

## “CUTTING THE HEAD OF THE ROARING MONSTER”: HOMOSEXUALITY AND REPRESSION IN AFRICA

Kwame Essien

*Department of History, The University of Texas at Austin*

Saheed Aderinto

*Department of History, The University of Texas at Austin*

**ABSTRACT** This paper examines how a proposed conference of gays and lesbians in 2006 in Ghana created tensions and repercussions from the social, cultural, religious and political factors, which worked to repress same-sex discourse in the country. The new wave of homophobic expression that ensued is partly a product of the new globalization and also a manifestation of the clash between what is considered “African” and “un-African” social and sexual behavior. This study shows that the government of Ghana and religious institutions did not view homosexuality as a human rights issue as in the case of South Africa, but a form of “sexual colonialism” or Western imposition on Ghanaians. Africanists working on West Africa have yet to seriously place homosexuality on academic agenda. We fill this gap in the current stage of sexuality and African studies by looking at how the proposed conference of gays and lesbians in 2006 in Ghana integrated Ghana’s experience of “unnaturalness” of homosexuality and homophobia into those of other parts of the world.

**Key Words:** Homosexuality; Repression; Ghana; Tradition; Western cultural infiltration.

“Let us wait until they gather in Accra so that we can cut them in pieces.”<sup>(1)</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The epigraph is an excerpt from a statement made by a caller during a local, Joy FM radio talk show in Accra, Ghana’s capital city on August 31, 2006. Prince Kweku McDonald, President of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG), had announced on that day the proposed public gathering of homosexuals in Accra and other undisclosed Ghanaian towns and cities. Ghanaians through print and electronic media expressed their position on this controversial subject, leaning on a host of ideologies structured along the confines of religious, moral, and cultural boundaries. Similar to the misconception in North America and Europe, some Ghanaians believed the incidence of HIV/AIDS to be higher among homosexuals, and saw the legitimization of their presence as a cog in the wheel of the war against the dreaded disease (Samanhya, 2006). However, there is no empirical data or scientific evidence supporting this claim.

It is important to note that not all Ghanaians frowned at the sexual freedom of homosexuals. Indeed, a cross-section of college students did not subscribe to the idea of censoring sexual behavior of homosexuals.<sup>(2)</sup> Some held that the repression of same-sex relationships contradicted Ghana’s democratic principles, its rich history rooted in Pan-Africanism, and the fight against colonial oppres-

sion (The Chronicle, 2006). However, the overwhelming influence of the homophobic press, political and religious leaders, and the general public combined, ultimately did not create adequate visibility, verbal or otherwise, for a pro-homosexual discourse.

This paper seeks to investigate the public outcry for and against homosexuality in Ghana, which surfaced mostly in local newspapers and on radio talk shows immediately after McDonald's announcement of the proposed international conference. We posit that, as in other parts of the continent and the Western world, Ghanaian opponents of same-sex relationships were able to contain homosexuals and their supporters by using the print and electronic media as a means of intimidation. The Ghanaian government, just as its Zimbabwean, Kenyan and Ugandan counterparts, and also religious institutions, largely perceive homosexuality as another form of Western cultural infiltration and imperialism. They clamored for the preservation of heterosexuality as the only form of African sexuality while amplifying the implications of same-sex affairs on the conventional family and marriage system, generational continuity, and religious values.

Data used for writing this paper include newspaper articles (both in print and online) and websites, including some that were based in Europe and North America. The government and its agencies did not conduct any opinion poll on the matter. However, public discussions generally tended to abhor homosexuality. We frequently use the words, "Ghanaian public," or "Ghanaians," to designate the people who expressed their views through the print and electronic media. It was difficult to locate members and officials of the GALAG because of the generally tense homophobic environment and the fear of prosecution. Our data about the perspectives of Ghanaian homosexuals therefore is derived from interviews that McDonald gave the press, published in both private and government-owned newspapers. We also administered an open-ended questionnaire among different categories of people, including college students, government officials, religious leaders and the general public.

## HOMOSEXUAL AFRICA? ARGUMENTS AND COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

The presence or absence of homosexuality in Africa is still generating serious debate among scholars and commentators of different ideological persuasions. Contemporary commentators and authors tend to freely borrow from the ideas of earlier counterparts, who saw African sexuality as predominantly heterosexual and devoid of the so-called "negative" influence of homosexual behavior and fantasies. Edward Gibbon is said to have made the first most influential comment on the absence of homosexuality in Africa, in a study published in 1781: "I believe and hope, that the Negroes in their own country were exempt from this moral pestilence [i.e. homosexual vice]" (Gibbon cited in Murray & Roscoe, 1998: xii). Sir Richard Burton, a prominent Englishman wrote on the eve of the colonial invasion of Africa, "the negro race is mostly untainted by sodomy and

tribalism” (Burton cited in Murray & Roscoe, 1998: xii). For Burton, the Sotadic zone where homosexuality was indigenous did not extend to south of the Sahara in Africa (Murray & Roscoe, 1998: xii). In another connection, the story of the *Kabaka* (king) of the Buganda who was rumored to have executed thirty pages that declined to have sex with him in 1886 is important, for it points to the presence of homosexuality in nineteenth century Buganda (Hoad, 2007: xi). While this story seemed to have confirmed the acceptance of same-sex affairs among the elite class in that part of Africa, attempts have also been made to link the practice to the influence of outsiders, notably the Arab traders (Hoad, 2007: xi).

The interconnectivity between homosexuality and cultural “infiltration” and “imperialism” is replete in the works of social anthropologists who visited Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. According to these colonial era writers, Africa was composed of primitive cultures, which were not only pure, but also devoid of the influence from Western cultural traits, characterized by a high degree of sexual laxity (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). This remark does not suggest that colonial social anthropologists were not obsessed with several other patterns of African sexuality, which they considered uncivilized or uncultured, as Vaughan (1991) has shown in her book entitled *Curing their Ills*. Early twentieth century anthropologists tended to dismiss the findings when they observed evidence of homosexual behaviors, and refused to accept the practice as an institutionalized or indigenous sexual orientation (Aderinto, 2008b).

During the 1990s, the subject of same-sex preference caught the attention of African leaders as some African homosexuals demanded official recognition. Some African leaders because of a combination of factors which include but were not limited to the need to satisfy their conservative and largely heterosexual constituencies, resisted the reform of laws that criminalized same-sex relationships. Human rights groups and politicians the world over protested against Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe’s much publicized statement about the conduct of homosexuals in his country: “If dogs and pigs don’t do it, why must human beings?<sup>(3)</sup> Can human beings be human if they do worse than pigs?” His reaction to international protests that followed this statement confirmed that he meant what he said: “They can demonstrate, but if they come here [to Zimbabwe] we will throw them in jail” (cited in Dunton & Palmberg, 1996: 13). On homosexuals in Western countries and their presence in Zimbabwe, Mugabe added, “Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves, out of Zimbabwe.... Let them be gay in the US, Europe and elsewhere.... They shall be sad people here.”<sup>(4)</sup>

In the 1990s, Mugabe was not the only African statesman that demonstrated antipathy for homosexuals. The stances taken by his Kenyan, Ugandan, and Namibian counterparts were equally unpalatable. Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda was quoted by New Vision, a state-owned newspaper as having said: “I have told the CID [Criminal Investigations Department] to look for homosexuals, lock them up, and charge them.”<sup>(5)</sup>

Provocative statements made by these statesmen during the 1990s boosted

global awareness of the African story of homosexuality and repression, created solidarity among gays and lesbians worldwide, and introduced into African politics a debate that North American and European countries had contested for decades, if not centuries. Importantly, the involvement of well-known public figures intensified and popularized the debate, thus creating more avenues for tension between the State, religions institutions, and custodians of African cultural values and heritage on the one hand, and those who see repression of same-sex relationships as human rights abuse on the other.

The presence or absence of indigenous homosexuality in Africa has equally generated a hot debate among academics and scholarly publications. In the preface to her popular book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Amadiume, a Nigerian sociologist, categorically stated that female-to-female marriage among the Nnobi Igbo should not be confused for lesbianism, arguing instead that support and cooperation between women, “do not imply lesbian sexual practice” (Amadiume, 1987: 7). Amadiume directed her remark at black lesbians who adopted “prejudiced interpretations of African situations to justify their choices of sexual alternatives which have their roots and meanings in the West” (Amadiume, 1987: 7). Her criticism is an integral component of a now well established paradigm that seeks to correct, reinterpret, and reconstruct the imposition of Western ideas on African cultural experience, especially in the study of women and gender (Awe, 1977; Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997).

Amadiume’s stance did not go well with scholars such as Hoad who argued that, “an identity politics of sameness, literally of appropriative identification, is potentially as harmful as the fetishizable difference of exoticism” (Hoad, 2007: xxv). Pincheon (2000) called attention to a sort of cultural nationalism epitomized in the denial of indigenous homosexuality in Africa, especially among African-born scholars. He claimed that facts are sometimes misrepresented by academics because of the need to deny the institutionalization of same-sex relationships in the continent.

The dearth of scholarly research on African homosexuality, without doubt, is largely responsible for the well-circulated proposition that same-sex relationships are “exotic” and “un-African.” African-centered academic research rather than donor-driven studies may in some ways be capable of giving more insight into this somewhat dark corner of African history and culture. Anthologies including *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* (Murray & Roscoe, 1998) and monographs including *Hungochani* (Epprecht, 2004), among others, are beginning to fill this gap in African studies. Authors of the various chapters of *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* challenge the un-Africanness of homosexuality, looking at institutionalized same-sex relationships in socio-cultural context. Their findings counteract homophobic prepositions that homosexuality is a Western implantation among some African ethnic groups. Equally interesting is Epprecht’s (1998) work on indigenous homosexuality in Zimbabwe, which debunked the assertion that it was introduced by white settlers, and traces the history of same-sex affairs to periods before colonial rule.

The appearance of new studies, including Hoad’s (2007) *African Intimacies*

and Epprecht's (2008) *Heterosexual Africa*, is not likely to resolve this contentious debate because more micro-studies of African sexualities are needed to refute or validate the notion that Africa is entirely heterosexual. The continent of Africa is vast, and likewise, African culture is not monolithic but diverse. If Africa is home to thousands of ethnic groups and nationalities, then one should also expect variations in African sexual experience and practices (both heterosexual and homosexual). Sexual variations establish the significance of conceptualizing sex and sexuality in geographical and cultural terms, thus negating the now infamous theory of a distinct African sexuality propounded by Caldwell et al. (1989: 185-234). A short insight into the case of three ethnic groups in Nigeria, the world's most populous black country, can be used to further throw light into the dynamism as well as complexity of the African sexual experience.

Transvestism and cross-dressing can be found among the Yoruba and Hausa. Hausa transvestites (*yan daudu*, men who talk like women), in spite of the fact that they sometimes play an important role in Hausa Bori religious observances, tend to be associated more with deviance and criminalized, accused of serving as pimps and procurers in northern Nigeria's prostitution network (Pittin, 2002: 214-235; Gaudio, 1998: 115-128; Salamone, 2005: 75-86). Some Hausa *yan daudu* are bisexuals, while others who are entirely heterosexual enjoy cross-dressing. Yet some engage in predominantly same-sex behaviors (Pittin, 2002: 214-235; Salamone, 2005: 75-86). However, a form of cross-dressing among the Yoruba is restricted to certain categories of people, such as the *Elegun Sango*, the priests of the *Sango* deity. Matory (1994: 206-208) has described the feminine character of *Elegun Sango* (biological males) who usually have multiple wives and children, but found no evidence that they have sexual intercourse with other men. The *Aboke 'Badan* (the hereditary priest of Oke 'Badan deity in Ibadan, a Yoruba town) who is a biological male permanently wears female hairstyles (*suku*, *opalangbe*, *koloba*) and cross-dresses as a female during the annual worship of the deity. As a spirit medium of a female deity (*Atage olomu oru*), it is incumbent on him to cross-dress not only during the annual festival, but also when occasionally in the midst of other priests and traditional chiefs of the town. However, the *Aboke* does not engage in any same-sex behavior (Aderinto, 2008a).<sup>(6)</sup> According to Matory and Oyewumi, authors of the award-winning books *Sex and the Empire that is No More* and *The Invention of Women* respectively, gender and sexuality is an integral component of Yoruba religion, and cross-dressing further validates the fluidity of gender as a social and historical construction among the Yoruba (Matory, 1994; Oyewumi, 1997).

Yoruba women in precolonial and colonial times would encourage and, in some cases, help their husbands to search for new brides in order to secure time to engage in trade (especially long-distance) and limit the enormous social responsibilities that marriage sanctioned upon them (Aderinto, 2008a). It was not unusual for them to help their husbands raise the bride price and other requirements for marriage consummation, thus performing the responsibilities of the bridegroom. This kind of arrangement is definitely different from the

woman-to-woman marriage that Amadiume studied. In the Yoruba case, the new bride is married into a household always headed by a man. However, both practices enhanced women's economic and social standing both within the extended family and the community at large. In a traditional Yoruba compound (*agbo ile*) and household (*ile*), senior wives address new brides and junior wives as "my wife (*iyawo mi or aya mi*)," but this does not mean that they have any form of erotic or sexual contact or relations. Wives may likewise address male and female members of the house as "my husband/s (*oko mi plural oko wa*)" (Fadipe, 1970: 97-100). But again this does not mean they engage in sexual fantasies or relations. Linguistic patterns and actual practices do not always correlate and of course vary from culture to culture. The authors of the following prominent works and many others on Yoruba history and culture did not document any form of institutionalized same-sex relationships among the people (Olurankinse, 1992; Ojoade, 1983; Olajubu, 1972; Johnson, 1921; Fadipe, 1970; Ajisafe, 1924).

This brief discussion of sexual variation among three out of Nigeria's over 300 ethno-cultural groups leads to one conclusion: if it is unprofessional and unscientific to generalize that Africa is mainly heterosexual as Epprecht (2008) maintained or that there is a distinct form of sexuality which Caldwell et al. (1989: 185-234) believed is promiscuous and facilitate the entrenchment of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, then it is equally inaccurate to generalize about the existence of indigenous homosexuality among all African ethnicities, especially in the absence of micro and empirical research. The point we make is that the fact that traces of indigenous same-sex relationships are found among one ethnic group should not be taken to mean that it is prevalent among all African ethnicities, and that more academic and systematic finding focusing on cultural and historical construction of gender, sex and sexuality in specific cultures is needed to ventilate this contentious aspect of African history and culture.

#### HOMOSEXUALITY: ITS UN-AFRICANNESS AND WESTERN CULTURAL INFILTRATION IN GHANA

Again, on August 31, 2006, Prince Kweku McDonald, the President of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG) went on Joy FM to remind Ghanaians about the rights of gays and lesbians (Ennin, 2006). He also announced that a proposed international conference was to be held in Accra, the nation's capital on September 23 and other locations, such as Koforidua in the Eastern region (Quaye, 2006).

This public announcement by the President of GALAG, echoed in other local radio stations and media outlets, unleashed an unprecedented atmosphere of hatred for homosexuals. McDonald's unexpected proclamation of the strength of the movement gained front-page newspaper coverage in *The Chronicle*, *The Accra Daily Mail*, *Daily Guide*, *The Ghanaian Times* and *The Daily Graphic*, and several websites. Indeed, ripple effects from McDonald's announcement

went beyond the media. It penetrated the walls of the government, churches, mosques, college campuses and the larger public conversation. Strong opinions rapidly emerged: David Adotey Saka, a storekeeper warned that Ghana was “descending into the days of Sodom and Gomorrah (Boateng, 2006).” Valerie Bempomaah Okai, a college student and a Christian, stated that homosexuality “is an indictment on our culture and our beliefs.” Akosua Dunia, a street vender queried “as a society where are we drifting towards?” Christine Okaine, a Christian hair beautician claimed, “man was created in God’s image to procreate... gays and lesbians are telling God how things should be done, which is wrong” (Boateng, 2006).

Kwamena Bartels, the Minister for Information and National Orientation made the first official remark to the proposed meeting. Bartels not only proclaimed that any attempts to hold the international conference in Ghana would not be entertained, but threatened members of the GALAG that they would be arrested if they disobeyed government orders. Bartels stated that, “the government would like to make it absolutely clear that it shall not permit the proposed conference... the government does not and shall not condone any activity which violently offends the culture, morality and heritage of the entire people of Ghana” (Sawatzky, 2006). He further cited a relevant section of the criminal code, which criminalized “unnatural” behaviors such as homosexuality (Sawatzky, 2006). Bartels’ announcement is in conflict with Ghana’s Constitution which “guarantees the protection of all human rights of every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, color, religion, creed or gender.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Religious authorities and the government expressed similar ideas about “natural” sexual behavior (heterosexuality) and the promotion of “decent” social and sexual behavior. The ordination of a homosexual priest in North America was and is still considered a religious aberration among Ghana’s Christian leaders who were afraid that the proposed conference and official recognition of homosexuals could undermine the spiritual purity of the church, or even lead to the rise of homosexual priests within the church hierarchies (Addo, 2006). The Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), the umbrella organization of all Christian denominations in the country, served as the mouthpiece of their flock. The religious body mobilized its constituency to denounce GALAG’s effort to come out of the closet. The CCG abhorred the formation of the gay and lesbian association and upheld the ideas of Ghana’s absolute hetero-normativity. The CCG referenced a passage of the Bible’s Leviticus 20:13, “If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination...they shall surely be put to death,” to validate the ungodliness of homosexuality. The CCG tried to underscore the importance of drawing a line between human rights issues, religious issues and the definition of cultural taboos. Rev. Dr. Paul Kofi Fynn, chairman of CCG emphasized that there was some level of limitations to the rights of individuals or groups. Fynn declared, “the fact that the constitution of Ghana guarantees freedom of association, movement, speech and worship, is not a license to misbehave and satanize our country as Sodom and

Gomorrah did in the Bible” (Fordjour, 2006).

The CCG was not alone in the condemnation of the institutional acceptance of homosexuals. Indeed, other Christian denominations followed similar approaches in denouncing GALAG and supporting the Ghanaian government, which had the political and legal machinery to criminalize and prosecute people accused of illegal sexual behavior. *The Ghanaian Times*, a national newspaper, reported that the Anglican Church of Ghana (ACG) also showed solidarity with Minister Bartels of the Ministry of Information and National Orientation. It is significant to note that the spiritual integrity of the Anglican Church in Africa was and still is confounded by the decision of some of its sister congregations in North America and Europe to ordain homosexual priests and bishops in the early 1990s. Certainly, the emergence of GALAG in Ghana struck a highly sensitive religious and emotional nerve prompting a spontaneous response throughout its dioceses in Ghana. According to Rev. Justice O. Akrofi, the Archbishop of ACG, it was imperative that all religious groups speak out publicly against GALAG in order to prevent the expansion of homosexual organizations and movements in Ghana and throughout Africa (Owusu, 2006).

The CCG and Anglican Church were not the only Christian groups that condemned the official recognition of homosexuals in Ghana. Apostle Dr. Michael Kwabena Ntummy of the Church of Pentecost, lamented that the church would not ignore Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, because it emphasized that sexual relations should be between a man and a woman only, and that those who crossed such sacred intimate lines established by the supreme God would be punished on the day of judgment. He reminded the Pentecostals that, “as spiritual watchdogs, we wish to warn of the consequential disfavor and wrath of God on this nation if Ghana fails to condemn homosexuality” (*The Ghanaian Times*, 2006). The Pentecostal Church of Ghana, The Assemblies of God Church, another charismatic movement with over 2 million members, praised the Ghanaian government for leading the way to prevent gays and lesbians from gaining social visibility in the country. The leaders of the Assemblies of God of Ghana made a direct connection between traditional value systems, the government’s position, and blessings from God. In the words of Rev. W. W. Dontoh, General Superintendent of the Church, “Our ancestors and elders had very good reasons for condemning this practice hence our culture does not accept gay practice...by refusing [the] gays to hold their meeting in this country, Ghana has proven to the world that we are a nation with strong moral values. God will bless us abundantly for honouring Him in this direction” (*The Spectator*, 2006).

Christian leaders were not the only religious authorities that publicly denounced homosexuality. It was rumored that a public demonstration of a national magnitude was planned to register the public disdain for homosexuals by the Vice President of Ghana, Alhaji Airu Mahama, the National Chief Imam, Sheikh Osman Nuru Sharubutu and a traditional chief of the Gã, an ethnic group in Accra.<sup>(8)</sup> Presumably, the anti-gay and lesbian rally did not take place, because with the cancellation of the GALAG’s conference it appeared that Ghanaian homosexuals no longer posed an immediate threat to the nation.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the government and religious institutions' response appealed to the homophobic sentiment of the Ghanaian public.<sup>(9)</sup> But it appears that some other commentators to these debates felt that the government and religious institutions should be blamed for the ineffective policing of social and moral decadence, such as homosexuality and prostitution. Although this notion of the ineptitude of authoritative bodies is very popular, one of the most comprehensive contributors to this issue, Nana Kofi Amankwah stated:

Churches, traditional rulers, and government are to be blamed for the gay and lesbian patronization in our country. Their presence in the country is disastrous for the core principle of the good name Ghanaians had enjoyed. The entire nation understands God's principles of reproduction to fulfill the purpose of our mission on this earth as man and women married and living together. Not man and man or woman and woman....<sup>(10)</sup>

Amankwah also stated:

The traditional leaders should realize that they have a constitutional obligation to continue the ideological legacy of our ancestors for the next generation. Tradition has no limits. Without tradition there is no innovation.... Tradition is an identification of a culture that determines who we are. As a result of this, these traditional leaders need to wake up from their slumber and stop this idiotic behavior from those South Africans that have the audacity to recruit, and others who has allow their facilities to be used for these satanic purpose....

The concomitant effect of the institutional condemnation of homosexuality was the creation of an atmosphere of fear towards and intimidation against homosexuals. The reactions of Ghanaian homosexuals (led by McDonald), as we shall see in the proceeding section, unveiled a counter-discourse to the popularly held idea of homosexuality and deviance.

#### DEFENDING SEXUAL CHOICE AND ORIENTATION: GALAG, THE GHANA STATE AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

Polemics about the proposed homosexual solidarity conference oscillated like a pendulum, as McDonald challenged Kwamena Bartels and religious leaders. Overwhelmed by threats against gays and lesbians, McDonald asserted that, "There are hundreds and millions there who would not show their faces, because they know when they show it, this is the reaction they will get from Ghanaians" (Sawatzky, 2006). The leader of the GALAG appeared not to be intimidated by the name-calling, and threats by the government and religious bodies. Indeed, he had a tripartite battle to fight: (1) to demand reforms of

legal codes that criminalize homosexuality, (2) to establish sexual orientation as a human rights issue rather than a moral one, and (3) to challenge the notion of Ghana as a Christian nation and to appeal to Ghanaians to look at family structures and sexuality from a different angle.

But the most immediate battle that had to be fought was in the court of public opinion, and the media determined the extent of visibility given to the counter positions presented by the GALAG. Clearly the media, especially in print, saw the controversial homosexuality stories as a way of improving sales and readership. But the difficulty was in ensuring that the opponents of homosexuals did not see the media outlet as having a pro-homosexual viewpoint. The Ghanaian press, like most news outlets the world over, are conservative and tended to be pro-government in their coverage of the entire imbroglio.<sup>(11)</sup>

GALAG and its leaders were aware that in order to make strides, it was imperative to get to the root of the debate by appealing to the moral and religious sense of Ghanaians. McDonald came up with an innovative strategy by raising some pertinent questions: What is the origin of the criminal code that criminalizes the so-called unnatural sexual behaviors? And he asked likewise whether the Bible was indigenous to Ghana. On matters relating to religion, he stated, as a Christian, he believed that some laws in the Bible were instituted for a specific period in history, and therefore, Christians should be open-minded about their interpretations. For example, McDonald made an argument that slavery was prevalent during the period of the Old Testament and the New Testament, but today slavery and servitude of all shades were despicable worldwide. The idea of the globalization of cultures also caught his attention. He asked the citizens to ponder the idea of the “authentic Ghanaian culture” as paradoxical, given the fact that individuals and groups over the course of Ghanaian history have adopted values, customs, and ideals that may have been extraneous to Ghana (Sawatzky, 2006).

McDonald’s attack on the secular posture of the Ghanaian state was compelling. He wondered why a modern democratic state should use the Bible as a means of deliberating on issues closely connected to a religiously pluralistic society’s social and sexual experience and existence. Additionally, he described both the legal code and the Christian Bible as part of the ideological package that the Ghanaians inherited from colonial masters. McDonald did not end there. He charged that since Europeans and North Americans have embraced homosexuality and ordained some gay and lesbian church ministers, Ghanaians should also be receptive to this kind of development.

The GALAG President also expressed criticism of those who employed elements of legal codes, and those who held on to cultural factors. He touched on a sensitive subject embedded in Ghanaian cultural norms and traditions, and challenged the collective assertions that homosexuality was an imported sexual identity from the West. McDonald explained that the traditional Ghanaian culture did not include eating at modern restaurants, wearing suits, or driving a car (Amoako, 2006). Indeed, the GALAG’s view as espoused by McDonald, expresses a salient argument about modernity and acculturation. As in many

other cultures, Ghanaian cultures have also been permeated and influenced by foreign values, norms and cultures. In fact, it would be difficult to locate many elements in Ghanaian cultures that speak otherwise (Amoako, 2006).

One of the issues that characterized the discussions about homosexuality during the debate that began with the announcement of the international conference on homosexuality was whether it had its origins in Ghana. Is homosexuality an old sexual tradition in Ghana or is it a new phenomenon? A clearer identification of its origin will enable us to properly trace how this issue has been dealt with in the past, and why it remains a contentious issue in the socio-cultural debate. McDonald and the GALAG members had a simple answer to its origin in Ghana. They claimed that Ghanaians were naïve, because people have always engaged in same-sex relations, despite the rigid norms that perceived homosexuality as a cultural taboo. To make a stronger case about the presence of alternative sexual lifestyles in Ghana, the GALAG posted dialogue and experiences of gays and lesbians in Ghana on their website in order to educate the Ghanaian public.<sup>(12)</sup>

The crisis in Ghana gained international attention as supporters from South Africa, Asia and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission expressed solidarity with the GALAG. They criticized Minister for Information and National Orientation Bartels, religious leaders, and the Ghanaian media for being homophobic and for exacerbating the controversy. While some international groups called for a boycott of Ghanaian goods and products in the international market, others sent petitions to the President of Ghana, John A. Kuffor, during his tour of Europe to canvass foreign investments in Ghana. One of the petitions from a gay rights group in England read:

Ghana's continuing criminalization of homosexuality is a relic of colonialism. The British colonial administrators imposed this anti-gay law on the people of Ghana in the nineteenth century. It sets Ghanaians against Ghanaians, undermining national unity and dividing people against each other. The prohibition of consenting adult same-sex relations violates the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which enshrines the principles of equal rights and non-discrimination for all human beings.<sup>(13)</sup>

The group also wanted the Ghanaian President to follow the footsteps of Nelson Mandela, the former South African President, who supported gays and lesbians after the demise of Apartheid. Finally, human rights lobbyists wanted Kuffor to follow in the footsteps of Kofi Annan, a Ghanaian statesman and former Secretary General of the United Nations, who endorsed spousal benefits for employees of the world body including same-sex couples.<sup>(14)</sup>

Ironically, considering the intensity of homophobia in Ghana, violence against gays and lesbians is not as common when compared to the situation in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Kenya, or in Europe and North America. Violence remains

rare, because most homosexuals are neither vocal nor publicly forthcoming about their sexuality. However, *The Chronicle* reported threats against homosexuals who congregated in Suhum and Koforidua in the eastern region of Ghana soon after McDonald made his first public announcement in August 2006 (Quaye, 2006). Similarly, reports on some international gay and lesbian websites revealed that threats on McDonald's life were so intense that he was forced to leave Ghana temporarily to an undisclosed location in West Africa (Quaye, 2006). Although reports of physical violence against gays may be low, the impending threat of violence may be conceived as a constant.

The relationship between the media and homosexuals was paradoxical. On the one hand, homosexuals accused newspapers such as *The Chronicle* and radio stations on many occasions of engaging in propaganda. On the other hand, the media offered an avenue for disseminating news about the debate and allowing discrimination against gays and lesbians to be visible. For instance, *The Daily Graphic*, a leading government newspaper, reported that four people were each jailed for a two-year term for shipping magazines and materials that showed gays and lesbians in explicitly sexual positions in 2003.<sup>(15)</sup> Although the GALAG generally perceived the media and religious institutions as pro-government, the Ghanaian press played a significant role throughout the crisis by capturing the voices of both support and dissent, and making such views accessible to a wider public. They created a platform for Ghanaians and the rest of the world to express opposing views and to engage verbally with each other (*The Chronicle*, 2006). In many ways, the publication and broadcast of controversial ideas attest to the reality that opposing conceptions about sexuality do exist, not only abroad, but also within Ghana.

## CONCLUSION

McDonald and the GALAG members were unsuccessful in lobbying the Ghanaian government to recognize the contradictions in the criminal code that criminalizes unnatural acts. The GALAG's insistence that one's sexual choice/orientation should be treated as a human rights issue rather than a religious or cultural issue remains un-entertained in the Ghanaian context. Without any doubt, the GALAG will have to make a more concerted effort in order to appeal to the group of influential conservative Ghanaians who made their opinions known through electronic and print media, and who believed that tolerating the voices of the homosexuals or allocating a degree of sexual freedom to them was tantamount to the desecration of the Ghanaian tradition of family, its religious treasure, and the international reputation conceived over the last fifty years.

Although fervent appeals by the GALAG and international gay rights activists and advocates have not gained considerable currency in Ghanaians political arena, gays and lesbians have managed to defend their sexuality or educate Ghanaians about their sexual convictions. They continue to use information outlets, especially the Internet, to share their story with the Ghanaian society and

the world at large. In the midst of this highly charged debate in which overt and covert intimidation by the opponents of same-sex unions continues against the gays and lesbians, the GALAG has continued to seek new ways to galvanize support for their political and social agenda.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT** A version of this paper was presented at the Popular Cultures in Africa Conference held at the University of Texas at Austin between March 30 and April 1, 2007. We thank the audience for their comments and suggestions. Courtney Morris deserves special thanks for painstakingly going through the essay several times and offering suggestions, which improved its quality. We also express our sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of African Study Monographs for their helpful criticism and suggestions.

#### NOTES

- (1) A statement attributed to a caller during a radio talk show on Joy FM of Accra, Ghana on August 31, 2006.
- (2) Interviews were conducted at University of Ghana, Legon.
- (3) Mugabe's ill-fitting suit of moral outrage. *The Independent* (London), Aug 27, 1995. Online. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4158/is\\_19950827/ai\\_n14002832](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19950827/ai_n14002832) (Accessed on November 15, 2008).
- (4) *Ibid.* 13.
- (5) Uganda: Arrests Of Gay Men Have Begun. Online. <http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/takeaction/resourcecenter/125.html> (Accessed on February 1 2009).
- (6) Personal communication with Aboke of Ibadan, Chief (Dr.) Ifasola Ifamapowa, June 13, 2008.
- (7) Gay Tour Ghana (Column "Legal wise"). Online. <http://www.geocities.com/gaytoughana/> (Accessed on July 10, 2007).
- (8) Ghana: Media Leads Anti-Gay Witch-hunt - Article no.14. *GlobalGayz.com*. Online. <http://www.globalgayz.com/ghana-news.html#article7> (Accessed on July 15, 2007).
- (9) This conclusion is based on the numerous reactions of the people and the government to homosexual rights. A comprehensive list of these reports can be found at <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/dossier.php?ID=120> (Accessed on March 1, 2009). For the counter-positions held by homosexuals see various articles in <http://www.geocities.com/gayghana/> (Accessed on March 2, 2009).
- (10) Blame Govt., Churches and traditional leader for gays and lesbian in Ghana. Online. <http://www.ghanaweb.net/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=124595&comment=0> (Accessed on July 21, 2007).
- (11) See all the fourteen articles in this link, *Gay Ghana News & Reports 2007-08*. Online. <http://www.globalgayz.com/ghana-news.html#article7> (Accessed on August 20, 2007).
- (12) See *Gays and Lesbian Association of Ghana*. Online. <http://www.geocities.com/gayghana/> (Accessed on July 12, 2007).
- (13) Outrage! Calls for the Decriminalisation of Homosexuality in Ghana. *UK Gay News*. Online. <http://www.ukgaynews.org.uk/Archive/07/March/1303.htm> (Accessed on February 1, 2009).

- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Four Gay Men Jailed. Sodomy Laws. Online.  
<http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/world/ghana/ganews001.htm> (Accessed on February 2, 2009).

## REFERENCES

- Aderinto, S. 2008a. Personal field-note on Yoruba sexuality. *Entry*, 23.
- 2008b. Review of M. Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*. *Gender Forum* 23. online.  
[http://www.genderforum.uni-koeln.de/racing4/review\\_aderinto.html](http://www.genderforum.uni-koeln.de/racing4/review_aderinto.html) (Accessed June 29, 2009).
- Addo, M. 2006. Presbyterian Church of Ghana condemns homosexuality and same-sex marriage: Commends Government's bold decision. *The Chronicle*, September 8.
- Ajisafe, A.J. 2003 [first published 1924]. *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People*. Trubner, London/Portland.
- Amadiume, I. 1987. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, London/New Jersey.
- Amoako, A.K. 2006. Ghanaian culture and homosexuality tolerance. *The Chronicle*, September 13.
- Awe, B. 1977. Reflections on the Conference on Women and Development: I. *Signs*, 3: 314-316.
- Boateng, B. 2006. Should Ghana allow gay conference. *The Spectator*, September 9.
- Caldwell, J.C., P. Caldwell & P. Quiggin 1989. The social context of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population and Development Review*, 15: 185-234.
- Chronicle, The 2006. Ghanaian culture and homosexuality tolerance. September 13.
- Dunton, C. & M. Palmberg. 1996. *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*. Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Ennin, E. 2006. Gays, lesbians storm Koforidua. *Daily Guide*, September 1.
- Epprecht, M. 1998. The "unsaying" of indigenous homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a blindspot in an African masculinity. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24: 631-651.
- 2004. *Hungochani: A History of Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal/Kingston.
- 2008. *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*. Ohio University Press/University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Athens/Scottsville.
- Fadipe, N.A. 1970. *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan University Press, Ibadan.
- Fordjour, L.A. 2006. Christian council backs Government ban on gays confab. *The Ghanaian Times*, September 5.
- Gaudio, R.P. 1998. Male lesbians and other queer notions in Hausa. In (S.O. Murray & W. Roscoe, eds.) *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*, pp.115-128. St. Martin's Press, New York.
- Ghanaian Times 2006. *Pentecost Church is Shocked*. September 5.
- Hoad, N. 2007. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality and Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London.
- Johnson, S. 1921. *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. CSS, Lagos.
- Matory, J.L. 1994. *Sex and the Empire that is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor*

- in Oyo Yoruba Religion*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London.
- Murray, S.O. & W. Roscoe eds. 1998. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. St. Martin's Press, New York.
- Ojoade, J.O. 1983. African sexual proverbs: Some Yoruba examples. *Folklore*, 94: 201-213.
- Olajubu, O. 1972. Reference to sex in Yoruba oral literature. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 85: 152-166.
- Olurankinse, O. 1992. Euphemism as a Yoruba folkway. *African Languages and Cultures*, 5: 189-202.
- Owusu, W.Y. 2006. *Anglicans Support Ban on Gays*. The Ghanaian Times, September 14.
- Oyewumi, O. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Pincheon, B.S. 2000. Ethnography of silences: race, (homo) sexualities, and a discourse of Africa. *African Studies Review*, 43: 39-54.
- Pittin, R.I. 2002. *Women and Work in Northern Nigeria: Transcending Boundaries*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Quaye, S.A. 2006. E/Region residents rage over gays, lesbian issue. *The Chronicle*, September 13.
- Salamone, F.A. 2005. Hausa concepts of masculinity and the 'Yau Daudu.' In (L. Ouzgane & R. Morrell, eds.) *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. pp. 75-86. Palgrave Macmillan/University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, New York/Scottsville.
- Samanhyia, N. 2006. Rights of homosexuals. *The Accra Daily Mail*, September 8.
- Sawatzky, W. 2006. No gay and lesbian conference was planned. *The Chronicle*, September 20.
- Spectator, The 2006. Assemblies of God commends Government. September 9.
- Vaughan, M. 1991. *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

———— Accepted June 10, 2009

Correspondence Author's Name and Address: Saheed Aderinto, *Department of History, The University of Texas at Austin, TX 78712-0220, USA.*  
E-mail: saheedaderinto@mail.utexas.edu