



BEING LESBIAN OR GAY IN AFRICA

Some people think that being lesbian or gay is only about who you have sex with. This is not true. A definition of being lesbian or gay is: To have romantic, sexual, intimate feelings for or a love relationship with someone of the same sex.

IS BEING LESBIAN OR GAY UN-AFRICAN?

Many years of research internationally have shown that between 5 and 10% of people in every community are lesbian or gay. Yet, sometimes people think lesbian and gay people only live in Europe or America. They think in Africa lesbian and gay people do not exist. This is not true.

In Africa, there is also a lot of research showing that there have been African people who loved and had sexual relationships with people of the same sex for hundreds of years. In Namibia, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, bond friendships, ancestral wives, female husbands and male wives have existed for centuries as forms homosexual relationships. Most of these countries considered people in these kinds of partnerships superior. They were highly respected and regarded as spiritual voices for their communities. In many parts of Africa, people who were born with both sexual organs were also considered to possess powers and spirits from the ancestors. All these relationships were accepted and respected in Africa long before Africa was colonised. These forms of partnerships and marriages were protected by common law.

The idea that loving someone of the same sex is wrong, or evil is an idea that was introduced by the colonial powers, according to some researchers. The colonial powers brought Christianity to Africa, and with it, the idea that loving someone of the same sex is an abomination. Before colonisation, researchers say, many African cultures accepted sexual and love relationships between people of the same sex. In South Africa today, lesbian, gay and bisexual people live in every community, whether they are 'black', 'coloured', 'white' or 'Indian'.

Most Africanists argue about being African as though it is a single identity, and as though it is the same as being black. Being African is not only about one's race, and it is not a single identity. There are different ways of being African. In South Africa, there are diverse racial, cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups.

All of these groups have different beliefs and ideas about being African. None of them can claim a single African identity. Given this scenario, it may be misleading to claim that homosexuality is not African without examining the diversity of African identities.

Our Constitution says that we are not allowed to discriminate against anyone because of their sexual orientation. However cultural and traditional intolerance and negative attitudes from others still force people to hide their sexuality.

As a result, some lesbian or gay people, including those living in African communities, do not disclose or openly show who they really are in public. This does not suggest, however, that homosexuality is un-African. On the contrary, it is clear that homophobia is un-African because it denies people the opportunity to express their full humanity.



Some Common Questions And Answers About Lesbian And Gay People

Question 1

What causes homosexuality?

Often people wonder if being lesbian or gay is something you are born with (if it is genetic) or whether it is something that you change into (if it is learned behaviour). This question is not often asked of heterosexual people, even though being heterosexual is another of the three recognised sexual orientations. Things that are unfamiliar, such as being lesbian or gay, often make us ask questions of cause. It seems as if knowing the cause makes it easier for people to accept lesbian and gay people.

The fact is that it is not known what causes sexual orientation. Some studies suggest there are genetic influences, but not all researchers or experts agree with these research findings. Most researchers agree that sexual orientation, be it heterosexual, homosexual (lesbian or gay) or bisexual, is determined by a mixture of genes and social influences.

"From an early age I knew I was different. I never had feelings for men and I always had feelings for women. But I never had anyone in the village to talk to about these feelings..."

(Vera, cited in Morgan & Wieringa, 2005:291)

Question 2

Does your race or nationality determine your sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation has nothing to do with one's skin colour or geographical location. The fact that people are born in Africa or outside Africa does not determine whether they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or heterosexual.

The fact remains that sexual orientation is not determined by race or nationality. There is no scientific basis to prove the relationship between one's sexual orientation and race or nationality. There is a proof however that homosexual relationships have existed amongst African people for many centuries.

"In 1900 the missionary ..explains that oupanga is an original good custom..Two men who are each other's epanga commit themselves to giving mutual gifts of cattle and other things..even girls become each other's oupanga to commit and help each other until death. The word Oupanga means, connection, and is related to traditional healers, the ovapange"

(Karsh-Haack, cited in Morgan & Wieringa, 2005: 293)

Question 3

Is being lesbian or gay against religion?

"Before I didn't think that it is possible for a gay person to be a Christian; I thought being gay is a sin.1 Corinthians 13...says that love comes from God. When you read about that love, every single detail about that love, you will find out that God loves us all. It also says....there is nothing that can separate us and God."

(Sandile, cited in Bloch & Martin, 2005:33)

Most religions started a long time ago, when having as many children as possible was important for people to survive. That is why the holy books mention sex only to have children (for procreation).

Interestingly, sex between men is often strongly condemned in religious teachings, while sex between women is rarely, if ever, mentioned.

At the same time, the holy books mention compassion as a state that we should strive for. It is important to read any religious writing with this in mind. Remember, too, that not so long ago Bible texts were used to justify apartheid.

In all religions there is a difference between the texts and daily practice. Some people read the holy books literally, and are therefore against lesbian and gay people. Others use the texts as a source of inspiration, but in daily life they accept lesbian and gay people as human beings. There are many lesbian or gay and bisexual people who find ways to keep their faith and be who they are.

It usually takes time to get to that point, but it is possible. There are churches in South Africa that accept lesbian and gay people as members and even bless their unions.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has publicly apologised for the persecution of lesbian and gay people by the church.

Question 4

Can lesbian and gay people be cured?

This question suggests that lesbian and gay people are sick, which is untrue. In the past some psychiatrists and doctors tried to show that homosexuality was a mental illness, but they failed. From 1973 onwards, being lesbian, gay or bisexual is no longer described as an "illness" by the medical profession. However some people still wrongly send their gay sons or lesbian daughters to clinics, psychologists or sangomas to be "cured". If being lesbian or gay was accepted by everyone, no one would feel the need to "cure" it.

Question 5

Do gay men want to be women and do lesbian women want to be men?

Some people think a man, for example, must be or should be a woman to love another man. This comes from the thinking that only men and women can be together. If one thinks like this then it seems logical that a man who loves another man must wish to change his sex. But this is not true.

"When one finds out that she is a lesbian somehow in her mind she thinks that she has to behave like a boy....[but after a while I suddenly]... got the revelation that a lesbian does not have to be manlike. Though there was nothing wrong about me being butch, I wanted to explore my femininity."

(Thembi, cited in Morgan & Wieringa, 2005:213-214)

We often forget that there is a difference between sex, gender role and sexual orientation. They are not the same thing.

- Sex is determined by biology (man or woman).
- Gender role (masculine or feminine) is often determined by culture and environment (and acceptable gender roles have changed a lot over the last 20 years).
- Sexual orientation refers to whether you love and have sex with people of the opposite sex (heterosexual), people of the same sex (homosexual) or people of both sexes (bisexual).

A biological man can be masculine and heterosexual, or masculine and gay. Some gay men and lesbian women choose to adopt the gender role of the opposite biological sex, and become feminine gay men or masculine lesbian women.

A gay man who chooses a feminine gender role is still a man.

There is a big difference between being a gay man and wanting to be a woman. A man can love another man and still look like a man, dress like a man, and talk like a man.

Question 6

Is it a question of language?

It is possible that people who claim that homosexuality is not African are confused by the fact that relationships between people of the same sex were not called homosexual relationships in Africa. They were called different things in different African societies, like ancestral wives and bond friendships as mentioned above. The terms used were also associated with spirituality. The term homosexuality might therefore be associated with western culture and tradition. The problem could possibly be an issue of language and not necessarily of sexual orientation.

Further reading:

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Acknowledgements: this pamphlet is based on a pamphlet developed by OUT – LGBT Well-being, Tshwane and the Triangle Project, Cape Town

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