



Challenging sexual stereotypes: is cross-dressing “un-African”?

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Introduction

In Malawi, the year 2005 saw a significant increase in public media debates on issues such as homosexuality, cross-dressing and transvestitism. The media – print and radio especially, for television is a relatively new form and not widely available – treats these three issues differently. Homosexuality is the most hotly debated, with debate focusing on its “morality”. Opposition to homosexuality is usually couched in terms of religion and culture. Transvestitism is rarely discussed, while cross-dressing,¹ interestingly enough, is seldom linked to homosexuality or transvestitism.

The representation of transvestitism and cross-dressing in the Malawian media suggests that the former does not exist in Malawi, while the latter is present and acceptable as a form of entertainment. Examples of cross-dressing as entertainment that receive media coverage are those seen in traditional dances and in commercial music culture. For instance, Television Malawi (TVM) has shown documentaries on boys who dress like women to entertain. There are several popular musicians who use female names and give commercial justifications for so doing, arguing that this helps increase their popularity and creates intrigue and suspense among their audience.

The media also covers events at which men dress like women and vice versa (at weddings and even funerals for certain ethnic groups), but this is not investigated as a practice indicative of sexual “deviance” or homosexual tendencies; rather, such acts are represented as “cultural” practices.

In contrast to such benign presentations of cross-dressing, the media treats homosexuality as a “new” menace, an “alien sin” that needs to be swiftly rooted out before it spreads. The media discussions spilled over to online discussion forums of the University of Malawi, specifically, the Chanco-Alumni lists, to which I subscribe. What I found poignant was that many contributors dismissed practices such as homosexuality on the basis that they are not African, but “vile” foreign imports. In this brief standpoint, I wish to note that not only homosexuality, but cross-dressing has been observed in a variety of African cultures for centuries.

Brief notes on the history of homosexuality and cross-dressing in Africa

The history of homosexuality and cross-dressing on the African continent needs to be noted so that these two issues cannot be dismissed as a foreign phenomenon. According to the *Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, Transgendered, Queer (GBLTQ) Encyclopaedia*, African traditional art provides evidence of homosexual expression throughout the African continent. The entry by Frederick Lamp documents evidence of what we now call male-to-male and female-to-female relationships:

The Meru ritual leaders called *mugawe* among the Meru of Kenya, dress as women routinely and sometimes even marry other men. Coptic monks in the sixth or seventh century whose work included the painting of sacred manuscripts apparently were known for their homosexuality, judging by a man's wedding vow on papyrus that promises "never to take another wife, never to fornicate, nor consort with wandering monks."

Among the Dagara of Burkina Faso, the homosexual man is said to be well integrated into the community, occupying a performance role of intermediary between this world and the other world, as a sort of "gatekeeper".

Carlos Estermann found that among the Ambo of Angola a special order of diviner, called *omasenge*, dressed as women, did women's work, and contracted marriage with other men who might also be married to women. An *esenge* [sing. of *omasenge*] is essentially a man who has been possessed since childhood by a spirit of female sex, which has been drawing out of him, little by little, the taste for everything that is masculine and virile.

[In] the case of the Zande of the Central African Republic, sex between a man and a boy was said to benefit the diviner, and would take place before the consultation of oracles, when sex with women would be taboo. But as Evans-Prichard reported, the Zande went on to allow that the reason was not simply ritual prohibition, but also "just because they like [boys]" (2002).

Ancient Egyptian art also exhibits homosexuality: The Saqqara from Dynasty V shows the close embrace of two powerful male court officials. Further south, an ivory carving from the Vili of Congo shows two men with their hands on the genitals of adjacent men, two men holding a phallic staff, and one man holding his own erection. The GBLTQ encyclopaedia also documents evidence of woman-to-woman relationships in art from Zambia and Sierra Leone. The creation of an artificial penis has been documented among the Ovimbundu of Zanzibar; in 1937, Wilfred Hambley mentioned that "a woman has been known to make an artificial penis for use with another woman" (2002–2006).



Frederick Lamp's entry also features the Yoruba of Nigeria. Their male priests always dress as women with braided hair. They operate in the ritual context in which the god is said to "mount" the priest in spirit possession, as a male animal mounts a female in intercourse. The Gabra of Ethiopia and Kenya even have a symbolic gender transformation, in which men become women and women become men.

Cross-dressing is also seen in traditional African masked dances. A good example is the Baga dance from the Guinea coast of Africa, in which a group of men dress as women and imitate their movement erotically, undulating their hips and sometimes suggesting sexual intercourse with male bystanders.

Modern African cross-dressing in fiction and reality



I found it refreshing that Benjamin Kwakye's *The Sun By Night*, winner of the Commonwealth Literary Prize for the best novel in 2006, featured cross-dressing as an African phenomenon, in an African setting and context. Set in Ghana, it is hardly a neutral treatment of cross-dressing – the anti-hero, a young man who likes to wear women's clothing and make-up, is also responsible for the murder of a prostitute. Nevertheless, there are moving scenes that show the clash between a modern urban African youth and his more traditional father, when the latter discovers his son wearing women's clothing. The first time this happens, the teenage boy is "caught" wearing his mother's dress, high-heeled shoes, rouge and lipstick. He is shame-faced and stammering, while his father delivers the traditional authoritarian lecture of the paterfamilias. But the second time is quite different. Kubi, the son, is found "admiring himself" (150) in a navy-blue dress, with his face adorned with make-up. When his father sees him like this, he is too shocked to speak, but this time Kubi shows no shame. He laughs, and explains that he bought the dress, and sees nothing wrong with wearing it; that it is harmless. The father is baffled, alienated and even disgusted; yet he accepts that he is powerless. This time he can only shake his head in pity and acknowledge that he does not understand his son. The narrative of cross-dressing has shifted from one of Freudian transgression to one in which the right to self-expression trumps the patriarchal arbiter of gender roles.

Shifting to the story of a cross-dresser in South Africa, Donald Donham features the real-life story of young man who enjoyed wearing female attire. Linda (a common male name in Zulu) was a black man who died of Aids in Soweto in 1993. He was the founding member of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), and was a drag queen.² At his funeral, his father, an

independent Zionist church member, explained that his son was a good person who worked hard in the household. However, he went on to say the following:

There was just one thing about my son's life that bothered me.... So let me tell you, if you're a man, wear men's clothes. If you're coloured, act coloured. Above all, if you're black, don't wear Indian clothes. If you do this, how will our ancestors recognise [and protect] you? (1998)

Like the fictional father in Kwakye's novel, it seems that cross-dressing is not associated with sexual transgression so much as a blurring of the borders of identity; a blurring that older men and those who espouse traditional values find particularly disturbing.

Challenging binary thinking

The behaviour of these two sons, Kubi and Linda, challenges the binary thinking that strongly differentiates between masculine and feminine behaviour. The fictional and the real characters do not reject their biological sex; rather, they enjoy exploring aspects of feminine identity performance. The notion that men can explore an inter-gendered space, laying claim to feminine practices, is unfathomable to their fathers. However, it is this space that the sons use to frame their identity, even though this contests the societal norms and gendered dress codes to which their fathers subscribe.

This seems to bear out Stuart Hall's assertion that "Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture" (quoted in Donham, 1998: 1).

What is interesting is that neither in the Ghanaian novel, nor in Linda's lived experience, is there any suggestion that the cross-dressing they enjoy is the result of foreign or Western influences. If an aetiology of their behaviour is sought, it can be found only in local childhood practices. In *The Sun By Night*, Kubi's mother tells how she and a neighbour who had a girl the same age as Kubi used to swop the children's clothing and dress their son and daughter up in the other's clothes.

Linda, the drag queen from Soweto, had similar experiences as a child: in an interview, he said: "I used to wear girls' clothes at home. My mother dressed me up. In fact, I grew up wearing girls' clothes" (quoted in McLean and Ngcobo, 1994: 170).

Whether the cross-dressing of adult men can be attributed to cross-gendered ways in which their parents dressed them as children is open to debate. However, what remains is that some adult black African men choose to wear women's clothing, and derive pleasure from this – without any evidence that these choices are the result of "foreign" or "non-African" influences or "corruption".



Conclusion

Whatever one's personal attitude to cross-dressing or homosexuality, what is clear is that both have history and precedence in Africa. To demonstrate this, this brief article has attempted to parallel literary and real-life examples of cross-dressing in African contexts. Encyclopaedic evidence has also been presented to underline the point that there is clear evidence of homosexuality in African history. The intention here is neither to advocate nor oppose gay rights or cross-dressing. Rather, it is to deconstruct the view that homosexuality, cross-dressing and transvestitism are foreign imports, and to thus encourage Africans to take informed positions on these issues. Cross-dressers and homosexuals may be in the minority in our societies, but in this age of spiralling gender-based violence and HIV/Aids, we need to encourage informed discussion and investigation of all forms of sexuality if we are to curb sexual violence and the transmission of a cruel disease.



References

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Footnotes

- 1 Cross-dressing is the act of wearing clothing commonly associated with another gender within a particular society.
- 2 A male-bodied person who performs, often in nightclubs and at parties, as an exaggeratedly feminine character, in an elaborate costume usually consisting of a flamboyant dress and high-heeled shoes, heavy make-up and a wig.

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