

Book Review: Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance

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*The persecution of people in Africa on the basis of their homosexual orientation has recently received considerable coverage in the media. However, much of the analysis thus far has been highly critical of African leadership and culture without considering local nuances, historical factors and external influences that are contributing to the problem. In this book, based on pioneering research on the history of homosexualities and engagement with current LGBTI activism, **Marc Epprecht** aims to provide a sympathetic overview of the issues at play. Clearly written and richly annotated, the book will prove to be a useful guide for academics, social workers, and activists, writes **Jia Hui Lee**.*

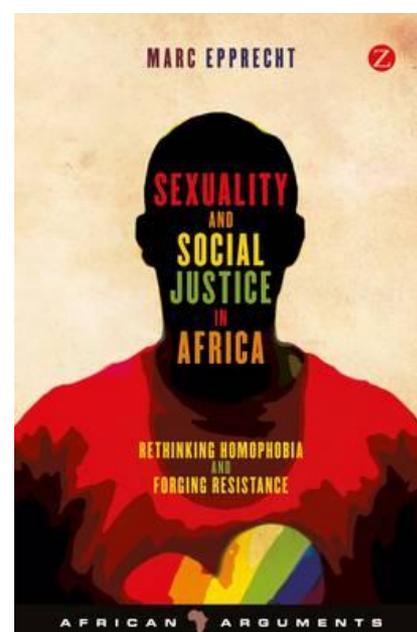


Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance. Marc Epprecht. Zed Books. July 2013.

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Marc Epprecht's *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa* arrives at a time when lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) communities are confronting a growingly violent wave of homophobia in the continent. Just last July, Eric Lembembe, a prominent Cameroonian gay activist was tortured and murdered. In May, the House of Representatives of Nigeria passed a bill that would extend punishment for those involved in same-sex relationships to 14 years in prison.

While Epprecht, a historian and professor of Global Development Studies at Queen's University, acknowledges the struggles faced by LGBTI Africans, he is optimistic about the quest for justice for LGBTI communities. Comprehensive and accessible, Epprecht's book places sexuality and homophobia within African contexts. It provides both a historical understanding as well as provides strategies for future activists to forge greater acceptance for sexual minorities on the continent.



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The book usefully frames “homophobia” as a social institution informed by religion, the state, and the history of (post)colonialism in Africa, rather than merely the inexplicable hate for non-normative sexualities. In doing so, Epprecht argues that “homophobias” should be understood within the particular context of a place and culture, and that such understandings also usually lead to discovering indigenous sources of “humane and pragmatic ways that can mitigate the harms of intolerance” (p. 177).

In the chapter on “Faith” Epprecht explores how traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam have dealt with sexual difference in Africa. The chapter carefully combs through religious doctrine and practice to show that the relationship between faith and sexuality in Africa has always been ambiguous. Indeed, Epprecht points out that the recent wave of homophobia on the continent is not so much due to religion as much as it is due to a specifically literalist interpretation of Christianity and Islam, as promoted by fundamentalist groups who usually come to Africa from elsewhere.

The segment on gender transgressions in traditional religions is particularly fascinating: Epprecht explains how non-normative sexuality might have been accommodated by coming-of-age practices or beliefs in spiritual possession. With the arrival of colonialists and traders, some of these practices were fused into African Christianity or Sufi Islam; others were erased by a colonial insistence on the “pure” and “modern”, categories which rejected what was seen as primitive heterosexual and same-sex relations.

Epprecht’s next chapter on “Sex and the State” deals with the history of pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial state regulation of sexuality. This chapter is the book’s most compelling, foregrounding detailed research from Epprecht’s previous works on sexuality in Africa. Epprecht successfully shows how homophobia was manipulated by a range of actors, colonial and postcolonial, usually to cast homosexuality in a disparaging light so that they can forward their own agendas.

In Rwanda and Uganda, indigenous kings were accused of “flagrant moral breaches” (p. 126) that included affairs with young boys of the court. In both cases, it resulted in the removal from office of King Musinga in Rwanda (by the Belgians) and Kabaka Mwanga in Uganda (which led to British interference). As nationalist sentiments begin to challenge colonial rule in Africa, homosexuality came to be perceived as a weakness, a threat to the masculinity that black male leaders such as Julius Nyerere wielded. As Epprecht writes, “It was a masculinity that allowed no room for doubt about African heterosexuality lest such doubt feed into the colonial propaganda of African indiscipline and immaturity” (p. 127).

More recently, the view that homosexuality originated in the West has been used by politicians to justify their attack on LGBTI Africans. For Epprecht, this claim is a distraction used by leaders to divert attention away from other more pressing issues. By sounding the alarm of homosexuality’s intrusion into Africa, politicians like President Mugabe of Zimbabwe are able to downplay falling life expectancy and increasing poverty, even as many countries battle the legacies of structural adjustment programmes endured by the continent.

These three chapters lay the groundwork for the final chapter, “Struggles and Strategies”. In it, Epprecht outlines the main strategies used by LGBTI activists to fight for justice and acceptance. The first strategy is activism based on the advocacy of human rights; the rate of success of this strategy, however, depends on the strength of a country’s democratic institutions, proponents of which might be accused of importing a Western-centric concept. Epprecht then goes on to elaborate on a second, alternative approach, that is promoting sexual rights by advancing public health arguments.

It is in this final chapter, too, that Epprecht addresses the role of the “gay international”, or the support given by rights-based LGBTI groups often headquartered in the West. While Epprecht recognises the importance of the support and research these groups provide, he notes that it is just as important to consider African activists as more than passive recipients of support. He emphasises instead that “effective leadership is increasingly coming from the global South” (p. 159).

These chapters collectively highlight several points that form the crux of Epprecht’s book: that homophobias are varied according to particular cultures and places, that the struggle for social justice must address the nuances that result from these particularities, and that Africa’s own history and culture are themselves rich sources of inclusive practices.

Although Epprecht’s writings highlight the challenges faced by sexual minorities in Africa, it is also sensitively tempered by the victories of effective community organising he describes. For that, Epprecht’s hopeful optimism is well placed. Turning away from media reports that frequently only highlight the persecution faced by sexual minorities in Africa, the book convincingly underscores the potential that African activists bring to the global movement for LGBTI rights.

Clearly written and richly annotated, the book will prove to be a useful guide for academics, social workers, and activists. For the academic, it is perhaps the only book available that provides a brief and broad overview of the subject of sexuality in Africa, along with identifying possible research topics. For social workers and activists, it offers a strategy for creating change in difficult places.

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