether one is in a liminal state and also on the duration of that state. This is the basis on which I earlier suggested the notion of the multiplicity of sexed bodies. The idea of crossing the biological divide between men and women through the agency of spirits inserts into sexuality two distinct regions of possibility, that of ambiguity and that of plurality, as important parts of the elementary structure of desire. A male diviner who becomes possessed by a female spirit, and whose bodily characteristics are symbolically modified as a result so that he behaves like a woman, expresses the assimilation of a metaphorical gender through ritual displacement, and at the same time dialectically affirms his biological gender, thus inscribing both ambiguity and plurality at the heart of sexual experience. This is because of the co-extensive presence, in his physically gendered body of other structures of sexual identity. Thus in itself, corporeality is but one marker of sexuality. The point is that even in its biological element as male or female, the body of the diviner compromises its sexual individuality by being always ritually situated midway between masculine and feminine possibilities. The diviner is, to be sure, not androgynous. When he is liminally transformed into a woman, he is woman and will be treated as such. In sum, what ritual in different communities up and down the African continent allows and what it prohibits can

thus serve as metaphors for the multiplicity of sexed bodies (social and individual).

3.5 Homosexuality in East African Prisons

I have given in this chapter a considerable amount of attention to research done on traditional homosexual practices in East Africa. What is the situation with regard to homosexual practices in present East African societies? The problem is that tradition in the East Africa societies does not provide for an open discussion on the matters of sexuality. This makes research on the topic of homosexuality extremely challenging since volunteers would be hard to get. Therefore other alternative sources had to be looked for, one such alternative is/was the prisons. There are some of the points that make prisons to be a viable option for research especially in East Africa i.e. Kenya and Uganda:

- (I) The national and international media run stories on homosexuality revealing that these end up being court cases. Eventually the convicted end up in prisons throughout the countries of East Africa.
- (II) According to one senior prison officer (his name withheld) in Kamithi maximum prison in Kenya on a television interview by journalists made it clear that no prisoner in Kenyan prison could be allowed either to visit or be visited by a spouse or sexual partner for the purposes of conjugal rights. With this highly restrictive regulations, it is likely to put a lot of sexual pressure in the prisoner who may turn to homosexuality for sexual release or relief.

(III) Another senior prison officer in the same prison (his name also withheld) on a television interview by journalists made it clear that the provision for parole was not necessarily made to address the issue of conjugal rights since it depends on whether a prisoner is trusted or not. The majority of prisoners do not have the privilege to enjoy the parole status. This leaves them with shattered hopes of ever uniting with their sexual partners which they left at home. Naturally, prisons become a very good source for research on homosexuality.

With the information I had concerning the homosexuals and the rapists in East African prisons, I approached the prison authorities in Kenya and Uganda, after introducing myself as a minister of religion and doctoral student at the University of Pretoria in the department of theology pursuing research on homosexuality in East Africa. I told them that I needed their assistance in order for me to reach the goal. I got a list of the convicted homosexuals, convicted rapists and the attempted rapists and permission was granted to meet with some of these individuals. An example of the questions I used is attached in appendix B.

Several of the offenders I personally interviewed. The explanations some of them gave to me for their offences contained an indirect appeal to tradition in a way that implicitly suggests the historical location of homosexuality in traditional culture. It was claimed by one prisoner, for example, “that the reason he had had sex with a young man was because a traditional doctor had instructed

him, after communicating with the prisoner's ancestors, to do so in order to secure his position at work. The act involved rubbing a certain concoction of herbs on the forehead of the penis before penetration."³⁴ "Another prisoner said he was possessed by a spirit that urged him into homosexual activity: a claim which would suggest some form of transgenderal sexuality."³⁵

The fact that these explanations were offered by people who had served a large part of their sentences should warn us against dismissing them simply on the suspicion that those who offered them were trying to obtain pardon. It is possible that these explanations are an attempt to link aspects of tradition with modern experience and to use that link as the basis for founding new forms of the self. Whether or not such a link can be shown to be actually present is, however, in some ways irrelevant since the important point is that what was used to appropriate and justify new forms of sexual behaviour was the perception of its existence. Those offenders who were prepared to talk about their homosexual activities identified themselves as (homosexuals) and said they found this a satisfying way of expressing their sexual identities.

3.6 Homosexuality in East Africa and the Street Children

If we now turn to my second category through which homosexuality is manifested in modern-day Nairobi, that of street children and sexuality, we encounter a different set of issues. The overwhelming experience of sex among

³⁴ Name withheld, prisoner at Kamithi Maximum Prison in Kenya, Interviewed by the researcher, Nairobi, Kenya, 10 February 2002.

³⁵ John Juma, Prisoner at Kamithi Maximum prison in Kenya, Interviewed by author, Nairobi, Kenya.

these children is with people of the same gender (using gender here in the usual sense). Most of the children on the street, at least during the day, are male³⁶ ranging in age from 6 to 30 (or more) years.³⁷ Sexual activity among street people falls into three distinct areas. First, there is homosexuality among the ‘street kids’ themselves. It must be remembered that because the community of the street children is predominantly male, their first sexual experience tend to be with other males. Much of this is by consent and involves no outsiders from the group. This is similar to what Baum called egalitarian homosexuality. But sometimes the older boys take advantage of the younger ones (form of transgenerational homosexuality)? And even rape has been known to occur. Second, there is homosexuality with outsiders, the latter find street kids attractive, because they are not as expensive as the usual rent-boys. The problem here is that since not all street children are willing, some are tempted into it by the prospect of immediate financial reward. Some go on to become professional rent-boys. Others eventually opt for heterosexual relationships. Third, there is the phenomenon of male prostitution. This is depicted in a small group of mostly young adult men who offer sex for cash. Male prostitution in Nairobi is highly formalized and secretive and depends on a network of people who know each other. Some of these young men are kept by homosexual men who are established but have no courage to come out or associate themselves with an

³⁶ Females tend to come out at night to work as prostitutes.

³⁷ The use of the term “Street Kids” to cover such a wide range of ages is problematical and serves to show how society can sometimes trivialize marginalized people by according them the status of minors.

organization such as the Gay and Lesbian Association. These young male prostitutes are not necessarily gay but use homosexuality as a way of earning their livelihood.

The problem, however, is that the use of street children for sex by outsiders has been seized upon by homophobes as one reason for rejecting homosexuality and it is also partly this which, quite unjustifiably, has given the gay community in Kenya a bad name. Moreover, the image of the street kids has suffered as a result. Not only are they the focus of a host of usual social prejudices but they are now often associated with both homosexuality and male prostitution. Of course, what society fails to see is that even those who end up as rent-boys are very often forced into that circumstances by economic necessity. Society also fails to see that there is a huge difference between discreet homosexual acts and gay culture. In fact this is a distinction which makes no sense to many Kenyans, since for many it is the sexual act itself which defines a gay person and not the quality of the person's relationships. The truth is, though, contrary to what has been recently claimed, there is not only a gay culture in Kenya, which for political reasons has been forced to operate underground, but there also exist other forms of homosexuality which correspond to the grid of same-gender sexuality elsewhere in East Africa.

3.7 Morality in East Africa (Kenya)

Some might object that to focus on the realities of the present, as I have done, is to shift the basis of the discussion from history to practice at the expense of the

authority of memory. We have, however, seen that the memory to which the Africanist condemnation of homosexuality appeals is one of an alleged absence. And it requires no great imagination to realize that absence does not provide grounds for moral judgment one way or another. The distinction between history and practice implied in the use of tradition to deny the present (and, therefore, the presence of homosexuality) is concerned not with the recovery of memory but with the inscription of the ideology of the past into the present. This is done by projecting the alleged historical uniqueness of Africanness on to the sprawling canvas of sexuality as a basis for political control of morality. Thus, the separation of history from practice (tradition from the present) results in the unity of history and ideology. Politicians and representatives of the churches know that in East Africa, as elsewhere, political causes and moral causes can hardly be separated. And for once they are right. But what they do not realize is that this conjunction of courses, which of course is always an expression of the unity of human experience, is never innocent. For it is precisely in that nexus that ideology reaches its gestation. Here civil society and the state join hands to erase any possibility of transgressive difference which people who participate in sex with persons of their own gender are taken to represent.

Two points need to be made here. The first is that the policing of moral choices by the state involves a dialectic which politicises ethics while at the same time turning ethics into a political problem. The second point is that homosexuality

itself then becomes a political issue. With regard to the first point, the state is never concerned with moral issues disinterestedly or for their own sake. It is always motivated by the problem of the extent to which the legitimisation of its political status depends on the exigencies of civil society. When economic and social problems threaten the legitimacy of the state it is sometimes necessary for it to speak the language of morality in order to win the support of civil society. This is what has been seen in Uganda in the last few years. Thus it is that both church and state have found common cause against homosexuality. What is interesting here is that prior to the political intervention of the state in challenging homosexuality, the churches were silent. This is not because they were unaware of the existence of homosexuality. It is rather because they subscribe to a view of sex which silenced any discourse relating to it. This silencing of the voice of desire is, of course, quite consistent with the attitude of African traditional culture in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The decision of the churches to join in the condemnation of homosexuality raises the important question: What is the basis of that decision? Is it traditional culture or is it Christian morality?

3.8 The Immorality of the Churches in East Africa

I want to argue here that churches' position is something of a knee-jerk reaction and, as such, is confused and not thought through. On the face of it, the support the churches have given to the cause against homosexuality might suggest that they share the basis on which that cause is founded. But this is only an

appearance. It will be recalled that homosexuality is rejected in the name of tradition and culture. The problem, however, is that the churches have, on the whole, a highly ambiguous view of traditional culture. Many of them still think of it (in terms of the old missionary ideology) as pagan and superstitious. Yet, ironically, it is this culture which is invoked to combat homosexuality. In the interview with the pastor for Mombasa Central S.D.A Church, the researcher was made aware that “the basis of their objection is not culture but Christian morality”³⁸ But this simply begs the question: whose Christianity? There are, even in East Africa, many Christians today, including clergy, who are gay and homosexuals. This is a reality with which African churches are simply out of touch. “There is not a single church in the country that has formulated a coherent sexual ethic of any kind.”³⁹ But this has not deterred churches from marching in the streets in support of the cause of the states against homosexuality. The point of my remarks is to argue that the relationship between morality and culture, on which the churches ought always to speak prophetically, is delivered over a reactionary political ideology which has arrogated to itself the position of moral leadership. By following that leadership the churches become voices of another master. The fact that sexuality has come to represent the arena within which that question is being fought out says something about the importance of the relationship between sexuality and social

³⁸Haron Nyamweya, Pastor of Mombasa Central S.D.A Church, Interviewed by the researcher, Mombasa, Kenya 12 February, 2002.

³⁹ Ibid.

identity. “In a society in which the regulation of kinship and lineage through reproduction fundamentally serves as source of the self, collective and individual, we can expect strong reaction to any form of sexuality that threatens to transgress usual ways of self-defining.”⁴⁰ This is so not only because kinship and lineage depend on the operation of rules which directly address sexual matters and patterns of marriage but also because by so doing, kinship rules mark out sexuality as one crucial locus of identity. In other words, the ways in which people understand themselves include their sexuality, and this is encoded in lineage and kinship rules. Participation in these rules are, therefore, a performance of the self on the stage of culture.⁴¹ Again, the innumerable rituals that attend marriage, the prescriptions that apply to when and where sex can or cannot be performed, and the training of girls for sex in marriage provide good examples of how identity is performed. It is played out in following the rules that enunciate the way relationships are ordered, at least at some levels, in terms of gender and sex roles. It is this performance of the self in many African cultures which has been historically interrupted by modernity.

What is sad in all this is the way in which the states in East Africa have not only co-opted the language of ethics but the way they have used that language to strip individuals of their moral rights. Equally worrying has been the way in which

⁴⁰Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia 1894 – 1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), P. 26ff.

⁴¹The notion of performance of the self is meant to express the fact that in Africa, culture’s identity is not simply a state contributed by relationship between mind and body (the mind – body problem in philosophy) but a function of roles and rituals as themselves processes of identity formation.

the churches have remained silent when homosexuals have been called names, e.g. “dogs” and have had serious threats made against their lives in the name of traditional morality. But when homosexuals point out that this is not just a matter of morality or culture but one of rights, they are denounced both morally and politically as though politics have nothing to do with rights and morality. Here the states contradicts themselves or rather shows themselves to be quite prepared to have their own cake and eat it alone. And these are the states which claim to be democratic.

Conclusion

From what has been written in this chapter one can conclude that it would be a serious mistake for the SDA church to make East African culture normative in the theological ethical evaluation of homosexuality since:

- i. Oral East African tradition does not really provide any *moral* view on homosexuality. To read into the silence on homosexuality the moral condemnation of homosexuality is not acceptable.
- ii. Homosexual practices, in a ritualized form, are not foreign to East African culture.
- iii. The strong condemnation of homosexuality in East Africa is often politically and ideologically inspired.

The question remains: if the East African cultures cannot provide us with an adequate normative basis for the theological ethical evaluation of homosexuality,

can the Bible do that? In the next chapter we will turn to an in depth discussion of the ethical guidance the Bible provides with regard to homosexuality.

APPENDIX A

FROM: PASTOR MATWETWE KNN

TO: SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH MEMBERS IN EAST AFRICA

DATE: FEBRUARY 1st to 28th, 2003

RE: RESEARCH ON HOMOSEXUALITY IN EAST AFRICAN CONTEXT: A SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE.

I, the above mentioned, currently being a doctoral student at the University of Pretoria in South Africa in the department of Theology, am pursuing research on homosexuality in East African and I need your assistance on this issue in order for me to reach the goal.

I would like to assure you that whatever information you give will be confidential and you will not be held responsible for any information. Therefore it is not important to write your names on this questionnaire form.

Questionnaire

1. In your own understanding, what is homosexuality?

2. As far as you are concerned, has homosexuality always existed in East Africa or is it something new?

3. Where do you think homosexuality originate from?



4. (a) What do you think should be the normative basis for the ethical evaluation of homosexuality in East Africa? the Bible and /or culture? Give reasons-----

- (b) In your personal opinion is homosexuality acceptable in East Africa?
Yes No
In your answer give reasons-----

5. What role should culture play in the evaluation of homosexuality in East Africa? -----

6. What role does the church play with regard to those who declare themselves homosexuals? -----

APPENDIX B

1. Are you a religious person?
2. If yes, what is your religion, or denomination?
3. If no, are you a traditionalist?
4. What do you understand homosexuality to be?
5. At what age did you first come to know about homosexuality?
6. At that time did you think homosexuality was an acceptable thing?
7. At the time of your engagement in homosexuality had your original perspective on homosexual changed? If yes, how?
8. What is your preference: homosexuality or heterosexuality?
9. What led you specifically to engage in that homosexual activity?
10. Do you consider yourself a homosexual or was it for that particular time?
11. Would you repeat the homosexual experience if you have the opportunity?