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Queer Love in a “Christian Nation”:

Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities

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Abstract

On the basis of a study of a group of Zambian men identifying both as gay and as Christian, this article explores the negotiation of sexual and religious identity and critically addresses the “surprise” some scholars have expressed about the general religiosity of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) people in Africa. The study demonstrates that participants are not just victims subjected to homophobic religious and political discourses but have agency: resisting discourses of demonization, they humanize themselves by making claims towards the universal category of love—both their own inclination to loving relationships and their share in God’s love. Hence they claim space for themselves as full citizens of Zambia as a Christian nation. This article particularly highlights how some aspects of Pentecostalism appear to contribute to “queer empowerment”, and argues that the religiosity of African LGBTIs critically interrogates Euro-American secular models of LGBTI liberation.

In his recent book *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*, Marc Epprecht (2013: 66–67) notes that “many African lgbti ... are proudly, happily and deeply religious”. Referring to the explicitly religiously informed “homophobic hatred” that affects sexual minorities in contemporary Africa so profoundly, Epprecht comments that secular activists and scholars from the West—perhaps himself included—are often surprised by this religiosity, and he asks, “How to explain that apparent contradiction?” (ibid.: 67). Taking up the question of this “apparent contradiction”, in this article I interrogate some of the presumptions underlying the surprise of African LGBTI religiosity. Drawing on my study of a group of self-identified gay men in Lusaka, Zambia, I will explore how they negotiate their sexuality and religion, particularly Christianity. On that basis I will make some critical suggestions, challenging the emerging (but contested) body of queer studies in Africa to take religion seriously, not only

¹ I wish to thank Joseph Hellweg for inviting me to contribute to this roundtable, and the two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their useful comments. I also thank the organizers of, and participants in, the session ‘The Souls of Queer Folk: LGBTIQ Africans and the Decolonization of Religion’ at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting in Baltimore, MD on 22 November 2013, as well as respondent Charles Guéboguo for the stimulating discussion of an earlier version of this paper. I gratefully acknowledge the AAR for awarding me an Individual Research Grant (2013) that enabled the fieldwork that forms the basis of the present article. I am forever thankful to the participants in my study for sharing their lives – their stories, dreams and struggles – with me. Last but not least, thanks to Lundu Mazoka – for invaluable assistance and true friendship.

as a tool of homophobia and a force of oppression of LGBTI identities, but also as key to agency and empowerment.² To date very little empirical research has been conducted on the religiosity of Africans who identify, or might be identified, as LGBTI or otherwise as “queer” or as having a non-normative sexuality (but see Gaudio 2009; Mbetbo 2013).³ My study in Zambia, although preliminary in nature because of its relatively limited scope and small sample size, addresses this gap; it raises questions and opens up perspectives that hopefully will be explored in more detail in further research. This will also show to what extent the findings from my sample of Zambian gay men can be generalized to other LGBTI people and different countries.

A surprising contradiction?

The observation that many African LGBTIs are religious can only come as a surprise and be considered a contradiction if religion is believed to be inherently homophobic and if religious commitment is considered to be a matter of individual choice and as conflicting with sexual identity. These presumptions need to be interrogated and complicated vis-à-vis the complex realities of contemporary African contexts.

The idea that the major religions of Africa are fundamentally against homosexuality and other non-conforming gender and sexuality expressions could be supported with plenty of contemporary and recent historical empirical evidence (cf. Van Klinken and Chitando forthcoming). A widespread popular belief, actively perpetuated by political and religious leaders in a variety of African countries, is that homosexuality is in conflict with African cultural and religious values. This idea is also accepted by Western observers who often consider religion as a major force in what they tend to depict monolithically as “African homophobia” (cf. Thoreson 2014; Awondo, Geschiere, and Reid 2012). Yet this belief has begun to be questioned by historians and anthropologists, including Epprecht, who highlight that African traditional religions, and also some forms of Islam in the past, have shown a relative flexibility and tolerance to accommodate sexual difference (Epprecht 2004; Epprecht 2012; Murray and Roscoe 1998).

This belief is further interrogated by some progressive African religious leaders and theologians – including the Anglican Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu – who capitalize on those traditions to argue for religious attitudes of respect towards LGBTI people, as well as for recognition of their human rights (Van Klinken and Gunda 2012). Furthermore, as I demonstrate in this article, the idea of a straightforward link between religion and homophobia is questioned by the religiosity of African LGBTI individuals and communities themselves, precisely because it undermines the idea that African religions are

² Epprecht (2008: 16, 171) argues that queer studies are too heavily dependent on Western theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence and therefore has little relevance in African contexts, while Spurlin (2006) proposes a decolonization of queer studies in Africa. Contrary to Epprecht’s claim that African scholars and activists are very reluctant to embrace “queer”, the term has recently been adopted, such as in the *Queer African Reader*. The editors of this reader acknowledge the limitations of “queer” in relation to African neo-colonial realities, but they adopt the term to denote a political frame: “We use queer to underscore a perspective that embraces gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks” (Ekine and Abbas 2013: 3).

³ I follow Sokari Ekine who observes that the acronym LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) is becoming generally used to refer to a variety of dissident gender and sexuality definitions in Africa, with “queer” being used as an umbrella term (Ekine 2013).

essentially homophobic and shows that they can be creatively appropriated, negotiated, and reinvented. As much as vociferous homophobic pastors tell us something about religious dynamics in contemporary Africa, the religiosity of LGBTI people is also significant in order to critically grasp the width and depth of African religious realities. Acknowledging this will help to go beyond the initial surprise that many African LGBTIs are religious and move towards a better understanding of the variety and complexity of religion(s) in relation to issues of sexuality.

The surprise about the religiosity of many LGBTI people in Africa is further informed by a notion of religious commitment as a matter of individual choice. Where sexual identity, in this perspective, is thought of as innate and intrinsic, religious identity is considered to be something that is chosen and therefore also can be rejected. Since religion is believed to be inherently homophobic, religious adherence is considered to be conflicting with an LGBTI identity. This rationale reflects an individualistic concept of religiosity that might apply to Western contexts but is, however, problematic in African contexts for at least two reasons. First, in African societies religious adherence is not simply a matter of individual choice but (also) of family history, community, and culture. Africa is certainly not unique here, but a crucial difference with the West is the absence of a more or less secular culture. This leads to the second reason: the pervasiveness of religion in African societies. Even without adopting the infamous notion of Africans as “notoriously religious” (cf. Platvoet and van Rinsum 2003), it can be observed that many Africans are religious and that in most African societies, religion, to a considerable extent, shapes socio-political life (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004). In such a context, being explicitly and openly non- or anti-religious is not only uncommon but socially and culturally also more or less unacceptable.

Rather than contemplating the “apparent contradiction” that African LGBTI’s religiosity would present, I propose to explore and understand this religiosity in more depth. Therefore I adopt the notion that both religion and sexuality are crucial aspects of personal identity and subjectivity, and my interest is in how both apparently conflicting aspects are being negotiated. This is the case in modern Western contexts (cf. Ganzevoort et al 2011; Rodriguez 2010) as well as in contemporary African settings, as the present case study demonstrates. The analytical focus on negotiation is not to suggest that religious and sexual identity form a stable and coherent whole together. I acknowledge the multiplicity, fluidity, and complexity of, and the tensions and ambivalences in, identity. However, as shown below, in a socio-political climate that denies Zambian LGBTI individuals the possibility of a positive identification with their sexuality *and* religion, reclaiming these identity aspects and reconciling them appears to become an important personal and political struggle.

Homosexuality and the “Christian nation”

As an introduction to the Zambian context, it is important to note that in recent years issues of homosexuality have frequently emerged as the subject of public and political debate (cf. Van Klinken forthcoming). Particularly noteworthy here are the following events: the campaign for the presidential elections in 2011, in which the opposition candidate was associated with a pro-homosexuality stance; the February 2012 visit of United Nations General Secretary Ban Ki-moon who, in a speech to the Zambian parliament, called for the recognition of the human rights of sexual minorities; and the mid-2013 arrests and prosecutions of some presumed

same-sex couples and of AIDS activist Paul Kasonkomona who on TV had called for the decriminalization of same-sex relationships. All these cases were extensively reported and discussed in the media. They illustrate the recent politicization of homosexuality in Zambia, as in many other African countries (Awondo 2010; Van Klinken and Chitando forthcoming).

In Zambia and elsewhere, homosexuality is politicized in religious discourse, but what is rather unique for the Zambian case is the specific way in which religion comes in: in the form of a Christian nationalism which has direct consequences for the politics on sexuality and LGBTI rights in the country. An example here is the statement made by Minister of Justice Wynter Kabimba, that there is “no room for gays in Zambia” because “as Zambians, we declared that we are a Christian nation and there is no way we can allow this un-Zambian culture” (Namaiko 2013). The reference to Zambia’s status as a “Christian nation” refers to the fact that in 1991, President Frederick Chiluba declared Zambia to be a Christian nation, which was enshrined into the constitution in 1996 (Gifford 1998). This declaration illustrates the public role of Pentecostal Christianity in Zambia and has given rise to a popular Christian nationalist discourse that, as Kabimba’s statement illustrates, directly shapes the debates over homosexuality in the country (Van Klinken 2013, 2014).

Against the background of a Zambian Christian nationalism that stigmatizes, excludes, and criminalizes LGBTI people, my interest is in how these people actually relate and respond to the charges that homosexuality is un-Christian, un-Zambian, and un-African. This article is based on a small-scale study of a group of ten self-identified gay men (18–35 years old) in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, conducted in the period June–July 2013. The participants, coming from different socio-economic backgrounds and having varying levels of education, were approached through a local gay support group. Most interviews were conducted at the house of the convener of this group, which is a safe place for the members—one of the few places where they can actually openly talk about their sexuality. My examination of their negotiation of sexual, national, and religious identities serves to highlight that participants are not just victims subjected to homophobic religious and political discourse but have agency and find ways to create room for themselves, thereby contributing to a queering of Zambia as a Christian nation.

Gays as men who *love* other men

Unmistakably, with the process of globalization and the emergence of what Joseph Massad (2007) somewhat disparagingly called “the gay international”, the originally Western terms for homosexual and queer identities are now more commonly used in Africa; various African contexts, including Zambia, have witnessed a social and political organizing around LGBTI identities and rights in recent years (Blessol 2013; Currier 2012; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013). Hence it is not surprising that all male informants tended to refer to themselves as “gay” and did not use indigenous terms or words in local languages to refer to same-sex sexualities. Being marginalized in their own communities because of their sexuality, identifying as gay allows them to inscribe a modern, global narrative of identity and rights.

As much as they used the term “gay” to identify themselves, many of the informants also showed some ambivalence about doing so. One such ambivalence is expressed by those who described themselves as “a straight-acting gay person”. This might reflect an element of

internalized heteronormativity, but first and foremost it was informed by the very real concern that if you do not behave or look straight enough, according to the popular norms of masculinity, you may be beaten up or at least become the subject of ridicule. Another ambivalence is expressed by those who hesitated to describe their sexual identity at all. They hesitated, first, out of the realization that systems of categorization can easily lead to discrimination. “When we label people we make it easy for discrimination to exist: short or tall, fat or skinny, gay or straight.” Second, they hesitated because identifying with a sexual minority would particularize them when they wanted to normalize themselves by emphasizing that they are human beings like everybody else. “I describe myself as normal, because I don’t vary from anyone else. I might be gay, I might be bi, but at the end of the day we are all the same. Just normal.”

A similar tendency to normalize the self is reflected in a newly-invented identity term. In discourses of HIV prevention, in recent years the term “men who have sex with other men” has been introduced, in Zambia and wider in Africa, to target men in same-sex relationships who do not necessarily identify as “gay”. Several informants were unhappy with this intended-as-neutral category because of its narrow emphasis on sexual practice. They creatively rephrased it into “men who love other men”. This rephrasing move corrects popular discourses that sexualize homosexual identities. It is also a claim towards the universal—and as shown below, Christian—category of love as a way to humanize people with same-sex affection.

Zambian, African, and gay: The struggle for recognition

As Sokari Ekine (2013: 80) points out, the popular rhetoric around homosexuality as “un-African” is about cultural authenticity—who counts as a “true African”?—but is in the end also about “the power to determine who counts as human and what lives count as lives”. How, then, do Zambian gays respond to the charges that homosexuality is incompatible with Zambian and African cultural and religious values, and that it is a Western invention? A common response from my informants was that they questioned the meaning and validity of such claims. They interrogated the essentialist understanding of “Africanness”, highlighting that so many things in contemporary Zambia are not traditionally “African” any longer, but yet are widely accepted, such as: weddings, clothing, and housing. Even Christianity, they pointed out, is not indigenous, so why all the fuss about homosexuality? Their reference to Christianity as being un-African points to the ironic fact that this religion was introduced in Zambia by Western missionaries, along with colonization. Yet it is now being used to reject homosexuality as a Western phenomenon. This is even more ironic, some interviewees commented, because homosexuality actually did exist in pre-colonial Zambian societies.

Some informants also interrogated the racial dimension of the idea of homosexuality as un-African: “The term ‘un-African’ sounds so weird. We are all human beings. We have the same blood. The only difference between us and the whites is the skin. What is the difference?” They considered homosexuality to be a universal phenomenon and wondered why it would be incompatible with being black and African. This relates to their generally shared notion of homosexuality as an inborn trait. Participants emphasized that they did not copy their sexuality from the West, but found themselves to be this way: “I am black. I am Zambian. I live in a third world country that is so hostile and considers itself a Christian

nation—how stupid would I be to wake up one morning and say: ‘Today I am going to decide to be gay because it’s so hip and so in right now.’ How stupid would I be, for you to think that I chose this? This is who I am. This is how I was born”. Contesting the idea that homosexuality is white and Western appears to be crucial for them to claim recognition of their national identity as Zambian citizens and their racial-cultural identity as black Africans. In the end, it enables them to claim back, in Ekine’s words, “the power to determine who counts as human”.

Even though homosexuality is not believed to be a Western invention, some informants acknowledged that Western culture plays a crucial role in the current moment of gay liberation in Africa: “[homosexuality] is just human nature. It’s just the way people are born. Though the West did highlight it; it is the same way they have a big influence on everything, but they cannot make everything. They did show us, they brought it out of the closet, and people blame them for that”. The suggestion here is that it is the modern Western notion of homosexuality as an identity that, in the process of globalization, has been introduced to African contexts and stimulates African gays to come “out of the closet”, and that the subsequent new visibility of homosexuality is the problem for many people. One interviewee explained that as long as things are not too explicit, traditionally there is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy: “Zambians are civilized people, up to a certain level. They can allow men doing things together, staying in the same house. They will not question you. Unless they see a fun behavior between the two of you, that’s when they start raising questions”. This reflects Epprecht’s thesis of a relative “culture of discretion” surrounding same-sex practices in pre-colonial African societies (Epprecht 2004: 37). It is, however, precisely this culture that recently has come under strain because of the globalization and politicization of LGBTI identities and rights. These processes have led to an increased self-awareness and a growing visibility of sexual minorities, but at the same time have mobilized counter-forces in society to speak out and push them to the discrete margins again. The resulting increased levels of stigmatization and discrimination explain why many informants feel, as one of them put it, that “there is no future being gay in Zambia”. In fact, several of them dreamed of leaving the country in the hope of a better future in a place where they can be themselves.

Being Christian and gay through a “spirit of discernment”

As can be expected, participants had an abundance of stories about the prejudice they have met in their churches and the levels of religious-inspired hate speech towards homosexual people in society, and in some cases also about attempts to exorcise the “evil spirit of homosexuality”, either by traditional healers or Pentecostal pastors. Those who did not attend churches where homosexuality was explicitly discussed, were yet often confronted with the widespread perceptions of homosexuality as un-biblical and un-Christian. Despite this reality, they all identified as Christian. This was not just because of living in a country that constitutionally is “a Christian nation”, but because identifying as Christian is an issue of good citizenship. In most cases, they were actively involved in church communities (varying from Catholic to Pentecostal and from Anglican to Jehovah Witnesses) and their faith appeared to matter to them. As one of them put it, “I am very much religious. It doesn’t mean that when you are gay, Christianity moves away from you. It doesn’t happen like that. I am a very strong Christian.”

Even more, it appears that my informants do not just *combine* but somehow are able to *reconcile* their sexuality and religious faith. This is not an easy process and it often involves a spiritual struggle, not only with the church but also with the God preached about in church—and both struggles are not always things of the past. “I have been very angry with God”, one interviewee told me, “and if I am to meet with God I will ask him: ‘If this is wrong, why did you make me like this?’” Another informant stated that he had been able to “recapture” his Christian faith by redefining it.

This process of negotiating and reconciling sexuality and religion is an on-going and complex process. Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis, in what follows I discuss some key strategies with particular reference to Pentecostal Christianity—not because all participants attended Pentecostal churches (although a considerable number did), but because Pentecostalism has become a very prominent form of Christianity in Zambia and broader in Africa; it is also shaping the beliefs and practices of other denominations; and because it is known in Zambia, Africa, and globally for its general explicit anti-homosexual politics (Van Klinken 2014; Kay and Hunt 2015).

“I don’t see God the way he is preached about in church.” This statement made by an interviewee reflects a typically Protestant notion of religious authority in which believers have direct access to and knowledge of God and God’s revelation in the Bible. This notion is even radicalized in Pentecostalism with its belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to all believers, with the pastor being “in principle only a first among equals” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 96). Without explicitly referring to these theological articulations, it appears that informants engage this space to develop religious knowledge that differs significantly from what they are taught in church. As one of them, attending a Pentecostal church, narrates:

That time I used to go to church and the pastor would say that he hates gay people and that they are worse than the devil himself, they were Satanists. That hit me so much. That week I was feeling low. And then I thought: Does God really see me as worse than Satan himself? Why then has he not killed me? I mean, the Devil has never had peace. So if I was worse than Satan, God would have punished me—I would never have completed school or I would have been sick all the time. But in fact God blessed me even more than the straight people! Is this really God, the way people talk about him, is that how he is? It was a Friday, I just woke up and it felt good. I thought: Really, I don’t think God sees me as a bad person. God loves all of his creation. So from that time I just stood up and said: I shall not allow any person to make me feel bad, thinking that God sees me as a bad person.

The notion of blessing invoked here echoes the (neo-)Pentecostal prosperity gospel in which wealth and success are interpreted as a direct blessing from God to the believer (Kalu 2008: 255–263). This account, and several others, further reflects a form of religious authority in which “the decisive factor remains the spiritual state of the individual” (Marshall 2009: 208). Indeed, it could very well be that these informants, and perhaps African Christian LGBTIs more generally, do not just “simply ignore the selective homophobia their ministers preach”

as Epprecht (2013: 79) suggests, but have a spiritual ability to discern whether their pastors are preaching “the truth” or not. As one interviewee stated: “When a pastor is preaching about certain things that are just pointing at you, you feel out of place. But at the end of the day I think: Is it God saying this to me? No, it’s just a person saying that.”

In a similar way, popular interpretations of the Bible, specifically of those texts often used to argue against homosexuality, are being discerned. “Scripture is very wrongly interpreted”, an interviewee explained, and he then pointed out that these texts are not about same-sex relationships as we know them today and that we should focus on the message of the Bible as a whole rather than on a few selected verses. This, again, illustrates the Protestant notion of the individual believer having direct access to the Bible, being able to interpret it and hence to challenge the interpretations presented by religious leaders. Interestingly, in Pentecostalism the “spirit of discernment” is recognized as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As Marshall (2009: 212) points out, this discernment concerns “the problem of right, or of correct conduct” and hence this gift hinders the creation of a collective ethic because such an ethic is “continually interrupted” by individual experience of faith and by personal spiritual power. Vis-à-vis the present study, the question, then, is on what basis this discernment takes place: what are these experiences of faith through which informants begin to question and challenge the teachings of their pastors in church, and what are the underlying beliefs informing their hermeneutics of discernment? It appears from the interviews that two related theological notions, or better: fundamental experiences of faith, are crucial – the belief in God as creator and in God as love.

As mentioned above, homosexuality is generally considered an inborn trait. More specifically, informants did not just express the belief to be *born* this way but put this in religious language saying that this is how they were *created* by God. Both the basic belief that as a human being they are created in the image of God, and that their sexuality is not something they chose but found themselves with, deeply shapes their understanding of the self and provides a basis on which they can reconcile their sexual and religious identities. Referring to the words of Psalm 139, one interviewee stated, in an almost confessional mode: “I believe God knew me before I was formed in my mother’s womb. So if there is something wrong with me, he could have changed me. ... He could have chopped me out and taken me away. But I think he knows his people and keeps them for a reason.” This naturalization of homosexuality in religious language reflects a form of essentialism that might not be in line with the constructivist and poststructuralist frames dominating contemporary gender and sexuality studies, but that appears to be crucial for spiritual empowerment and that might strategically be quite effective in the longer term. “The power of gay Christian essentialism”, as Stephen Warner points out with reference to the Metropolitan Community Church in the United States, is that it “invokes a powerful and benevolent God to proclaim the issue of homosexuality to be beyond human control”, and “demands, as a matter of simple justice, inclusion of gays” into society and faith communities (Warner 2005 [1995]: 199). Though not being activists in a formal sense, the Zambian gay men in this study tend to deploy an essentialist understanding of their sexuality in a religious guise for similar reasons, and it is yet to be seen how powerful this might be for queer politics in an African context.

The notion of being created by God or in the image of God is broadly interpreted in two different ways. First, some interviewees emphasize the universal characteristic of human

beings, regardless of their sexuality, as being created by God and in God's image: "I think God sees me as normal as everyone else. ... God made me in his image. So I don't think God really hates me. ... For God it totally doesn't make a difference whether I'm gay or straight—I am just God's child." Here, the reference to creation serves to normalize and humanize the gay self: what homosexual and heterosexual people have in common is that they are created by God and are children of God. According to this theological anthropology there is no ground to value LGBTI people as inferior and to discriminate against them, because human beings are equal to God. Second, a few informants referred to the notion of creation to emphasize diversity rather than equality.

It was suggested that God deliberately created some people as gay: "I believe God is the ultimate artist. He can paint classical paintings, abstract art, etcetera. We are just another design from him, so I don't think it [homosexuality] is wrong. ... I think I am made to be like this, because He is a colorful God and he wants diversity." Extrapolating these two interpretations, they point towards two different articulations of what can be called "grassroots queer theologies" beginning to emerge from Zambian soil: one more pastoral theology, where the notion of creation provides sexual minorities with a basis for self-acceptance in a shared humanity, and one more radical theology where the notion of creation provides the basis to acknowledge and celebrate sexual diversity as something intended by God. Both theologies are queer, in the sense that they directly challenge and question the heteronormative theologies prevailing in Zambian churches and in society at large. Both theologies, which have equivalents in wider discourses of queer theology (Cheng 2011; Cornwall 2011), could be effective tools for sexual minorities to respond to, and interrogate popular Christian discourses that dehumanize or demonize and discriminate against them.

In addition to the notion of God as creator, the second criterion or hermeneutics is informed by the radical notion of God as love (cf. Cheng 2011). Being asked how they think God looks at them as gay persons, almost all interviewees first and foremost stated that God loves them. As one simply put it, "I really don't know what God thinks about homosexuality, but he loves me anyway." Reference is being made both to God as the creator who loves his creation and to Jesus Christ who expressed God's love to all human beings, especially those marginalized by society. The hermeneutics of love helps, for example, to deal with the biblical texts that would condemn homosexuality: "Jesus Christ to me preached love, tolerance, hope, you know. That's what I chose to believe in, which is why I could embrace my Christianity and am not moved by what the Bible says about gay people." This hermeneutics also helps to respond to the religious hate speech against gay and lesbian people, which is then argued to be fundamentally un-Christian: "You see people raising the Bible to say, 'God hates fag'—but the word 'hate' has never come out of the Lord's mouth. So they are the ones, those who are saying this, who are involved in blasphemy".

Making the category of love the main criterion for theological and ethical discernment further supports the earlier mentioned move from a discourse that particularizes gay people on the basis of their sexual practice to a discourse that humanizes them by emphasizing their ability to love, which is universal. As one interviewee powerfully put it: "I am not a man who has sex with other men; I am just a man who is in love with other men. And if you look at God's commandments, they are about love".

Conclusion

Popular discourse in Zambia has it that homosexuality is both un-African and un-Christian, and that therefore “there is no room for gays” in this African and Christian nation. In this homophobic climate, the self-identified Zambian gay men participating in this study appear to be relatively well able to create room for themselves. Their narratives reflect a significant level of self-awareness, often achieved through painful experiences, that helps them to resist, question, and challenge prevailing perceptions and attitudes in church and society. They do not leave “the power to determine who counts as human” (Ekine 2013: 80) to homophobic religious and political leaders or the general public. Resisting discourses of demonization, they humanize themselves by making claims towards the universal category of love—both their own inclination to loving relationships and their share in God’s love. Hence they claim space for themselves as full citizens of Zambia as a Christian nation.

In this article I have particularly highlighted how Pentecostal Christianity – often associated with the politicization of homosexuality in Zambia and broader African contexts, and even with the production of ex-gay subjectivities (Hackman 2014) – might also be a source of queer agency, providing the seeds of resistance to homophobic discourses. Kevin Ward (2006: 132) has noted that both Pentecostal/born-again identities and gay identities “are shaped by participation in a global culture and are almost unimaginable without that participation”, as a result of which they both “struggle to assert their ‘Africanness’, and to receive public recognition as ‘authentic’ African modes of being”. Remarkably, where this problem of African authenticity does not hinder people in Zambia and wider in Africa to convert *en masse* to Pentecostalism, it gives rise to a stigmatization and exclusion of gay people. However, this study then suggests that Pentecostalism might provide the same gay people with resources to counter and resist such exclusion, revealing a fascinating dynamics of cultural and religious queer politics. The size of this study is too small to draw any far-reaching conclusions here, but obviously this question opens up an intriguing and critical area of further research.

The positive identification with religion, in this case Christianity in its different forms, among these Zambian gays, and their ability to combine and even reconcile their sexuality and religious faith, should not just strike secular activists and scholars from the West as surprising: rather it should lead into a self-reflective critique of the colonizing gestures of Western queer identity politics that rely on Euro-American secular models of LGBTI liberation. The religiosity of African LGBTIs puts a particular challenge to the growing body of queer studies. Building on Spurlin’s proposal to “decolonize assumptions in queer scholarship about sexual identities, politics, and cultural practices outside the West” (Spurlin 2006: 29), I suggest that one critical task concerns the secular bias characterizing queer studies, that is, its tendency to ignore religion as a relevant factor in queer practice and politics. As Melissa Wilcox (2006: 94) suggests, “perhaps religious discourse is the secret that queer theory has hidden (in plain sight) from itself.”

Acknowledging that in African contexts religion is crucial because it provides people “with a means of becoming social and political actors” (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004: 2), it is clear that as part of a decolonizing move queer studies also needs to make a post-secular move in order to be relevant to African contexts. Not only should it engage with religion as an important locus of power and heteronormativity in contemporary African societies; for queer

studies to really take seriously African queer subjectivity, it also must contend with the above-mentioned observation that my sample of Zambian gays, and possibly African LGBTI people more generally, actually identify with the same religious traditions that mobilize against them. Where religion is generally considered a key factor contributing to homophobia in contemporary Africa, it also appears to be a resource for queer subjectivity and empowerment. The nature of this empowerment needs further exploration, but it is clear that in this context spiritual empowerment *is* deeply political.

Let me conclude by briefly identifying the key issues for a research agenda stimulating further investigation of LGBTI religiosity in Africa that have emerged from the above preliminary study. First, where this study has focused on a small sample of gay men, future research should be systematic and comparative in its approach to LGBTI sexualities and identities, not presuming that LGBTI are one monolithic group but instead examining the different concerns and strategies of the respective constituencies referred to under this acronym. Second, it should also be systematic and comparative in its approach to religion, exploring the particular practices and resources that appear to be sources of queer agency, subjectivity, and empowerment in specific religious traditions and contexts – both between and within the main religions of Christianity and Islam. This article has highlighted some dynamics regarding Pentecostalism, yet Christianity in Zambia and wider in Africa is enormously diverse and more research needs to be conducted on LGBTI religiosity in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Pentecostal settings. Third, future research should not limit itself to the question of the negotiation of religious and sexual identities, but should take into account how LGBTI religiosity indeed shapes agency and subjectivity and therefore also has political effects. In other words, the relationship between religion and African LGBTI organizing and activism is a crucial area of research, especially because there are some signs that in the foreseeable future religious and political homophobia in Africa will disappear or at least be reduced.

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