Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2023, Vol 9, No 1, 1–23
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n1.a24
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459

Pulpits and politics, discrimination and disruptive bodies: Anti-LGBT+ sentiments installed by Christian nationalism in Africa and disruptive counternarratives.[1]

J.D.K. van Jaarsveld
University of the Free State, South Africa
miasvj@gmail.com

Abstract

Zambia is an official Christian nation – it is added in their constitution's preamble. When tracing the country's history, the story of European Christian missionaries who installed a heteronormative and patriarchal understanding of the Bible is quite prominent. Despite decolonisation and a growing awareness of the importance of gender equality, heteronormative – and consequently anti-gay – sentiments are still prominent in African churches – especially in Neo-Pentecostal churches, whose theology is rooted in the American televangelism. These churches are the fastest growing nodes of spirituality on the African continent, and despite preaching "freedom" and "power", they have a fundamental understanding of the Bible where there is no room for queer bodies. In fact, in this Christian country, homosexuality has been politicised, even weaponised since a majority of Zambians are opposed to homosexual behaviour. In this article, I give an overview of anti-gay sentiments in Zambia as experienced in the field, place this in conversation with Queer Theory and Queer Theology with the hope to draft a disruptive narrative for transforming practice.

1 This article is based on original research done for my PhD on African Masculinities. The ethical clearance for this project was approved by the University of the Free State's General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). Ethical clearance number: *UFS-HSD2019/0269/1405*. Originally this paper was intended for Stellenbosch University's "Power to discriminate" conference (18–20 March 2020), which was cancelled due to Covid-19. It was presented at the University of the Free State's Gender Talks Series hosted by the Centre for African and Gender Studies, and then redacted to be published as an Academic paper.

Keywords

Zambia; Queer theology; Christian nationalism; queer; American televangelism; Pentecostalism

1. Introduction

In 2018, Siya Khumalo published a book with the title: *You have to be gay to know God*. In this book, Khumalo integrates his experience of being gay and black in a post-Apartheid South Africa, divulging his experience of the intersectionality of religion, politics, and sexuality. This book has been praised by critics – some even called it a form of queer theology, and this was affirmed when the book received the Desmond Tutu-Gerrit Brand prize for a debut work in an official South African language.[2]

In chapter nine of his book, Khumalo talks about his experience of entering the Mr. Gay World pageant in 2015 as a proxy-contestant for Zambia. The reason why this is significant lies in the fact that no person from Zambia would dare to enter this pageant, due to the country's strict and damning rules regarding homosexuality. In the past, contestants from many African countries withdrew from this pageant due to domestic pressure, disownment from their families, (alleged) homophobic attacks, public shaming, and after receiving death threats (Lusaka Voice 2015). It is significant to note that the majority of the contestants who withdrew come from previously colonised, African nations. Khumalo himself became a victim of public ridicule and hate speech, which included dehumanising, xenophobic, and homophobic remarks; Zambians called him a sinner who does not represent their nation and its values (Khumalo 2018:188–189). Khumalo however felt that refraining from entering would deny the existence of queer populations in countries like Zambia and the human right violations committed against numerous LGBTI[3] persons in Africa. Khumalo ended in the top 10 of Mr. Gay World in 2015, and even though he did not win the competition, his entry had a ripple effect: not only did

2 See http://andrewmurrayprize.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/AM-2019-program-1.jpg [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

3 LGBTI is the abbreviation Khumalo uses for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Intersex people. Other abbreviations used are LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI+, LGBT+, some just use the word "queer" or "gay".

he raise awareness of the stance of homosexuality in Zambia, but he also became a source of encouragement for oppressed queer people across the African continent (Khumalo 2018:188–192; Lusaka Voice 2015).

In 2018, while I was at O.R. Tambo International airport in Johannesburg on my way to Zambia to do fieldwork for my PhD, I stopped to buy Khumalo's book. Since I was going to be doing research on African masculinities, I believed that this book would introduce me to the world of a black, queer, Christian man. This was a deliberate transgressive move on my part since this book is banned in Zambia (Khumalo 2018:190). The provocative title, *You have to be gay to know God*, resulted in the woman at the counter asking: "Do you believe this? This can't be true." Therefore, even before entering Zambia, in South Africa, Christianity and homosexuality were labelled as irreconcilable opposites. This experience created the backdrop of what I experienced in the field while confronting me with my own positionality – an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church who dares not to divulge his sexuality due to Zambia's strong views on anything that does not fall in the heterosexual norm. Therefore, despite the many privileges I experience as an educated, able-bodied, middleclass, white man in Africa, I have also experienced some forms of discrimination – some intentional and non–intentional – because of my sexuality. Therefore, the issues raised in this article are also personal and are done with the necessary hesitation and reverence for the church, queer persons, and the African continent.

2. Homosexuality – the pulpits, Zambia

Following the ethnographic and narrative methods of doing research, I entered Zambia as a participant–observer with the knowledge that talking about sex and sexuality in public is considered culturally offensive.[4] Or at least, so I was told. I later discovered that there are numerous places where sex and sexuality are discussed. In the Chewa culture, for example, there is a cultural rite called the *cinamwali*, where older women teach teenage girls

4 This was not just an observation but came up during the interviews held for of this project. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and interviewees participated voluntarily. The ethical clearance for this project was approved by the University of the Free State's General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). Ethical clearance number*: UFS-HSD2019/0269/1405*

how to seduce and pleasure men sexually (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1982:182; Banda 2014:12). Also, as HIV and GBV have been labelled as matters of great concern, more churches are participating in discussions on the subject despite the hesitation of some. Here, it is however important to note that discussions on sex and sexuality would always place the emphasis on "biblical" family values and "desirable" marriages, which enforces certain constraints on sexual/gendered behaviours, including monogamy, abstinence outside and before marriage, taboos over contraception, strong opinions on reproductive health, banning divorce for reasons other than adultery, reluctance to speak about sex in public, and imposing hierarchal, male-lead households and female submission (Elphick 2012:74–75; Cage & Rueda 2019:3; Haynes 2022).

Therefore, talking about sexuality is not necessarily taboo, except when discussions involves homosexuality which is considered an abomination. Zambia, along with many other sub-Saharan Africa countries, argues that homosexuality is unacceptable, unnatural, inhuman, un-African, un-Christian, and a Western invention that undermines traditional family roles and values (Van Klinken 2016:111; Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:316–318; Bastien, Kajula & Muhwezi 2011:2). In the past, homosexuality has been blamed for natural disasters such as droughts, as well as tragedies like HIV, and most recently for COVID-19. Some Pentecostal pastors argue that this is clearly a sign of God's displeasure with mankind, calling for repentance and action against homosexuality (Haynes 2022; Forster 2021; Igual 2020c).

I experienced these sentiments first-hand during fieldwork in Zambia. Any attempt to bring this topic into the conversation seemed fairly impossible; in fact, I was explicitly warned *not* to engage in discussions about homosexuality in the Reformed Church in Zambia. Reasons included:

- "We do not talk about things like that …"
- "It is just not the African way …"
- "The Bible is clear that this is wrong …"
- "Culturally and religiously, it cannot be allowed …"
- "It is disrespectful, offensive …" and
- "This is Zambia, not Europe; *here* we still take the Bible seriously!"

Out of respect for my hosts, I never enquired about homosexuality, well aware that silence on the matter could also be considered empirical data for my study. This silence, however, was interrupted numerous times. During an interview with a theological student, he asked: "Abusa,[5]I saw on Facebook that your church is voting on gays. Can you explain to me what is going on?" He was referring the verdict of the South African High Court in March 2019, when queer members of Dutch Reformed Church took the General Synod to court after its decision on same-sex relationships in 2016.[6] Respectfully, I replied, "Have you considered asking your lecturers about it." He answered, "Our lecturers will never talk about these gay things."

In my experience, Zambians are reluctant to even mention homosexuality in conversation – not only in church circles, but also at the seminaries where pastors receive theological training. It is a matter of, *Don't ask, don't tell; if we do not talk about it, it is not an issue.* However, when the subject *does* come up in conversation, it is aggressively opposed. Homosexuals are stereotyped as "sex maniacs" with "a serious distortion" who violate the Divine Order and God's intention for heterosexual marriage (Van Klinken 2013:111–112). These responses – both the silence and the timeworn reactions – reveal Christian-Zambia's efforts to justify and sustain heteronormative values, while also reinforcing a hierarchical order between men and women; a hierarchy that same-sex relationships disrupt and inconvenience (Van Klinken 2013:155). A hierarchy that is challenged by Khumalo's participation in Mr. Gay World as a gay Christian, and a hierarchy that is disrupted by the Dutch Reformed Church's General Synod who voted in favour of same-sex unions.

Here, one can ask: How far will Zambians go to defend this belief? This notion is not only found on the pulpits of Zambian churches – it is also found in the chambers of the parliament and on the benches of their courts. I experienced this when I was doing fieldwork in 2019, when Zambia became the focal point of international news.

---

5 The Chechewa and Njanje word "Shepherd", the title given to reverends/pastors in Zambia.

6 See https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2019/03/08/kerksaak-lees-volledige-uitspraak-hier/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020]. In 2015, the General Synod decided in favour of same-sex unions. In 2016, this decision was revoked.

3. Homosexuality in politics

In November of 2019, when I arrived in Lusaka, I called my regular taxi driver to collect me to the airport. I asked him: "Benjamin, what happened while I was away?" Stunned, he replied: "Abusa, have you not heard? They locked up two men for being gay. They got fifteen years in prison." Curious on Benjamin's stance on homosexuality, I asked him whether he thought fifteen years is too much. He answered: "No Abusa, actually it should have been twenty-five years … It is unnatural. You will find that not even animals engage in this sort of activities." Benjamin's disgust aligns with the dominant anti-gay attitude found on pulpits and in politics in Zambia.

The case Benjamin was referring to overwhelmed the news well into the beginning of 2020. In November of 2019, the High Court in Zambia sentenced two men to 15 years in prison after they were caught having sex two years earlier at a lodge in the town Kapiri Mposhi. The two men, Stephen Sambo and Japhet Chataba, were arrested after a female employee presented video evidence on her cell phone of the two men being intimate (Gondwe 2019). The two men were arrested in October 2017 on the grounds of "performing unnatural acts". Ten days after they had sex, they were forced to undergo an anal examination – a practice many label inappropriate due to its brutal and humiliating nature (Igual 2020b). After being found guilty in the local magistrates' court in 2018, the two men took their case to the High Court in Lusaka. They pleaded innocent on the grounds that their relationship is consensual and therefore does not harm anyone. They also highlighted the fact that this case is a gross invasion of their privacy. In 2019, the judge of the High Court, Mr. Charles Zulu, refused to review the verdict of the lower court, feeling that having gay sex goes "against the laws of nature" – a legal phrase in the old sodomy laws Zambia inherited from the British colonial era (Gondwe 2019; Times Live 2018; Frey 2019; Han & O'Mahoney 2014:23). Even though these British laws have been amended in Britain and homosexuality decriminalised in many countries, Zambia still subscribes to it (Han & O'Mahoney 2014:2,3).

After the High Court's sentence, the ambassador of the United States of America in Zambia, Mr. Daniel Foote, criticized this verdict, feeling that it threatens Zambia's democracy. For Foote, this verdict degrades its own citizens' human, economic, and political rights (Mansoor 2019;

Schumacher 2020). He argued that fifteen years of imprisonment is utterly unjust; especially when one considers the fact that there are numerous corrupt politicians who steal millions of public dollars, and political factions that beat innocent civilians and gets away unscathed. Elephant poachers, whose crime is disruptive and damaging, only get five years in prison, but these two men, who did not harm anyone, were sentenced with fifteen years (NBC News 2019).

Mr. Edgar Lungu – who was president at that time – immediately refuted Foote's response. Even before becoming president, Lungu aligned himself with the notion that homosexuality as a Western invention, an imposition influenced by neo-colonialists, attempting to re-alienate and re-acculturate the minds of African nationalists (Van Klinken 2014:266). Despite the pressure from donor countries, and his commitment to gender equality, president Lungu is very outspoken *against* gay rights (Times Live 2018). The Zambian government accused Foote of trying to dictate policy in Zambia, and president Lungu responded that Zambia would "[…] rather remain in poverty" (Mansoor 2019) than be dependent on the financial aid of around $500 million annually that comes with prescriptions and interference (BBC News 2019; Schumacher 2020). This is a bold claim in the name of faith for a nation where some regions are living in extreme poverty. Shortly after this, President Lungu declared Foote *persona non grata*,[7] and Foote was recalled by the US government (BBC News 2019).

Former American president Donald Trump did not respond to the ambassador's withdrawal from Zambia, but one of his Religious Freedom Commissioners, Mr. Tony Perkins did. Perkins, a man with a record of anti-gay law-making, supported Foote's removal. He argued that Foote's concern for the sentencing of Sambo and Chataba does not represent the values of the United States; he blamed the liberal Obama administration who used financial blackmail to promote its "radical social agenda" (Duffy 2020). Perkins reassured the press that Mr. Trump, a president who is endorsed by Christian evangelicals, is working hard on dismantling the army of international lobbyists who are imposing radical policies, like the

7 "Persona non grata" is a Latin which means "person not appreciated" or "person not welcome"; in diplomacy, this term indicates that a person cannot stay or enter the country.

LGBT agenda (Lusaka Times 2020; Duffy 2020). This means the Trump administration chose to side itself with the Zambian government, rather than with a committed American official who questioned the rationality of this sentence. This is a clear example of right-wing political opportunism, where two gay men in Zambia became the pawns in American politics in order to maintain the favour of Christian voters. Journalist Jeffrey Haynes would label this as one of the dangers that Christian nationalism poses: it threatens human rights by oppressing and dehumanising LGBTQ+ persons, it justifies discrimination in the name of religion freedom, while the motive behind it is actually political (Haynes 2022: electronic source).

During the next few weeks of my stay in Zambia, this case dominated the news on television and radio, it trended on social media and was addressed in churches. Complaints and accusations included:

- "America should not interfere in our country."
- "Homosexuality is something the West imposes on us", and
- "There are no gay people in Zambia – only confused and sinful men".[8]

The political antagonism against Western influence in Zambia is not a new thing. According to the Lusaka Times (2019a), weeks before the verdict of this case, a motion was moved by a member of parliament to ban all political parties affiliated to the African Liberal Network – a network in several African countries that receives funding from Europe and the United States[9] (Lusaka Times 2019b). An MP from the Patriotic Front party, Mr. Martin Malema, for example argued that all parties affiliated with this network are trying to introduce liberal values into Zambia, which in turn would later permit homosexuality in this Christian nation. The involved parties refuted these accusations, calling it ungrounded propaganda and political opportunism, but after the verdict of the High Court, they persistently had to reassure the parliament and the public that they do not have a gay agenda (Lusaka Times 2019a).

8 Arguments on the radio, on the news, and comments during informal discussions. This aligns with the grassroots work done by Van Klinken (2013:111–112).

9 See http://www.africaliberalnetwork.org

These accusations were purposefully invoked to discredit political opponents,[10] and the light of the upcoming election in 2021, homosexuality was politicised again. I got the impression that political parties repeatedly had to distance themselves from anything remotely connected to the Western policies and homosexuality. The reaction was overwhelming, and the news reports and radio interviews soon cyphered through to homophobic sermons from the pulpit and heated discussions on the street. Responses were discriminatory and extremely homophobic; it was as though Zambian people had the "right" to discriminate against homosexuality, and this "right" rested on a number of interlocking narratives which involved culture, religion, and politics.

It is notable to add that Mr. Foote never returned to Zambia and is currently a diplomat in Haiti. It is also interesting to note that on 25 May 2020, to commemorate African Freedom Day, former president Mr. Edgar Lungu pardoned Chataba and Sambo along with 2900 other prisoners. All of this happened during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore – maybe strategically – did not receive a lot of publicity. Though, there are speculations why Lungu pardoned these two gay men: it could be attributed to international backlash and pressure from the countries whose financial support would be crucial in the coming months in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Some also speculate that this pardon also contributed to him losing the presidential election in 2021 (Mfula 2020; Igual 2020a). The random and unexpected release of Chataba and Sambo does divulge the fact that queer bodies are at the frontline of politics and undoubtedly affected by Christian Nationalism. But where does this Christian nationalism character come from? And where does this leave queer bodies?

10 During a radio interview on 12 December 2019 that I listened to, representatives from numerous political parties had a heated discussion, and they accused one other of having a liberal agenda, which would allow homosexuality. Participants of this interview repeatedly had to reassure the host and listeners that they ascribe to traditional and conservative Christian values in Zambia. This interview is recorded in my ethnographic journal and field notes.

4. Christian nationalism and queer bodies

Zambia is among a number of countries who regards Christianity as their national religion. This could be attributed to the explosive growth of (American-inspired) Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in the country. Zambia was declared an official Christian nation by President Frederick Chiluba on 29 December 1991 – a declaration that has been repeatedly affirmed by political leaders and was later included in the preamble of country's constitution. Chiluba had a strong following among Pentecostal Christians, and even though this declaration was met with adoration and appraisal, it is important to note that this decision was made barely three months into his presidency, without prior consultation to the government (Van Klinken 2014:262; Van Klinken & Phiri 2015:10). During my fieldwork in Zambia, some respondents disclosed that they question Chiluba's intentions when he made this declaration: was it out of personal conviction, in order to obtain popularity, or to leave a legacy like his predecessor? In either case, the power of the president was abused in the name of the Christian faith.

An upsurge of Christian nationalism followed (Van Klinken 2014:263), which was greatly influenced by the theology of American televangelists with their fundamental interpretation of the Bible (Alimi 2015). The impact thereof is clearly visible in the country's endorsement of "traditional family values" – which basically implies patriarchy as God's will and heterosexuality as the norm, which in turn installs an intolerance towards the queer community (Haynes 2022; Forster 2021). When these Christian values collided with the old British colonial sodomy laws,[11] not only religion, but also homosexuality became politicised, and both churches and the government are working hard to defend the country's Christian character (Van Klinken 2014:265). Nigerian journalist Bibi Alimi claims that "...populist homophobia has kept many politicians in power. Across Africa, if you hate gay people, you get votes" (Alimi 2015). Zambian culture and Christianity became interchangeable canons, which even contested

11 Even though the laws that prohibits same-sex practices, are old, out-of-date British colonial (British) laws that have already been amended in Britain (Van Klinken & Phiri 2015:10; Han & O'Mahoney 2014:9–10). Since the 1960, homosexuality has been decriminalised (Han & O'Mahoney 2014:9)

the citizenship of sexual minorities (Van Klinken & Phiri 2015:10). Since being Zambian is synonymous with being Christian, but homosexuality is irreconcilable with Christianity, can you be a gay Zambian? Van Klinken would disprove the assumption that LGBTI persons are not religious ; in his research he found that queer people in Africa are actually "deeply, proudly and happily religious" (Van Klinken & Phiri 2015:2; Van Klinken 2015:948).

Alimi finds it quite ironic that Africans argue that homosexuality is a Western import, while using a Western religion to support this argument; also when Africans say that homosexuality is not in their culture, why would they use the Bible – a piece of Western literature – to substantiate their answer (Alimi 2015). This is exactly what happened in South Africa when African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) leader, Mr. Kenneth Meshoe, not only condemned the liberal West's desire to impose the LGBT+ agenda on the African continent, but also the honouring of Archbishop Desmond Tutu with a Lifetime Achievement Award for services to the gay community. Mpho Buntse, spokesperson of the ANC Women's league (ANCWL) contested Meshoe's statement that homosexuality is un-African, saying that same-sex desire has been "present on the African continent... even before colonisation" (Igual 2020a). Homosexual individuals would agree that being gay is not something imposed on them, but a fundamental, discriminatory reading of the Bible however, is. Therefore, Christianity is more foreign to Africa, than homosexuality. Calling homosexuality un-African and not part of African culture, can be problematic, since historically, the Bible is not Africa's culture either (Alimi 2015; Khumalo 2018:267-270).

The irony of calling homosexuality "un-Christian" and "un-African" in Zambia, lies in the fact that the Christian faith and its views on sex and sexuality were imposed by the early European missionaries in Zambia during colonialism (Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:318). This means that anti-LGBT rhetoric in postcolonial Zambia could actually be attributed to the decades of European influence (or indoctrination), and their views of sex, sexuality and civilisation. The same could be said of the contemporary, highly popular, American inspired Pentecostal (or evangelical) theology that demonises homosexuality, as it disrupts the traditional family values central to Zambia's identity as a Christian nation (Van Klinken 2014:268–

269). The country's Christian nationalistic character, however, influences the sexual politics greatly, and inhibits LGBT rights, leaving many gay men and women vulnerable to a type of culturally and religiously appropriated homophobia (Van Klinken 2015:959–960).

It could also be argued that calling homosexuality "un-African" in Zambia is actually an "un-African" sentiment, since independent Zambia was founded on the ethos "One Zambia – One Nation", Kenneth Kaunda's (and therefore authentically African) humanist philosophy which fostered a nation where there are (and should be) no divisions on the grounds of race, colour, creed, tribe, religion, or sex (Kaunda 1974: xi). Although Zambian Humanism[12] is not explicitly Christian, it has been appropriated to the Christian nationalism ideology which was installed later by President Frederick Chiluba and his successors (Soko 2014:131–133; Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:316). This creed, however, embraces difference and accommodates diversity, and implies that all people should be treated with respect, love, and dignity (Soko 2014:131–133). Discrimination against homosexuals and homophobia goes against this philosophy. Relatedly, new research[13] has uncovered that many precolonial Southern Africa societies (Zambia by name) most likely knew and tolerated same-sex relations – some even embraced and accommodated homosexuality. Since it was the colonial masters that criminalised homosexuality, it could be argued that homosexuality and affirming same-sex sexualities is much more "African" than the discrimination against it (Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:317–318). Considering the abovementioned, introducing queer theory and broadening the table to listen to the queer experience could be considered a relevant, albeit uncomfortable, narrative in Zambia.

12 Zambian Humanism is very similar to Ubuntu in South Africa. It says: Together we are stronger, despite our differences; despite our culture, our race, our gender, our sexuality. "One Zambia – One Nation", embraced and accommodated diversity; it has the ability to bring ethnically and culturally diverse people together in the spirit of cooperation and tolerance; it acknowledges marginalised groups, and treats all people with respect, love and dignity, unconditionally (Soko 2014:131–133).

13 This includes referrals to historical and ethnographic accounts from Southern and Central Africa, as well as prehistoric cave paintings, oral histories, and the literary constructions thereof.

5. Queerness as disruptive narrative

The term "queer theory" was coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991 and was an attempt to delink the relationship between sexuality and gender within the deconstructionist paradigm (Ngwena 2018:233). Although the term "queer" was originally used as a derogatory term to describe persons whose sexual or gender identity do not fall into the binary and heteronormative categories, the gay community reclaimed this term – along with its painful (homophobic) connotations – as an inclusive umbrella term by and for individuals who identify with non-normative sexualities and/or gender identities (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons). The word "queer" involves a transgressive action of embracing sexual and gender identities that disrupts the status quo, reclaiming the voices of those who had been previously ignored, silenced, discarded, discriminated against, condemned, and persecuted (Cheng 2011:2–6; Van Klinken 2019:4, 7). Queer theory does not aim to impose homosexuality onto people; rather, it values the stories of queer persons in order to gain new perspectives on issues regarding sex, sexuality, and gender, since their experience thereof differs from the heterosexual-hegemonic norm (Cheng 2011:18–19). Also, since queer rights are inherently human rights, political homophobia in Zambia shows that contemporary Africa has a different understanding of the concepts (and the traditions of thought they represent) ascribed to identity politics and the lived experience (Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:320–321).

Queerness is inherently political; it could be seen as a resistance to the societal rules that upholds the patriarchal system, unravelling power that bind communities. Queer theory shows that sex and sexuality is not only about "usefulness", procreation, or upholding hierarchies, it is also about meaningful relationships, pleasure, complementarity, and inclusivity. As an academic discipline, "queer theory" found inspiration in feminist theory, and in the deconstructive and poststructural schools of thought. This includes Foucault's notion that identities are constituted through bodily acts rather than psychoanalysis and knowledge production; that identities are the result of constant negotiation rather than a mere natural (or biological) fact, and that the focus on bodies (the bodily experience, including pleasure) helps one to unlearn (and move beyond) the rules set by patriarchy which places sexuality as a primary register when making

sense of ourselves (Foucault 1978:157; Cheng 2011:6; Ngwena 2018:233). Therefore, queer theory involves erasing boundaries – it challenges and disrupts the traditional (essentialist) notions that categorises sexuality and gender into fixed binary categories by questioning its significance when considering that they are merely social constructs (Cheng 2011:7).

Queer theory has since developed into a critical conceptual and analytical tool that aims to "[...] interrupt and destabilise the implicit and explicit norms and assumptions that underlie much sexual and gender identification and categorisation" (Van Klinken 2019:7). In other words: queer theory questions (and critiques) the metaphysics of sex and gender that habitually essentialises sexual acts and gender identities; it problematises the "natural" (or the biologically, socially, politically, and historically determined) categories of sex, sexuality, and gender, countering the identity labels given to bodies (Ngwena 2018:233–234). Queer theory embraces sexual pluralism and diversity, and it aims to move away from all sexual identities that implicitly privileges hetero-patriarchal values and categorisation. In practice, it mobilises against all identity-based hierarchies, seeking to achieve a radical plural democracy where there is hierarchal recognition in terms of sexuality and gender (Ngwena 2018:234). It is considered disruptive, since it destabilises heteronormative assumptions and categorisation, and works towards an epistemology where all binaries and hierarchies are displaced, resulting in no sexual minorities and majorities (Ngwena 2018:235; Van Klinken 2019:7)

In response to the question on whether queer theory is a relevant epistemology when studying sexuality and gender in Africa, Ngwena (2018:237) affirms that it can be, since queer theory emphasises queer (lived) experience as a source of knowledge and gives descriptions of nonhegemonic expressions of gender and sexuality that have remained historically hidden and not openly discussed in many African communities. In Zambian communities where patriarchal and heteronormative systems that are sustained in the name of Christian and traditional values, queer theory might seem like a threat since it disrupts the gender hierarchy (that advantages men and disadvantages women), disempowers men, and inconveniences the social hegemonic (Van Klinken 2016:155). In a time of gender-based violence, it could be argued that this is exactly why queer theory (and queer theology) is necessary. Queer theory disrupts binary, essentialist, and deterministic

grammar, and enables an equality framework that is porous to the plurality of sex, sexuality, and gender subjectivities. It embraces the fact that sex, sexuality, and gender – like other identity markers – are complex, fluid, unstable, and intersectional. Ngwena (2018:239) calls it a transformative way forward, since it deconstructs the criteria prescribed by so-called "master frameworks" that comes with rigid psychological and socio-cultural boundaries and hierarchies, which ultimately supress and erase individuals and groups that are not compliant.

In his book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2019), Van Klinken (2019:7) argues that queer theory could be a very useful tool when studying, analysing, and engaging in conversations on gender and sexuality in African religion, and even though his research was done in Kenya, the findings and theories could also be applied in the Zambian context. In his book that focuses on the queer experience (queer activism and resistance) in Kenya, Van Klinken (2019:4–5) reminds the reader that portraying the African continent as backward and conservative while claiming the West as liberal and progressive is quite problematic when considering the complexity and historical embeddedness of institutional homophobia in postcolonial Africa. Even though African scholars have been hesitant to use the term "queer" since it used to be linked with a Western theoretical framework, it has been increasingly embraced by those who pose that queer African studies is an influential tool when researching gender and sexual diversity, since it also addresses intersection issues like postcolonialism and decolonisation (Van Klinken 2019:8–9).

In the context of a highly religious African continent, homosexuality and Christianity are often viewed as opposites, and engaging in queer activism or an LGBT identity often meant leaving religion behind. Queer theory and queer studies look to the lived experiences and testimonies of gay persons as authentic sources of knowledge, recognises sexual diversity in practice, and challenges us to revisit the heteronormative definitions of relationships, marriages, gender hierarchies, and expressions of sexuality (Cheng 2011:18–21). Van Klinken argues that queer African theology is necessary to really deepen the understanding of basic theological positions, like "being created in the image of God", recognising that this means that all people – regardless of identity markers like colour, gender, class, race,

nationality, religion, ethnicity, heath status, age, or sexual orientation – are loved by God (Van Klinken 2019:14,21).

More boldly, Van Klinken (2019:80–83) argues that queerness not only disrupts and critiques, but it also reclaims Christianity and reimagines Africa. In many communities, Christianity has often been the motivation behind discrimination and rejection; queerness however pushes the boundaries of neighbourly love, unity, and solidarity with all who have experienced marginalisation and oppression because of who they are. Queerness in African Christianity values lived (religious) stories and is therefore a grassroot theology where the God of punishment and wrath – which is usually associated with homosexuality – is countered with an affirming and loving of God (Van Klinken 2019:125–129). Maybe Khumalo (2019) has a point to when he says, "You have to be gay to know God." The queer experience expands our understanding of God and what it means to be a Christian; it helps us to erase all socially constructed boundaries that inhibits us to grasp the radical love and grace of God.

Jesus Christ also becomes a disruptive figure in queer theology, since he took the experiences of people seriously, he treated (so-called) sinners and minorities with respect and compassion, he had countercultural views, and was in fact radical in his words and his methods (Van Klinken 2019:131–134). Furthermore, when considering the definition of queer theory, Jesus could also be considered "queer"; not in the sense that Jesus was homosexual, but in the sense that he paid attention to the voices of those who were habitually overlooked and marginalised. Jesus did not care for the culturally and religiously endorsed gender binaries; he was not ashamed to be in the presence of and interact with the poor, foreigners, the sick, women or children – people who were habitually overlooked. Queer theologians often turn to the healing of the Roman soldier's slave (Mt 8:5–13 and Lk 7:1–10) which when looking at the original text translates into Jesus healing the Roman soldier's male lover and thereby endorsing a homosexual relationship. Jesus could be considered queer when considering the fact that he never married – which would have raised the eyebrows of a few pious leaders in his time – and the fact that Jesus refused to be held back by the prescriptive purity codes. The fact that Jesus deliberately chose a road of suffering, weakness, and frailty – attributes often ascribed to queer men – instead of power, strength and importance, also contributes to the

ambiguity when it comes to his gender. This ambiguity however is a good thing, because it allows Jesus to be a Christ that is universally relatable; whether you are heterosexual, homosexual or anything in between (Cheng 2011:78–86; University of Oslo 2020; Shore-Goss 2020: 115–133; Jordan 2007: 281–292).

Contrary to the (patriarchal) belief, queer theory and queer theology do not impose a "gay agenda" onto people – it only recognises that which is already there; it reclaims (and queers) pieces of scripture that has been hijacked by anti-queer interpretations to promote discrimination and exclusion. It challenges the hierarchies installed by heteronormativity and therefore excludes stories of minorities, diversities, and queer ways of being community and/or church, whilst also embracing new (or alternative) ways of being human and a queer embodiment of one's faith in Africa (Kaoma 2015:26–28; Van Klinken 2019:157–161; Cheng 2011:12–14).

6. Conclusion – one Zambia, one nation

In closing I would like to revisit the humanist philosophy on which the democracy of Zambia was founded. In 1964, under the leadership of President Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia became a democratic nation. This nation consists out of a variety of provinces, tribes, cultures and languages. Their unity lies in the humanist philosophy which also became Zambia's ethos: "One Zambia – One Nation" (Soko 2014:131–133). This philosophy is authentically African, and it fostered a nation where there were no divisions on the grounds of race, colour, creed, tribe, religion and sex (Kaunda 1974: xi). This is (an) authentic African culture which is similar to the philosophy of Ubuntu in South Africa. "One Zambia – One Nation", embraced and accommodated diversity; it has the ability to bring ethnically and culturally diverse people together in the spirit of cooperation and tolerance; it acknowledges marginalised groups, and treats all people with respect, love and dignity, unconditionally (Soko 2014:131–133). It says: together we are stronger, despite our differences: despite our culture, our race, our gender, and even our sexuality. The irony of this philosophy is that it actually accommodates and protects those who are queer too. In fact, one can even argue that Zambia is built on a queer ethos: an ethos that embraces being Zambian (African), Christian, and queer as Khumalo

tries to highlight in his book, *You have to be gay to know God*. Christian nationalism clearly threatens this sentiment, and therefore one can even say being queer is more African than being a Christian.

Bibliography

Alimi, B. 2015. If you say being gay is not African, you don't know your history. *The Guardian Weekly*. [Online]. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/09/being-gay-african-history-homosexuality-christianity [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Althaus-Reid, M. 2003. *The Queer God*. New York, NY: Routledge (Taylor & Francis group).

Banda, M. 2014. *The clash between traditional marriage practices and Christian marriage practices in the RCZ*. Mini thesis. Lusaka: Justo Mwale University.

Bastien, S., Kajula, L.J. & Muhwezi, W.W. 2011. A review of studies of parent-child communication about sexuality and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. *Reproductive Health Journal*, 8(25):1–17. BBC News, 2019. US recalls ambassador to Zambia after gay rights row. [Online)]. Available: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50901537 [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Cage, J. & Rueda, V. 2018. Sex and the mission: the conflicting effects of early Christian investments on the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. *Sciences Po Paris and CEPR: Pembroke College, Oxford University*. (January 2018):1–50. (CEPR discussion paper no. DP12192).

Cheng, P.S. 2011. *Radical love: an introduction to queer theology*. New York: Seabury Books.

Duffy, N. 2020. Trump "religious freedom" commissioner praises Zambia over jailing of two gay men for simply loving one another. *Pink News*. [Online]. Available: https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/01/07/tony-perkins-zambia-anti-gay-law-donald-trump-religious-freedom-faith-adviser/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Elphick, R. 2012. *The equality of believers: Protestant missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

Forster, D. 2021. Trump is out, but US evangelism remains alive and well in Africa. *The Conversation*. Available: https://theconversation.com/trump-is-out-but-us-evangelicalism-remains-alive-and-well-in-africa-151117 [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Foucault, M. 1978. *The history of sexuality.* Volume 1: An introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

Frey, A. 2019. Zambia court sentences two men to 15 years for gay sex. *Club of Mozambique*. [Online]. Available: https://clubofmozambique.com/news/zambia-court-sentences-two-men-to-15-years-for-gay-sex-148134/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Frey, A. 2019. Zambia court sentences two men to 15 years for gay sex. *Club of Mozambique*. [Online]. Available: https://clubofmozambique.com/news/zambia-court-sentences-two-men-to-15-years-for-gay-sex-148134/ [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Gondwe, K. 2019. Zambia court sentences two men to 15 years for gay sex. *BBC News*. [Online]. Available: https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/c8nq32jwjp0t/lgbt-rights-in-africa [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Gondwe, K. 2019. Zambia court sentences two men to 15 years for gay sex. *BBC News*. [Online]. Available: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52807727 [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Han, E. and O'Mahoney, J. 2014. British colonialism and the criminalization of homosexuality. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27(2):268288. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2013.867298

Haynes, J. 2022. Christian nationalism poses a threat to human rights in Ghana. *The Conversation*. Available: https://theconversation.com/christian-nationalism-poses-a-threat-to-human-rights-in-ghana-192518 [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Igual, R. 2020a. ANCWL LGBTIQ+ Desk slams ACDP for un-African gay sinners statement. *Mamba Online.* [Online]. Available: https://www.mambaonline.com/2020/03/04/ancwl-lgbtiq-desk-slams-acdp-for-unafrican-gay-sinners-statement/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Igual, R. 2020b. Zambia frees gay couple jailed for 15 years. *Mambaonline.com*. Available: https://www.mambaonline.com/2020/05/26/zambia-frees-gay-couple-jailed-for-15-years/ [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Igual, R. 2020c. CT hate pastor Oscar Bougardt says LGBTQ people to blame for coronavirus. *Mamba Online.* [Online]. Available: https://www.mambaonline.com/2020/03/28/ct-hate-pastor-oscar-bougardt-says-gays-to-blame-for-coronavirus/ [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Jordan, M.D. 2007. God's Body. In: G. Loughlin (ed.). *Queer Theology. Rethinking the Western Body*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 281–292.

Kaoma, K.J. 2015. Beyond Adam and Eve: Jesus, sexual minorities and sexual politics in the Church in Africa. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 153:7–28.

Kaunda, K.D. 1974. *Humanism in Zambia and a guide to its implementation.* Part 11. Lusaka: Zambia Information Services.

Kaunda, K.D. 1974. *Humanism in Zambia and a guide to its implementation.* Part 11. Lusaka: Zambia Information Services.

Khumalo, S. 2018. *You have to be gay to know God.* Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Lusaka Times, 2019a. MP moves Motion in Parliament to Ban Political Parties that support Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender rights. *Lusaka Times.* [Online]. Available: https://www.lusakatimes.com/2019/10/10/mp-moves-motion-in-parliament-to-ban-political-parties-that-support-gay-lesbian-bisexual-and-transgender-rights/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020]

Lusaka Times, 2019b. African Liberal Network does not support gay rights, stop the propaganda, PAC President tells PF. *Lusaka Times.* [Online]. Available: https://www.lusakatimes.com/2019/10/14/african-liberal-network-does-not-support-gay-rights-stop-the-propaganda-pac-president-tells-pf/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Lusaka Times, 2020. Government Investigating a Political Party Funded to Promote Homosexuality. *Lusaka Times.* [Online]. Available: https://www.lusakatimes.com/2020/01/06/258955/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Lusaka Times, 2020. Trump's Religious Freedom Commissioner Supports Recalling of US Ambassador Daniel Foote from Zambia. *Lusaka Times.* [Online]. Available: https://www.lusakatimes.com/2020/01/09/trumps-religious-freedom-commissioner-supports-recalling-of-us-ambassador-daniel-foote-from-zambia/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Lusaka Voice, 2015. Mr Gay Zambia wins Art Challenge at Mr Gay World. *Lusaka Voice.* [Online]. Available: http://www.lusakavoice.com/2015/05/05/mr-gay-zambia-wins-art-challenge-at-mr-gay-world/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Mansoor, S. 2019. Zambia Says U.S. Ambassador's Position "No Longer Tenable" After he criticized the country's gay rights record. *Time.* [Online]. Available: https://time.com/5755538/us-ambassador-zambia-recalled/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Mfula, C. 2020. Zambian president pardons gay couple jailed for 15 years. *Reuters.* Available: https://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-uk-zambia-lgbt-idAFKBN232240-OZATP [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Moxnes, H. 2020. Was Jesus queer? *University of Oslo: Centre for Gender Research.* Available: https://www.stk.uio.no/english/research/pride/was-jesus-queer.html [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

NBC News (By Reuters), 2019. Zambia says U.S. ambassador crossed line by defending jailed gay couple. *NBC News.* [Online). Available: https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/zambia-says-u-s-ambassador-crossed-line-defending-jailed-gay-n1107061 [Accessed: 6 March 2020]

Ngwena, C. 2018. *What is Africanness? Contesting nativism in race, culture and sexualities.* Pretoria: Pretoria University Law Press (PULP).

Schumacher, E. 2020. US ambassador to Zambia recalled over gay rights row. *DW* (Deutsche Welle). [Online]. Available: https://www.dw.com/en/us-ambassador-to-zambia-recalled-over-gay-rights-row/a-51877463 [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Shore-Goss, R.E. Discovering the missing body: incarnational inclusivity. In: R.E. Shore-Goss & J.N. Goh (eds.). *Unlocking Orthodoxies for Inclusive Theologies. Queer alternatives.* New York, NY: Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group). 115–136.

Soko, L. 2010. *A practical theological assessment of the schisms in the Reformed Church in Zambia (1996–2001).* PhD-thesis. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.

Soko, L. 2014. Christian faith and the public sphere: An analysis of Zambia as a Christian nation. In: Kroesbergen, H (ed.). *Christian identity and justice in a globalized world from a Southern African perspective.* 124–135.

Times Live, 2018. Zambia court finds men guilty of gay relationship. *Times Live.* [Online]. Available: https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/africa/2018-08-03-zambia-court-finds-men-guilty-of-gay-relationship/ [Accessed: 6 March 2020].

Van Klinken, A. 2014. Homosexuality, Politics and Pentecostal Nationalism in Zambia. *Studies in World Christianity,* 20.3(2014):239–281.

Van Klinken, A. 2015. Queer love in a "Christian nation": Zambian gay men negotiating sexual and religious identities. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 3(4):947–964.

Van Klinken, A. 2015. Roundtable on LGBTIQ Persons in Africa. Queer Love in a "Christian Nation": Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* S3(4):947–964.

Van Klinken, A. 2019. *Kenyan, Christian, queer: religion, LGBT activism, and arts of resistance in Africa.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Van Klinken, A. and Phiri, P. 2015. In the Image of God: Reconstructing and Developing a Grassroots African Queer Theology from Urban Zambia. *Theology and Sexuality,* 21(1):36–52.

Van Klinken, A.S. & Phiri, E. 2020. The empire speaks back: Zambian responses to European Union LGBTI rights diplomacy. In: M. Derks & M. van den Berg (eds.). *Public discourses about homosexuality and religion in Europe and beyond.* Cham*:* Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 309–324.

Van Klinken, A.S. 2013. *Transforming Masculinities in African Christianity. Gender Controversies in Times of AIDS*. New York, NY: Routledge

Van Klinken, A.S. 2016. *Transforming masculinities in African Christianity: gender controversies in times of AIDS*. Oxfordshire: Routledge. (Originally published in 2013 by Ashgate Publishing).

Verstraelen-Gilhuis, G. 1982. *From Dutch Mission Church to Reformed Church in Zambia: the scope for African leadership and initiative in the history of a Zambian mission church.* Franeker, Netherlands: T. Wever.