

Can African Diaspora organizations in Germany facilitate dialogue between the global North and South on LGBTIQ human rights?

Talk by Tsepo Bollwinkel in the Crossings & Alliances series

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Ladies, gentlemen, and everyone between and beyond constructions of gender,

I am pleased and grateful to have the chance to speak to you this evening. Thanks are due to the organizational efforts of the Hirschfeld-Eddy Foundation, and especially to Sarah Kohrt. Thank you to the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD), which is not only my social/political home in the black community in Germany, but has also come a long way to be co-hosting events such as this one today. Thank you also to Ise Bosch and her Dreilinden organization. Ise, you have played a large part in turning my personal prejudices against white people, especially those with a feminist or queer bent, into more nuanced and peaceable perspectives. Ten years ago I would not have given a talk on this topic to white people. But your respect and your deep reflections on human rights have opened my eyes and heart such that I can now recognize allies like you. This talk is an extended version of a position paper of the same title but with a different focus that I wrote for last year's Rainbow Philanthropy Conference (link: <http://www.isvd-blog.de/?p=6755>).

Today I would like to focus on three points:

- Complete speechlessness currently reigns between organizations of the African Diaspora in Germany and German groups that seek to promote LGBTIQ rights on the African continent.
- A major reason for this speechlessness is linguistic/cultural, namely the different terms and social categorizations used for same-gender loving and different-gender living people and ways of life. If this speechlessness is to be replaced by fruitful dialogue, it is necessary to understand different notions of sexuality, loving relationships and family. Given the imbalance in power between North and South, and between rich and poor, the task of seeking a new type of understanding (not only in this area) lies primarily with the groups here in this country. To illustrate this, I will take a crucial concept and examine its history and meaning in the North vis-à-vis the African continent. We need to examine who is behind the spread of anti-homosexual attitudes and actions on the African continent, and what their motivations are.
- Despite all the difficulties, I consider dialogue with the African continent to be sensible and necessary. I would like to share some ideas about how it can work.

Two more preliminary remarks:

1. What is the African Diaspora? I will use the definition from the AU:

"The African Diaspora consists of people of African descent and heritage living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and who remain committed to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union."

The African Diaspora in Germany probably numbers around one million people. It includes: 1) around 300,000 citizens of African countries who have official residence status; 2) an estimated 50,000 people from African countries without papers; 3) approximately 500,000 Afro-Germans; and 4) people of African descent who are citizens of non-African countries.

2. For the rest of my talk I will no longer refer to the "North" but rather to the "West". Of course both terms are geographically incorrect. But "West" is used more often to describe the states and regions of the colonial and (supposedly) post-colonial powers on the African continent. And, when talking about lesbians, gay men, trans and intersex people, I will use the umbrella term "queer" as understood in the West to mean non-heteronormative.

1. Speechlessness

There are hundreds of organizations of the African Diaspora in Germany. Most of them are cultural associations that promote solidarity and mutual support within certain groups which are often national in character but can also be religious. There are also organizations that promote exchange with members of the white majority society. Then there are German projects initiated by the diaspora that provide support for economic development and social dialogue with countries on the African continent. And then there are organizations such as ADEFRA and ISD that are run primarily by Afro-Germans. Not to be forgotten are the relatively young refugee organisations resisting deportation and social exclusion in which African people play a key role. Last year I set out to investigate whether queer people can be seen and heard in these organizations, and if so, where. The result was devastating. The only places where this was the case were the Afro-German organizations and parts of the refugee movement. These organizations, however, do not direct their attention primarily to the African continent, which means they have comparatively less expertise about the continent and/or marginal influence there.

Last year I also endeavored to examine attitudes in the diaspora organizations toward the human rights of non-heteronormative people. I should note that this was not a comprehensive survey, but rather consisted of spot checks. And this was the result: the organizations that responded at all to my query generally stated that the topic is not relevant to their organization, their African homeland or the continent as a whole. Some responses were aggressive, namely that the topic belongs to the West as opposed to Africa or the diaspora. Some were cautious, indicating constraint by the laws in their countries of origin.

And something else: all the organizations that responded said that they had never been contacted by a German office or organization about LGBTIQ human rights. I subsequently inquired a little at German human rights organizations as to whether they were in contact with African Diaspora organizations on this topic. All of

them said no. Some said they had not received any responses to their invitations; others said they would prefer to communicate with groups directly on the African continent.

To summarize: there are currently no dialogue partners among the organizations of the African Diaspora in Germany that could play a role in facilitating human rights for queer people on the African continent. And on the German side, there appear to be no serious initiatives to bring about such a dialogue. With the major exception of groups working together at the Rainbow Philanthropy Conference as well as the Afro-German and refugee organizations – but these groups have little connection to the African continent and therefore can have only a very limited impact at present. The overall result, therefore, is speechlessness.

2. Terms

Why are Western LGBTIQ human rights activists unable to communicate with organizations of the African Diaspora – where does this speechlessness come from? As in so many areas, the reasons lie in the complex legacy and ongoing existence of colonialism. As I hope is common knowledge, at least in this room, all African cultures (of course) have numerous different ways of addressing and integrating same-gender loves and different-gender identities. These cultures are as diverse as the 54 countries and more than 2,000 peoples and languages on the continent today. It is important to note that based on current knowledge, all of these peoples and cultures have recognized and integrated same-gender loves and different-gender lives. That is, until the European colonial powers robbed the continent of people, land and resources. When its people, land and resources were stolen, the continent's cultures, historical traditions and systems of law and government were destroyed. Along with the colonial powers came Christianity, Victorian prudishness and the European legal systems of that era. The Christianity of that time, the Victorian prudishness, and – to varying degrees – all the European legal systems condemned, criminalized and prohibited same-gender love and different-gender lives.

Excursus:

The very rigor that colonialism brought to bear in destroying the ways African societies integrated same-gender loves, including the recollection thereof, suggests to me the type of racist projection that repressed its own sexuality in accord with European/Church traditions by sexualizing the Black Object, or the N, in order to combat it all the more brutally outside of itself, namely in these African cultures.

One indication of how terribly effective colonialism was can be seen in how African countries have seamlessly retained the underlying colonial structures following independence. The artificial borders drawn by Europeans have not been corrected, nor have any attempts been made to restore pre-colonial systems of government or law. Public life, educational systems, official religiosities – they all continue to follow colonial models to this day. So even after independence, same-gender love and different-gender lives still find no place in Africa.

Now one might object that Western countries have fundamentally changed their attitudes to LGBTIQ issues, and therefore that the former colonies should somehow also participate in this development.

This is the juncture at which we need to examine a concept that is crucial to understanding African worldviews. By that I mean the concept of family. Here is where most African social and ideological systems are

in agreement with the type of Christianity and the rigid European sexual mores that befell them in the 18th and 19th centuries, namely: the sole purpose of the family, and of sexuality in particular, is reproduction (and economic security). Precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa all agree on this point.

However, here is one of the places where different linguistic/cultural understandings of a term have enormous repercussions: Europeans use the term sexuality to mean every type of sexual interaction, whereas in most African cultures it refers solely to vaginal intercourse between a woman and a man for the purpose of reproduction. All other types of sexual interaction, including same-gender love, were not covered at all by terms like sexuality, and were not considered problematic as long as reproduction of the family was ensured.

Excursus: an example from my own cultural heritage:

I belong to the Sotho people in South Africa. In the precolonial tradition, the following model of polygamy was widespread especially among those of higher social status. A man's first wife is selected by the village or the community. This is a matter of dynastic and social balance. The man's second wife is selected by his first wife. This is a matter of sharing work and responsibilities – and of pleasure more for the first wife than for the husband. "Pleasure" here means all forms of non-vaginal, non-penetrative sexuality – primarily from woman to woman... The man's third wife is the first whom he may select himself. This is the closest thing to what would be viewed in the West as a romantic relationship.

I can attest to the fact that this model still survives, at least sporadically. I myself am the first son of the third wife of my father... And even though our President Zuma has four wives right now, my father was viewed as a thoroughly scandalous and antiquated exception. To quote one of my relatives: "we have moved beyond that."

But what does this "moving beyond" look like? Men wear their hair closely cropped, in the way white plantation owners thought appropriate for slaves. And women wear wigs of smooth hair. The main article of what is considered traditional clothing is a wool blanket, still based on the pattern of a blanket that Queen Victoria gave one of our kings. Fashion-conscious women wear styles popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. And aside from a few restricted monogamous heterosexual practices, sexualities are taboo.

The "moving beyond" here is therefore the internalization of Western colonial ideals (of morality). Despite the fact that until very recently the specific conditions of apartheid (including extreme periods of absence from the family, like in the infamous workers' dormitories) meant that precisely the black population of South Africa lived and loved in polyamorous and same-gender ways. However, the terms for this are not commensurate with those of the West, and it is taboo to speak about it using Western terms for sexuality.

So colonialism and its associated ideologies have been thoroughly successful here. They have managed to replace the African understanding with the European one. And in the process, to relegate all non-heteronormative forms of sexuality and gender identity into zones governed by taboos or prohibitions. As mentioned above, when the independent African states were formed they kept most of the colonial constructs. Where the ideology of nation states or pan-Africanism needed to be emphasized, reference was eagerly made to "African" values, and especially to the family as the foundation of society. The colonial equation between familial reproduction and heteronormative sexuality, however, has yet to be deconstructed or resolved to this day.

Of course there continue to be same-gender loves and different-gender lives in postcolonial Africa. In some areas they still even take the form of precolonial traditions or later adaptations thereof. Until recently, at least, they could be lived outside the public eye and were tolerated by a discreet lack of scrutiny. See the remarks above about my father.

Yet another excursus: I am a trans man – in a Western, queer sense

There is no way I can define myself in South Africa in these terms without a threat to life and limb. So the explanation for my relatives is as follows. My ancestors, who despite Christianization continue to be of enormous importance, have given me a mission in life that can only be fulfilled in the role of a man. (Followers of Eastern religions would probably call this a type of karmic destiny.) By the way, that is exactly how I myself understand my different-gender life. Now I may not be sure what this mission is, but I am prepared to pursue it in good faith. Perhaps that is what I am doing right now... and because I am married to a woman and am raising two children with her, I am fully compliant with the requirement to reproduce. This is because the Sotho idea of a functioning family does not require the children to be my biological offspring. And precisely because I fulfilled the mission of my ancestors by transitioning to the other gender and thereby gained a special kind of life experience, I am accorded a status of high spiritual development. The fact that my primary sexual orientation for a same-gender partner makes me gay in a Western sense plays no role in my South African family either. As long as I indulge this same-gender desire discretely and meet the societal demands for reproduction and family via my wife (who is ardently loved, by the way) and children, I am safely within the bounds of my tradition.

Most same-gender loving and different-gender living individuals, however, neither can nor want to follow traditional models anymore but instead find their identities within a framework that has developed in the West over the last 50 years as LGBTIQ. And this is the crucial difference to traditional thought: queer scripts of life are not linked to reproduction, or to the family as the locus of reproduction. That is the place where conflicts with queerness arise.

And that is precisely where neocolonialism kicks in. The most powerful players on the field of ideological subjugation on the African continent are the Christian churches, especially the evangelical ones of American origin. Backed by enormous financial power, these churches seek to spread their reactionary agenda of checking and destroying something on the African continent that despite the successes of the Tea Party can no longer be stopped in the USA, namely a society that is open to a wide range of sexualities and gender identities. And these churches shamelessly exploit the still poorly understood notion of LGBTIQ ways of life versus the (pre-)colonial concept of family to unite believers in a new type of witch hunt.

I have gone into such detail in order to make it clear that the current violations of LGBTIQ human rights have a colonial background. And to provide one example of where and how a lack of linguistic/cultural understanding leads to enormous suffering. So how can dialogue on the human rights of queer people succeed with African Diaspora organizations here in Germany, which could then have a liberating effect on the African continent, if the two sides lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of their respective terms and meanings?

3. Dialogue is crucial

That being said, I expressly urge those here in the West to seek and guide dialogue with the African Diaspora! Yes, of course we want and need the ensuing cooperation with self-help organizations for queer people on the African continent to take place on an equal basis. It is of paramount importance to address these human rights issues now. For those affected, it is a matter of life, liberty, medical care, legal support and more.

However, making fundamental change to the situation of LGBTIQ people on the African continent, and integrating the scripts of their lives legally and socially into African societies, are entirely dependent on equal dialogues that reveal and remove the ideological effects of colonialism – the internalized and directly externalized forms thereof both on the African continent and in the West.

It is essential to break through the linguistic confusion and speechlessness on both sides. The only way to have fruitful communication is to understand what the other side is saying. And here is where I see a key role for the diaspora organizations. More people of African descent now live outside the mother continent than in Africa itself. An enormous amount of social and economic exchange goes on. The money that flows from the diaspora back to the African continent is more than twice the level of so-called development aid, with a rapidly rising trajectory. A huge transfer of knowledge and technology is taking place. As well as an exchange of social ideas between the diaspora and the mother continent. So it makes sense to enter into dialogue with the diaspora right here in this country. Because this successful dialogue will flow back to and have an effect on the continent. True, it will not be easy. The damage and distrust that colonialism and racism have inflicted and continue to engender are too deep. But I am convinced that the efforts will pay off for all involved. From the West I expect a serious and studied examination of the different value systems and the various linguistic meanings, and an approach to social phenomena in Africa and to Western understandings of society and culture that is informed by a critique of colonialism.

Final excursus:

I expressly point out that the concept of queerness and the inclusion of LGBTIQ in human rights as such are of only recent origin in the West, and that they are far from firmly anchored in Western attitudes and actions. This is evident not only in the Tea Party or in the excesses of the Putin dictatorship, but also in how “concerned parents” resist reforms of sex education in schools.

A binary-gender and heteronormative concept of identity, relationships and family continues to dominate the West to this day. Its roots lie in the last 500 years of Western thought, which also produced capitalism, racism and colonialism. Unfortunately it was exported extremely successfully to the colonized regions. We need to ask, therefore, from what standpoint and with what justification can Western people demand an end to an ideology that they themselves exported? Moreover, I would point out that the idea of universal human rights for individualized lives is also Western and of recent origin. One example of how far the West is from applying this beautiful idea in practice can be seen in the deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. Here too we have to ask what standpoint or justification Western activists can claim in calling for universal (?) human rights.

My answer is the following: These rights cannot be “called for” at all! The only role that Western human rights activists can assume in offering their input to non-Western people is that of equal partners, and they need to show their support by following primarily the latter’s expertise. There is a long road to travel in becoming trustworthy and reliable partners, not so much in a monetary sense but rather with respect to power discrepancies and Western cultural dominance.

My recommendation for creating partner-based communication is to start with actual dialogue and building relations of trust with primarily Afro-German or Afro-European groups. Here at least there is a large shared basis of linguistic understanding. And the main initial task of Western LGBTIQ human rights activists would be to accept and address the critique of how they deal with organizations on the African continent as well as with black people and PoCs in this country.

When change begins to show in the form of mutual understanding and acceptance, the foundation is laid for more promising communication with organizations that are more connected to the African continent. One area I would recommend here are student organizations, which can be expected to have more open attitudes in general and to show a rapid flow of information back to their home countries. And I would also suggest the church organizations, which are not all a source of evangelical fundamentalism but also melting pots of very different realities of life and places of personal experience and change.

I am sure that everyone involved, and especially those affected by exclusion, persecution and deliberate disregard, can only benefit from equal, respectful and informed dialogue between organizations of the African Diaspora and Western LGBTIQ human rights activists.

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