



East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion

eajtr.eanso.org

Volume 4, Issue 1, 2021

Print ISSN: 2707-5362 | Online ISSN: 2707-5370

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5370>

ENSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Interrogating Issues of Sexuality in Africa: An African Christian Response.

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.4.1.557>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

06 November 2021

Keywords:

Sexuality,
Modernity,
Western
Worldview,
Sexual Orientation,
African Christian
Response.

The issues of sexuality have been very contentious in Africa more so after the legalization of same-sex marriages by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2015 under the President Obama reign. Africans have resented the way sexuality is understood and practiced in the west and has termed it un-African. Some scholars and indeed African leaders have argued that the attitude towards sexuality is a modern practice which is being introduced and even forced to Africa by modernity and influenced greatly by the western worldview. In a modern setting, different sexual orientation has been accepted as a lifestyle and has been institutionalized. Although African does not refute the fact that there were and indeed still are people with different sexual orientation, they do not find it right to institutionalize it since according to African culture, this is an abnormality that needs to be corrected, sympathized with and tolerated. To that end, African peoples assisted those with a different sexual orientation to live normal lives as much as possible. At the same time, the community was kind and tolerant and never banished or mistreated them based on their sexual orientation. This paper will attempt to show the attitude taken by the African people, the process of assisting those with different sexual orientation and how they were incorporated into the society. The paper will draw valuable lessons to be learned by modernity and which will correspond to African Christianity in accordance with the teaching of Jesus Christ.

APA CITATION

Chepkwony, A. K. (2021). Interrogating Issues of Sexuality in Africa: An African Christian Response. *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 4(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.4.1.557>

CHICAGO CITATION

Chepkwony, Adam Kiplangat. 2021. "Interrogating Issues of Sexuality in Africa: An African Christian Response". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 4 (1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.4.1.557>.

HARVARD CITATION

Chepkwony, A. K. (2021) "Interrogating Issues of Sexuality in Africa: An African Christian Response", *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 4(1), pp. 1-7. doi: 10.37284/eajtr.4.1.557.

IEEE CITATION

A. K. Chepkwony, "Interrogating Issues of Sexuality in Africa: An African Christian Response", *EAJTCR*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 1-7, Nov. 2021.

MLA CITATION

Chepkwony, Adam Kiplangat. "Interrogating Issues of Sexuality in Africa: An African Christian Response". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 4, no. 1, Nov. 2021, pp. 1-7, doi:10.37284/eajtr.4.1.557.

INTRODUCTION

The issues of sexuality have been contentious in contemporary society, especially after the legalization of same-sex marriages by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2015. In Africa, there is widespread resentment concerning the way sexuality is understood and practiced in Europe and North America, terming it as un-African. Some scholars and African leaders have argued that this mode of sexuality is a practice being introduced and even forced to Africa from a different worldview. In a modern setting, this different sexual orientation has been accepted as a lifestyle and has been institutionalized. Although Africans do not refute the fact that there were and still are people with different sexual orientation, they do not find it right to institutionalize it. According to the African culture, this is an abnormality that needs to be corrected. To that end, Africans try to assist those with a different sexual orientation to live normal lives as much as possible. At the same time, the community is kind and tolerant and never banishes or mistreats them. This paper will attempt to show the attitude taken by the African people, the process of assisting those with different sexual orientation including how they are incorporated into the society. The paper draws valuable lessons to be learned by modernity and which will correspond to African Christianity in accordance with the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Homosexuality and Sexual-differentiation in Africa

It is said that change is inevitable; change, however, can equally be good or bad. For the African community, most of the African values, principalities, and way of life have been alienated over the years, courtesy of Westernization. Some changes are indeed remarkable, but some have been constantly rejected by the African communities. Despite this, they have been continually imposed by the Western influence, masquerading on various

standpoints stemming from civilization to human rights pursuits. Sexuality with emphasis on same-sex relationships is a contentious issue, characterized by polar acceptance and interpretation by both the African and Western communities. I start this paper by defining certain terms pertinent to understanding the battles of sexuality with emphasis on same-sex relationships in Africa. The definition of terms used in this paper may deviate from the conventional understanding of the terms; one taking a Westernized view while the other takes an African perspective from my personal outlook.

Debate on homosexuality has increasingly gained intensified discussions across the globe. In Africa, the issue remains very controversial and complex depicted with the resentments despite the ever-escalating activism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights and equality. It is undeniable that the homophobic tones heard across Africa raises questions about the stand of Africa on homosexuality. It is important to categorically state that Africans do not refute nor deny the existence of same-sex tendencies in Africa. What Africa declines is the definition and acceptance of homosexuality and lesbianism as a lifestyle rather than as a sexual differentiation. Much of the evidence given to justify the existence of homosexuality in Africa are only instances where some people were attracted to persons of the same sex for sexual curiosity, experimentation, orgasms, and rituals but not as a right nor a lifestyle as openly depicted in the West. People who have such tendencies are counselled, educated, and encouraged to assume natural and normal tendencies where they would get married and start families with a person of opposite the sex as per the natural law of marriage. The same-sex sexual tendencies are perceived as an anomaly but not as a normal lifestyle as elevated in the West community. The continued advocacy by Western countries accompanied by threats of sanctions on African nations and imposition to adopt same-sex marriage

rights is an infringement of the sovereignty of African nations.

South African laws legalized same-sex marriage but in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Nigeria, and Somalia among many other African countries have openly rejected homosexuality with a conviction that the sexual orientation is un-African. To counter the homophobic arguments, the gay and lesbian activists have produced overwhelming evidence that indeed homosexuality existed in Africa even before pre-colonial periods. I believe either of the groups is justified to defend their arguments, but I think there is a concept of the definition of homosexuality each side has continually overlooked.

The controversies about acceptance of homosexuality in Africa is subject to the definition and how homosexuality is viewed from a Western perspective as opposed to the African culture. Some scholars and African leaders have argued that the attitude towards sexuality is a modern practice which is being introduced and even forced to Africa by “modernity” and influenced greatly by the Western worldview. It is imperative to revisit the context in which the African scholars and leaders use the word “introduce,” in this essence, they refer to the introduction of homosexuality as an institution or a lifestyle in Africa. The overwhelming evidence produced by LGBT activists only indicate the practice of homosexuality not as a lifestyle or an accepted way of life but as a case of a few instances in the African system^{1,2}.

In Africa, homosexuality is not an institution nor a lifestyle but a case in which Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and former Zimbabwean

President Robert Mugabe refer to as an anomaly in their efforts to counter the Western acceptance of homosexual. Sylvia Tamale quoted President Museveni in March 2012 in an interview with BBC stating thus, “Homosexuals in small numbers have always existed in our part of black Africa ... They were never prosecuted. They were never discriminated.”³ In my view, what President Museveni had in mind is not homosexuals but *Sexual differentiation*, which refer to people with a tendency of sexual attraction to persons of the same sex.

In a modern setting, different sexual orientation has been accepted as a lifestyle and has been institutionalized. Although Africans do not refute the fact that there were and indeed still are people with different sexual orientation, they do not find it right to institutionalize it. The move by many Western countries to force Africa to accept homosexuality and same-sex marriages as a lifestyle forms the backdrop of the resentment. Lees (2014) quoted President Museveni stating that:

You cannot call an abnormality an alternative orientation. It could be that the Western societies, on account of random breeding, have generated many abnormal people.

As harsh as the words of President Museveni may be perceived, they resonate across Africa. Homosexuality in Africa was not institutionalized but instead regarded as a condition that needed to be corrected. European and American regions might have primarily accepted the LGBT as a lifestyle, but from an African perspective the individuals can be helped to live a normal life as argued by Archbishop

¹ Bolatito, L.-A. (2012). The Natural Law Theory of Morality and the Homosexuality Debate in an African Culture. *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies*, 9(1), 182-214; Munday, J. C. (2014, July 26). *Marriage and Sexuality Rooted in Natural Law and Scripture*. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from Virginia Christian Alliance, Inc: <http://www.vachristian.org/God-Ordained-Family/Marriage-and-Sexuality-Rooted-in-Natural-Law-and-Scripture.html>;

² Murray, S. O. (2005). Homosexuality in ‘traditional’ sub-Saharan Africa and contemporary South Africa. *Le seminaire Gai Internet sources*; Tamale, S. (2014, Apr

26). *Homosexuality is not un-African: It is legalized homophobia, not same-sex relations, that is alien to Africa*. Retrieved Mar 18, 2018, from Al Jazeera America:

<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/homosexuality-africamuseveniugandanigeriaethiopia.html>.

³ Tamale, S. (2014, Apr 26). *Homosexuality is not un-African: It is legalized homophobia, not same-sex relations, that is alien to Africa*. Retrieved Mar 18, 2018, from Al Jazeera America: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/homosexuality-africamuseveniugandanigeriaethiopia.html>

Peter Akinola of the Anglican Communion of Nigeria who stated that:

From the very beginning, we see in the word of God that God created the world, and when He created the world, He created man in His own image – male and female. He created man... so going by the order of creation, that is, the divine arrangement – man and woman. In our African setup, when you talk of a man cohabiting with another man, it is an abomination, it is unheard of. When you go back to the Bible, you have specific directives urging the people of God to abhor such relationships. In fact, the word of God is so strong on this matter that the whole city (Sodom and Gomorrah) was destroyed. The Bible says this is an abomination before the Lord, don't do it (p. 78)⁴.

Archbishop Peter Akinola's sentiments that it is unheard of for a man to cohabit with another man is true in Africa since this is what is now understood as homosexuality. The panel that advised President Museveni on the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in 2014 was cited to have hinted to him "in every society, there is a small number of people with homosexual tendencies"⁵. Again, I think here, the use of the term "homosexual" is wrong since there are societies who accept sexual differentiation but not homosexuality. Other cases that have been used to argue that some Africans have always practiced homosexuality include the ancient cave paintings of the San people near Guruve in Zimbabwe which depict two men engaged in some form of ritual sex. "Mudoko dako," is a term among the Langi of northern Uganda inferring to effeminate males who were treated as women and could marry men⁶.

Other pre-colonial names among Africans depicting homosexual behaviors and identity include *inkotshane* among the Shangaan of southern Africa referring to male wife; *motsoalle* among the Basotho of Lesotho inferring to special friendship,

erotic relationships sanctioned by women; the Wolof language of Senegal referred to homosexual men (men-women) as *gor-digen*⁷. In the 18th century, the Khoikhoi of South Africa used the word *koetsire* to describe men considered sexually receptive to other men, and *soregus* was the word they used for a friendship which involved same-sex masturbation (Evaristo, 2014). Of all these cases, the people who have the homosexual tendencies according to African culture needed to be corrected, sympathized with and tolerated; therefore, it was not accepted as a lifestyle among Africans.

Sexual Differentiation in Traditional Africa

Stephen O. Murray (2005) provides well-documented and intriguing exhibits of age-defined attitudes towards sexuality in a traditional African society and how the individual with sexual differentiation was treated. Murray notes that no single serious scholar can ever deny the existence of pederasty in Africa. I agree with Murray and add that when the same traits were exhibited among members of the community, they were counselled and encouraged to marry and assume a normal life as defined within the African context that one must marry the opposite sex.

Murray notes that some sub-Saharan Africa traditional chiefs indicated that homosexuality was not part of the traditional African societies while Gelfand as quoted by asserted that:

The traditional Shona [of Zimbabwe] have none of the problems associated with homosexuality [so] obviously they must have a valuable method of bringing up children, especially with regards to normal sex relations, thus avoiding this anomaly so frequent in Western society (Murray, 2005, p. 1).

Dyne as cited by Murray (2015, p. 1) quoted Edward Gibbon in his book titled the Decline and Fall of the

⁴ Obasola, K. (2013). An Ethical Perspective of Homosexuality among the African People. *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 77-85.

⁵ Tamale, S. (2014, Apr 26). *Homosexuality is not un-African: It is legalized homophobia, not same-sex relations, that is alien to Africa*. Retrieved Mar 18, 2018, from Al Jazeera America:

<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/homosexuality-africanmuseveniugandanigeriaethiopia.html>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

Roman Empire (1781) stating that “I believe and hope that the negroes in their own country were exempt from this moral pestilence,” an insinuation that he hoped that Africans were free from the practice of homosexuality which was prevalent in the then Roman Empire. Consequently, Messing (1957) is cited by Murray (2005) stating that among the Amhara peasants of Ethiopia, male transvestites were perceived as “god’s mistake” and defective, so they were tolerated even though their kinfolk were ashamed of them while some were forced to relocate to other provinces out of shame. The transvestite was tolerated by women as a brother while men are noted to have been jealous of them for spending much time among the womenfolk (Murray, 2005). This indicates that the anomaly was tolerated, giving a chance to the individuals to live a relatively normal life because it was the mistake of the gods.

Ashtime was a name referred to men who behaved like women in the Maaleland of Southern Ethiopia. It is cited that the *ashtime* in the land was created a *wobo* (meaning crooked). It was further said that if *ashtime* was definitive man or women, they would have married and borne children, but because they are a *wobo*, they would not do either (Murray, 2005, p. 5). Contrary to the Amhara community where the transvestites lived harmoniously with the community, in Maaleland such were subject to a ritual where the *ashtime* would sleep with the King on the eve of royal rituals as the King was prohibited from having intercourse with women. Nonetheless, the known *ashtime* practiced skin curing, a female occupation while the others gathered and lived under the protection of the King (Murray, 2005).

Among the Zande culture, it is believed that some princes of the Azande monarchical system preferred sexual relationships with boys to women depending on their availability. This was however not their way of life because they were married and lived normal lives with their wives. If anything at all, their involvement with boys was for sexual experience, leisure and sexual exploration. An observation by Eva Meyerowitz on homosexuality tendency among the Akan and the Ashanti of Ghana noted that men who dressed and engaged in homosexual relations were never stigmatized but somewhat accepted because they had valid reasons to behave like women. The women status in the matrilineal Akan was highly elevated and so the men opted for the

high status accorded women rather than as a lifestyle. Southwold as cited by Murray (2005, p. 29) pointed out that even though the Baganda acknowledged the practice of sodomy, they perceived it as a foolish act and discourage the fooling around with a man, yet women were readily available. The words used to describe homosexuality are *Okuvuga olupanka* (riding/driving the wheel), *okusiyaga* (struggle in coitus) and *okugula butu* (opening that back part of the car for storage), which are both disgusting hence implying an abnormal behavior.

Sexual differentiation was fundamentally understood in an African context as a condition, problem, a disease and/or a mistake that called for correction and sympathy. Most of the men who were of different sexual orientation were married beside their sexual preferences. The society understood the abnormality and accepted the individuals but also persuaded and encouraged them to leave normal lives. In general, the African community never institutionalized homosexuality openly as to allowing the marriage between the same-sex individuals as advocated today.

Christian and African Values on Sexuality

The epicenter of theological ethics is embedded in God regardless of the faith. From both the Biblical and African point of reference, we are expected to behave and act in accordance with the laws of God. Our morals are significantly anchored in our interpretation of the Biblical text and the African values. Sex and sexuality are one topic that ensues a lot of confusion not only in the African cultures but across the globe. From time immemorial marriage and family institutions have been founded on the heterosexual union denoted as a natural form of human association and a blueprint of creation. According to Genesis 1:27-28,

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it...

Distancing this paper from transgender and bisexual, a focus on homosexual or same-sex relations deviates from the Biblical teaching about marriage. God created man and woman for a prime

purpose of procreation; a concept possible through the natural law of marriage. The traditional definition of marriage from both the African and Christian perspective is anchored in the natural law which flows from nature⁸. Christians and staunch believers in African values hold that nature is God's (supreme human being) creation where natural law is inherently embodied in the authority of God as Creator. Delineation of the natural law of creation dictates that marriage should be consummated by heterogeneous couples; that is the Divine order of all relationships. As indicated in Genesis 1:27-28; marriage is between man and woman thus anything deviating from that contradicts with God's creation. After creation, God reflected on his creation and said "it was good" a perfect creation. But when we introduce and advocate for same-sex relations, we are implying that we are imperfect. Can we improve on God's design on marriage and family institution?

The Bible categorically rejects the homosexual relations arguing that marriage is intended for procreation. Homosexuality challenges the law of procreation, literally, homosexual relations insinuate that the couple does not have the intention of furthering their lineage and procreating. I am therefore perturbed when I see a gay couple refer to each other as wife and husband and even have adopted children. Traditional and natural law of marriage only refer to a man married to a woman as husband and woman to a man as a wife; applying the same definition among the homosexual couples seems absurd. I am compelled to implore the LGBT community to redefine or find alternative names that suits their relation when referring to their spouses. A significant part of the African community decisively argues that homosexual and same-sex relations are an anomaly because it degrades African values on marriage and family more so distorting the promotion of family bloodline through childbearing.

The current outburst and advocacy for same-sex marriages is far worse than the story of Sodom and

Gomorrah in the Bible. Sexual sin is cited as a primary reason that led to the collapse of Sodom, but the story does not mention homosexuality as a lifestyle but only prevalence of same-sex intercourse. Africans and Christians acknowledge the existence of sex differentiation where people of the same gender are likely to be implored to engage in sexual activities but not as a formalization of marriage or lifestyle. The pursuit of the Western countries of imposing the acceptance and legalization of homosexuality and lesbianism as an alternative sexual orientation is pervasive and unpalatable.

According to Bolatito, Africans criticize same-sex relationship as a lifestyle on the grounds of immorality and a practice that erodes the values attached to procreation and family life in African cultures⁹. The Yoruba Culture of West Africa argue that:

...since homosexuality tends towards not begetting children and begetting children defines the essence or even success of any marriage in Africa, homosexuality would be considered a bad omen...¹⁰.

Africans hold the institution of marriage and family with high esteem and thus the issue of homosexuality as a lifestyle in Africa ensues many questions than answers. Often, human rights activists base their argument on liberty as a fundamental human right hence legalization of the LGBT rights promotes liberty. Africans recognize liberty as a key right but the imposition on Africa to fully adopt the principles of homosexuality as defined by the Western cultures is not justifiable. From a personal perspective, Africans construe homosexuality to be an abomination because it deviates from the law of nature.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the first principle of nature elevates the importance of promoting good

⁸ Munday, J. C. (2014, July 26). *Marriage and Sexuality Rooted in Natural Law and Scripture*. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from Virginia Christian Alliance, Inc: <http://www.vachristian.org/God-Ordained-Family/Marriage-and-Sexuality-Rooted-in-Natural-Law-and-Scripture.html>

⁹ Bolatito, L.-A. (2012). The Natural Law Theory of Morality and the Homosexuality Debate in an African Culture. *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies*, 9(1), 182-214.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 183.

and evading of evil¹¹. Based on this, Africans have a right to reject homosexuality as a lifestyle for they perceive it as evil. This reason drives them to a logical view that homosexuality is immoral and unacceptance in Africa. In this regard, Balitato (2012) posit that:

For human beings, reason dictates how they should act and acting in accordance with reason means acting in conformity with nature. Hence whatever is contrary to reason is unnatural and therefore immoral¹².

According to the reason of nature, heterosexual intercourse is natural and homosexual unions are unnatural. The interpretation of scriptures vindicates that homosexuality does not only reject the divine order of creation but also undermines and distorts the sanctity of opposite-sex marriage. Africans believe that sexual relations were not only for sexual gratification but for procreation, a goal impossible with pure same-sex intercourse. I often wonder, whether same-sex couples at one-point desire to father or mother children of their own as opposed to adoption. Balitato (2007) sums up the promotion of heterosexual relations by Africans as:

In African Traditional Religion, marriage is a cherished fecundity and is intended for procreation. Marriage involves not only interpersonal relations but also intercommunity relations. The survival of kinship in the social structure depends on marriage; marriage always establishes very strong bonds between the individuals belonging to different families and clans, especially when children are born. When a community seeks out a wife or a son-in-law, they look for one that lives up to their expectations; a person with good moral qualities, industrious in physical work, respectful towards their elders and a good reputation. Physical attractiveness doesn't matter as much as the community's expectations. Fertility is the central requirement in marriage (p. 204).

CONCLUSION

The arguments about homosexual and sexual differentiation in Africa and across the world rely on the legitimacy of the definition of the terms which vary across cultures. Africans reject and consider homosexuality as an anomaly primarily because it is a selected behavior that does not conform to the laws of nature and African values on marriages and family. Marriage from both Christian and African perspective is anchored to the natural law of procreation; a principle degraded by homosexuality. Intercourse in African culture does not only constitute of satisfaction of sexual curiosity and orgasm but begetting of children. Therefore, what is the benefit of having a relationship that only amount to orgasms but not the fundamentals of continuity of kinship? Reason implores most Africans to reject homosexual lifestyle but equally demands them to help such parties live a normal life. Noteworthy, the increasing advocacy accompanied by sanctions to the African community by the West advocating for the legalization of same-sex marriage in Africa is pervasive and infringement of the sovereignty of African communities.

¹¹ Bolatito, L.-A. (2012). The Natural Law Theory of Morality and the Homosexuality Debate in an African

Culture. *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies*, 9(1), 182-214.

¹² Ibid, p. 185.