



LUND UNIVERSITY

# Lesbian Life in Malawi

*An Intersectional Study of  
Repressive and Constructive Power*

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## Abstract

This thesis identifies a set of power relations that complicates Western aid to African gay movements. It is a cultural analysis focusing on lesbians living in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, aiming to explore the tensions between discourses of power in play, from a post colonial and intersectional perspective. The use of queer theory makes similarities between traditional non-conforming sexualities in Africa and updated Western queer thinking visible, in refusing to identify as negations to heterosexuality and that way define a hegemonic ideal. At the same time conditions' stemming from colonial structures, Western influence and material indigence push gay people in Malawi towards an increasing use of problematic Western concepts such as binary sexual identities and "coming out" as a strategy to contest homophobia. Meanwhile, a rise of public homophobia due to political populist efforts and Western and African religious movements claiming homosexuality to be a neo-imperialistic invention, is accordingly facilitated by Western framings of gay rights movements. The thesis advocates for resources to be directed to lesbians who have been overlooked in the context of gay rights, partly because of how HIV/AIDS has directed focus upon gay men. In order to relevantly address the hardship of lesbians in poor areas the thesis suggests a rethinking of aid aimed to strengthen gay rights in Africa. It proposes the needs for financial resources rather than outreaching identity construction to be acknowledged and to start off in assisting with the purchase of real estate and the initiation of cooperative agricultural business.

Lesbian, LGBT, Culture, Queer theory, Malawi, Postcolonial, Aid, Gay rights

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## Introduction

At an Amnesty-led conference on homophobia and sexual minority rights in Africa, held in Lund on the 22-23 of February 2014, an Italian anthropologist in the audience raised her voice. She said that she had worked outside Kampala, the capital of Uganda, for the last ten years and she described her frustration when it came to introducing ideas of gender equality and LGBT<sup>i</sup> rights to the poor, vast majority of the people she met. She said: “What good does it do to throw it at them that ‘I am a feminist, I support gay rights’? They don’t see the relevance. They don’t accept it and I understand them! Westerners have come there for centuries continuously patronizing them.” (Field diary, Lund, 2014, February 23)

The question highlights the post-colonial state of affairs that will be explored in this thesis, complicating today's aid campaigns directed from the Western world to Africa<sup>ii</sup> concerning gay rights. I came across this dilemma during my internship in Malawi in the summer of 2013, where I worked for a human rights organization focusing on gender and LGBT issues. The quote above encapsulates my main question, forcing Western activists and scholars to reflect: how should human rights struggles be waged without reproducing colonial patterns?

One could consider the conference in the small town of Lund, which was touching on my topic of research, to be a surprising coincidence. This specific interest in African LGBT rights has to do with an increased Western focus on homophobia in Africa, in reaction to a toughening of already harsh laws in countries such as Uganda, Nigeria and Malawi. News reports on African political leaders making strong pronouncements against homosexuality, massive and aggressive anti-gay demonstrations and the murder of the gay rights activist David Kato in Uganda – all received global coverage. Thus, although homosexuality is far from being an unproblematic issue in the Western world, recent years’ exposure of LGBT-related news from Africa has raised and created public awareness of “African homophobia” as an urgent and serious problem. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, SIDA, has increased its support of

LGBT projects from a negligible amount in 2006 to more than 4 million Euros in 2011. However, no contributions are directed specifically to Malawi.

The law in Malawi prohibits homosexuality, and is punishable with up to 14 years of imprisonment for gay men, and up to five years for lesbians.<sup>iii</sup> In 2010 two biological men<sup>iv</sup> were sentenced to the maximum time in jail, 14 years of imprisonment with hard labor, because of their attempt to marry, which became global news. Mass condemnation and the efforts of UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon led to them being pardoned, but the law remains unchanged. The following year the specific law on lesbianism was added. The two national human right organizations in Malawi; the Center for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) and the Center for Development of People (CEDEP), work to promote gay rights and therefore against the law. This work is complicated by a loud and massive critique posed by anti-gay governments, religious groups and their leaders in Africa against homosexuality and the gay-rights movements, describing them as being an imperialistic attempt to impose harmful behavior from the West upon Africa.

Accusations like these present the need to look closer at how human rights values are conveyed by NGO's and interpreted by gay target groups. This is of crucial importance in order to understand how Western financiers and local NGO's can work constructively with LGBT issues in Malawi. Since a high prevalence of HIV has directed an overwhelming focus on African gay men- (Epprecht, 2013, pg. 166) that is also at the forefront of African gay right movements, I have in this study focused on lesbian women. This thesis investigates how lesbians living in urban settings in Malawi relate to concepts of gender and sexuality, it furthermore addresses their relationship to projects that are directed towards them and their views on a sustainable future.

## Overview

In order to situate the reader, this thesis begins with outlining the legal and historical background of the LGBT situation in Malawi. In the section State of the Art the theoretical framework and previous research in the field is presented, first framing the field of LGBT questions in Africa. The discussion on sexuality is deepened through explaining the usefulness of queer theory in this thesis. Since I aim to critically investigate the creation and recreation of power I have used the concept intersectionality in order to concretize the consequences of discursive power. I further explain my use of a phenomenological theoretical perspective to analyze contexts of emotions, such as public homophobia.

In the Methods and Material chapter I account for the methods I used in the field, where I first give a background to my work in Malawi. In order to do research as a white person on post-colonial lived reality in Malawi, I have used phenomenology as a self reflective tool, which is explained next. I then describe how the ethnographical methods I intended to use were applied and modified. Thereafter I introduce my informants and describe the material generated by the applied methods in more detail.

In the main part of the thesis, I start off in a workshop for lesbians where I first discuss identity as related to gender and context, and second how identity as a group was affected by Western terminology in the situation I was studying. I then account for how the lectures made hierarchical structures visible, and discouraged knowledge exchange. The chapter Coming Out concerns the topic of coming out as gay, and describes various aspects on how the concept relates to gay people in contemporary Malawi. A chapter on the role of religion in Malawi follows, which is centered on the voices of religious leaders and how religion and religious rhetoric can be linked to public condemnation of homosexuality. The last chapter describes how the economy is affecting lesbian life in Malawi, and ends with a suggestion of how Western aid can be used to strengthen a Malawian lesbian community. It seeks to take all considerations that were the result of my study into account and make a call for action.

## Historical and Legal Background

At the time of writing this thesis, Malawi's president Joyce Banda is struggling to keep her position in an election heavily afflicted by charges of corruption and rigged results. In May 2012 she vowed that laws against homosexuality that remained from the colonial era would not be employed in Malawi. She was met by political and public disagreement, which led to a situation in which the laws temporarily remained in the books. Her future in Malawian politics at this point is open-ended. What remains though, is a population apparently in favour of restrictions against homosexuality. This is something that Africans have been accused for in Western media, and this thesis aims to problematize this picture.

When it comes to Malawi, one aspect that must be taken into account when discussing attitudes towards homosexuality is its recent history. For 30 years the country was governed by Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda- and his dictatorship is known as one of the most authoritarian in Africa at the time. He took over and ruled the country after the British colonizers in 1963 but was pressured to allow a multi party election in 1994, in which he lost. Four cornerstones: unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline, were the base of his leadership, and his conservative and puritanical ideals suppressed all open expressions of sexuality. This contributed to many homosexual Malawians going underground, according to the former chairman of the CHRR, Undule Mwakasungula. Colonial structures were thereby upheld for more than a century, leaving lasting effects on Malawi's gay life (2013, pg. 359-360).

But 36 of 55 independent countries in Africa, with varying historical backgrounds, criminalize homosexuality. Some of them appear in global media due to homophobic measures. In 2013 and 2014 the topic of African homophobia was much debated around the world due to the controversial new Ugandan law, passed by the parliament on the 20 of December 2013 and signed by the president Yoweri Museveni on the 24 of February 2014. It had been called the "kill the gays-bill" because of the proposed death penalties for gay acts or intents. These were later on replaced by life imprisonment. The law is far-reaching and even puts doctors, nurses, pastors and families supporting gay persons



into the scope of the law. If not reported to the police within 24 hours, knowledge about homosexual acts or intents can lead to imprisonment. (*The Anti Homosexuality Bill*, 2013, November 15)

The American Christian right wing extremist, pastor Scott Lively is now facing a lawsuit in the US by the New York based Centre for Constitutional Rights (CCR) on behalf of the Ugandan NGO Sexual Minorities in Uganda (SMUG) (Amended Complaint, 2012). It is based on the charges “crimes against humanity” and regards Lively’s cooperation with the Ugandan MP David Bahati to engineer the original bill that was proposed in 2009, which included the death penalty for homosexuality. It also addresses his engagement in anti-homosexual campaigns in Uganda. This example illustrates how law and religion are intertwined in the context of sub-Saharan Africa<sup>v</sup> and how religion can be used as a political tool. Professor of Global Development Studies at the Queens University in Canada, Marc Epprecht adds however, that it shows a development in African LGBT activism in which activists have taken an active role and moved the conflict right back into the West. (Epprecht, 2013, pg. 159)

Whilst global attention to laws against homosexuality is increasing Western aid to Africa, it also amplifies the problematic conception of Africa as culturally homophobic (Epprecht, 2013, Epprecht & Nyeck, 2013, Tamale, 2011, Tamale, 2013, Kaoma, 2012). Ugandan lawyer and doctor in philosophy, Sylvia Tamale, states that this veils its political role, as it is used by populist leaders who feed public suspicions against homosexuality – portrayed as abominations against God, termed in Western language – as a tool to increase their status (2013). It also steers focus away from how the Penal codes are direct imports from European former colonial powers, and how Western missionary movements have played a direct role in the spread of anti-homosexual propaganda.

The original law in Uganda,<sup>vi</sup> to which the new law is a complement intended to fill gaps as it is seen as too vague and toothless (§ 2.1), was established by the British empire during the period of colonization, just like in Malawi and other African countries ruled by the British. The colonisations took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Malawi 1891, during the Victorian era (1837-1901) when homosexuality went from being unknown to a concept describing an identity in the West. (Foucault, 2004)

Malawian law is phrased in a similar way but harsher than the previous Ugandan law with up to 14 years of imprisonment for men that have sex with men.<sup>vii</sup> In December 2010 a new bill was proposed directed towards lesbians. It passed at the end of January 2011 signed by the President at the time, Bingu Wa Mutharika: “**Section 137A. Indecent practices between females.** Any female person who, whether in public or private, commits any act of gross indecency with another female person, or procures another female person to commit any act of gross indecency with her, or attempts to procure the commission of any such act by any female person with herself or with another female person, whether in public or private, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable to imprisonment for five years.” (Malawi Penal Code, n.d.)

The law can be read as paradoxical to the Constitution which Mwakasungula sees as an opening for LGBT rights to be enforced as human rights. The Constitution states that “Discrimination of persons in any form is prohibited” (The Constitution 20; 1) and further that “all persons are, under any law, guaranteed equal and effective protection against discrimination [...]” (Mwakasungula, 2013, pg. 360) If LGBT status is to be read as a legitimate human condition the implementation of the law is blocked by the Constitution, which has the status of supreme law. Mwakasungula concludes: “The biggest embarrassment of the legal system in Malawi is the obvious contradiction between the Constitution and the country’s Penal Code. While the Constitution guarantees rights, the Penal Code seems to take them away.” (Mwakasungula, 2013, pg. 361)

The same law as in Malawi and Uganda: “carnal knowledge [...] against the order of nature”, was also imported by the British to India where it was dismissed in 2009. The arguments that made the Delhi High Court reconsider the law then were resting upon public health risks, i.e. fear of the spreading of HIV when gay or bisexual men hiding from the law could not be reached. (Epprecht, 2013, pg.168)<sup>viii</sup> The Ugandan NGO The Uganda Health and Science Press Association (UHSPA) which is the non-provocative to homophobes name (compare CEDEP) of an organization that actually focuses on gay rights, are now trying to create opinion against the Ugandan law from the same public health perspective.

In other words, there are within the juridical field entrances for the struggle to change the laws from both a human rights and health perspective. The laws however are not necessarily the key to a more open gay life. In South Africa, the law is changed and even homosexual marriage is legal. Still, “very few of the rights-oriented associations of South Africa [...] have the wherewithal to take their grievances to court, to monitor abuses, or to lobby government for reform.” (Epprecht, 2013, pg. 158) Gay people, especially in poor areas, are still exposed to violence and stigma, with little help from the authorities. With other words: gay rights struggles in Africa have argued from the standpoint of the heterosexual community (health) and from a notion of innate and unchangeable homosexuality (to gain human rights) but even with expressed rights on paper, as in South Africa, the struggle goes on.

Even though the legal situation is an obstructive factor that effectively inhibits the human rights claims of LGBT people in Malawi, the resources for the police to actually take people in for prosecution are scarce. From what I found, gay people primarily fear social exclusion, public condemnation and mob justice. During the winter 2013-2014 the practice of mob justice, commonly directed against thieves, was increasing and has led to several murders, including setting the victim on fire while still alive, (<http://www.nyasatimes.com/tag/mob-justice/>). A friend reported two occasions during the autumn where gay couples were the victims of mobs in her neighbourhood, but none of them led to fatal injuries. Through the statements of my informants and my overall impression, I have drawn the conclusion that the potential danger caused by quickly rising public aggressiveness has a stronger direct impact on gay people’s impression of safety in Malawi than the legal situation. But the discursive effects of the laws are unambiguous, though not perspicuous.

## **Aim**

The aim of this thesis is to explore the tension between what is perceived as gay rights from a Western perspective and the lived - cultural, political as well as social - reality of lesbians in contemporary Malawi. Funding is needed to support gay rights in many African countries, but how can Western financiers and project planners identify a constructive approach to facilitate the lives of gay people in Malawi is, sensitive to the local context? Focusing on a group of lesbians living in the capital city of Malawi, Lilongwe, and the approaches by NGO:s that I observed. I will use a postcolonial perspective that highlights intersectional structures of power and status. With that intention: how do lesbians in Malawi experience their own everyday needs and difficulties? How can Western aid be rethought to increase its relevance and efficiency in this specific context? How can ethnographic methods be used by a white researcher to study the clash between ideas of how to achieve gender equality and LGBT rights originating from a western context, and the perceived lifeworlds of outlawed, urban lesbians in Africa?

## State of the art

### Research on sexualities in Africa

Two researchers that recently has published literature on LGBT issues in Africa, which has been of core value for my contextual understanding, is Professor Marc Epprecht and the feminist and first woman dean at the Law Faculty at Makerere University in Uganda, Sylvia Tamale. The later has engaged in debates as a radical spokesperson for sexual minorities in a range of different forums and edited a large collection of essays, poems and anthropological reports published in 2011, called *African Sexualities; A Reader*.

The former, Marc Epprecht graduated in 1992 in African History and Imperial History with a dissertation titled *Women, Class and Politics in Colonial Lesotho, 1930-1965*, and his research has since focused on gender and sexuality in Africa. Last year's publications are: *Sexual Diversity in Africa* together with S. N. Nyeck, and *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa; Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance*.

All three of the above mentioned books are specifically aiming to show the complexity in developing an understanding of sexuality in Africa, as a reaction to the increased interest in the West due to reports of political and public homophobia. They show how colonial brutality and exploitation in the past, followed by Western exploitation and lobbying by Christian missionaries have contributed to a situation where Africa is now being pictured as immoral and violent. At the same time they show how African accusations against homosexuality as being un-African are false pointing at reports describing different gay practises and relations from long before colonialism. Just like forefront LGBT activists Bernedette Muthien (2007) and Mikki Van Zyl (2011) in South Africa and many others they highlight how different traditional gay relations in Africa are neglected social practices that relate better to constructions of identity as well as political reality in Africa than the western conception of homosexuality does. This is one of the central discussions in this thesis.

Both Epprecht and Tamale gives a detailed and broad picture of earlier research in the field of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa and keep colonial and imperialistic Western influence as a constant reference in their analysis. While feminist theory and pedagogy are central to Tamale's work, Epprecht often refers to ways to act out male gay sexuality whilst simultaneously upholding a heterosexual family life. At times I find his writings uncritical to the repression that such traditional solutions on how to be gay postulate. Many of these practises act upon hierarchies of privilege and I regret the lack of a more critical discussion from an intersectional perspective. His aim is not to evaluate traditional practises, but to leave obviously forced conditions without a discussion of how structures of power are played out paints a strange picture of homosexuality. As an example he refers to the tradition of "mine marriages" in South Africa in the early 1900s as "a demonstration of the power of sexuality to mobilize people". (Epprecht, 2013, pg. 153-154) It concerns the mine workers for colonial companies, who lived for long periods in industrial compounds far away from home. They developed a system of older men having the right to have "thigh sex" with younger boys. At one point, a worker raped a young boy and the company laid charges against the worker, but to their surprise many of his colleagues stood up for him and laid down their tools in protest to keep the system of mine marriages up.

Try as I might, I cannot see it as a story of gay rights resistance. I see it as an oppressive system of exploiting young boys. The reason why the colonial powers let the practise continue was surely economical. This is a structure of power that relates to what we can see today overrule sexually conservative forces in the West as pink washing, i.e. companies, political parties or governments promoting gay rights in order to obscure other oppressive, often racist, agendas and gain popular and economical benefits. Canadian associate professor in sociology and intersectionalist spokesperson Sirma Bilge views resistance-oriented approaches as common among postcolonial theorists: "With their eagerness to 'give voice' and inspire activism by finding or reinventing traditions of resistance [...], resistance-oriented approaches, biased by a certain romanticism, significantly impoverish the analysis of power researchers being too concerned to find resisters and not attentive enough to explaining the workings of power." (Bilge, 2010, Pg. 19) The meaning of a practise must be seen in its context.

Despite Epprechts urge to put forward positive examples of African traditions which I sometimes would like him to narrate from a more critical perspective, I generally agree with his analysis of how gay rights are interpreted as universal, yet come in a Western package to Africa and thus become a problematic continuation of Western ideological imperialism (Epprecht, 2013, Epprecht & Nyeck, 2013). It therefore fuels aggressively homophobic political leaders with a rhetoric that opposes Western power and feeds popular presumptions of how the West is imposing homosexuality on Africa.

This is a situation that has been used by Christian fundamentalist movements in the US to create an increasing hostility against homosexuality in an ambitious struggle to enlarge and strengthen the Christian movement in Africa. This is shown by doctor of theology, pastor and human rights activist Kapya John Kaoma in his reports: *Globalizing the Culture Wars: US Conservatives, African Churches and Homophobia* from 2009 and *Colonizing African Values: How the U.S. Christian Right is Transforming Sexual Politics in Africa*, from 2012.

Kaomas work is a mapping of the sweeps of the American fundamentalist Christian movements that during the last decade have invested great resources in religious campaigns in Africa. He enumerates organizations such as the neo-Pentecostal New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), the Roman Catholic Human Life International (HLI), the Christian conservative American Centre for Law and Justice (ACLJ-USA) and the Mormon Family Watch International (FWI) in the five countries Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Malawi. He (and a number of journalists, activist, documentary film makers and so on) claims that representatives for these missionary movements have played a prominent role in the development and escalation of homophobia in sub-Saharan Africa. The Christian right wing extremist pastor Scott Lively is one of the most noticeable evangelicals in this context, as I described earlier.

The aim of Kaomas work is thus to highlight the massive spreading of aggressive anti-gay rhetoric and how it along with harshening laws is a problem not only in Uganda but also in Malawi and other countries. To halt the propagation, rigorous work on many levels is needed and Kaoma has a ten point programme of suggestions. These include requests for increased support to local human rights organizations, and, notably, a suggestion to help LGBT people gain visibility in order to empower themselves and

take leading roles in their own struggle. “Broader visibility will enable their *Africanness* and humanity to become more broadly evident.” (2012, pg. 19) Kaoma argues. This point is relevant to my discussion on the multifaceted topic of coming out, and the applicability of my conclusions.

While Kaomas reports have the form of reviews tracing the sources of a homophobic uprising in Africa, both Tamale and Epprecht centre their studies on topics of sexuality. They both call for the necessity for sexuality research in Africa to be based on theory open for flexible and multifaceted expressions. In order to apprehend my informants’ relation to constructions of sexuality and gender, I have used a queer theoretical framework. I will go further into detail in the following section.

### Queer Theory and Intersectionality

A central concept in this thesis is sexuality. To problematize sexuality I have turned to queer theory and in particular the American professor in rhetoric Judith Butler’s radically anti-essentialist view. She concludes, in accordance with a non-centralized view on the subject, that neither sexuality, gender or even sex can be read as inherent but must be genealogically approached as without origin. (Butler, 2007) Considering the efforts it takes to act as a man or a woman, and the possibilities to act either female or male regardless of what biological sex that features a body, she dismisses a view of a coherent relationship between sex and gender. This means that gender is nothing fixed but a repeated, culturally bound activity that opens up for endless variations of gender performance. Therefore sex, as it is inextricably discursively understood, is also a social construction. These concepts, according to Butler, serve to express discursive orders of power. The categories within the frames of gender and sex should therefore be questioned and rethought as a means to structure power; an arrangement where heterosexuality has come to serve as the ideal and homosexuality as its defining opposite. Fluid and unstable gender identities as researchers of non-conforming sexualities in Africa have described (Muthien, 2007, O’Mara, 2013, Dankwa, 2013) could in Butlers reading be seen as subversive and “permanently problematic” (2007, pg. 204) to the established order of power.



Butler is further critical to the way in which categorization of sex and gender within feminist movements has served to put other orders of power in the shade, which touches upon the base-line of intersectionality. The concept emerged as an analytical tool from a feminist perspective of thought in the 1980's when women of colour highlighted how different structures of power affected different women in different ways. Instead of a single axis of social division, (men-women) they made visible how race and class, as well as gender work together to (re)produce power and privilege. Intersectionality thus “provides a critical lens to analyse articulations of power and subjectivity in different instances of social formations (economic, political, social and cultural)” (Bilge, 2010, pg. 23) To theorize on structures of power and how these structures manifest in actual situations and lived experience I use the intersectional approach trying to follow its “initial vision of generating counter-hegemonic and transformative knowledge production, activism, pedagogy, and non-oppressive coalitions” (Bilge, 2013, pg.1)

Both queer theory and the concept of intersectionality are theories that have been developed in the West. Since this thesis is aiming to critically view the interaction between Western concepts and actions and LGBT Africans, this could be criticized as paradoxical reproduction of colonial order. Tamale gives three reasons for not dismissing Western theory as such. She mentions how sexual morality, as well as African laws, are rooted in European colonialism. This makes Africa a part of the same discourses that entail Western theory building. Secondly, she states that ground-breaking theory, such as Judith Butlers work on heteronormativity and gender performativity, do not have to be reinvented when it is there to be used. Thirdly, she writes that sexual hierarchies work along the same patterns in both contexts. However, she stresses the importance of using and encouraging “home-grown” theories (2011, pg. 25) and mentions how widely shared cultural ideologies in Africa must be taken into account, such as community, solidarity and the ethos of *Ubuntu*, which can be translated to humaneness. In my study, lacking knowledge about African ideology, I have tried to listen to my informants and understand their situation from their point of view, at the same time as I have brought my own role as a white researcher into my work. To do this I have used postcolonial, phenomenological theory that also constructed the base for a reflexive methodology which I will explain further in the following chapters.

## Postcolonial Phenomenology

As phenomenological theory is the study of experience and consciousness, it this way centralizes the subject. Sara Ahmed, Professor in Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmith College in London, renegotiates that view through feminist-, queer- and postcolonial perspectives. I interpret her use of phenomenology as correlating with a discursive understanding of the subject as decentralized, according to an anti-essentialist critique of an ethnic-, racial- or gender based perception of cultural identity and practice. Ahmed was key to my study of sexually non-normative persons in a context affected by homophobia. I have turned to her concept of affective economies (Ahmed, 2011, pg. 65-92) to understand not only how homophobia spreads, but also how the negative feelings attached to homosexuality accumulate through movement between subjects.

She points out how we tend to see feelings as possessions, as something that we have. Ahmed questions this notion and shows through references to psychoanalysis how emotions, and what they are connected to, are affected by the unconscious and what is repressed. This means that feelings and associations are more than products of our conscious experiences and valuations. Ahmed goes further by claiming that feelings are without origin, and should not be viewed as if they belong to subjects or symbols, but gain their strength through circulation between them, similar to accumulation of capital. She sees feelings in themselves as the creators of perceptions of bodies and worlds, showing an economy of circulating feelings to play a large role in human awareness. Feelings are associated with objects, figures and symbols; they form in clusters to associated ones. Feelings like fear and hate will accumulate intensity through the movement between subjects and certain objects, figures and symbols that temporarily are associated with these feelings. Her theory makes it possible to; from a phenomenological standpoint analyze collective feelings that circulate around and through subjects.

Post-colonial phenomenology was also key to a self-reflective perspective in a situation marked by racial boundaries. In the following chapters I will first narrate how my assignment during my internship led to the specific topic of this thesis, and how

phenomenological thought was used to analyze contexts of feelings whilst keeping sight of my own view point.

## Methods and material

### Catching Culture

The thesis is based on material obtained during a three months long internship with an NGO working for human rights in Malawi the summer of 2013. A few days after my arrival my assignment was announced. The communication I had had with the organization to that point had been about them welcoming me as a cultural analyst with an interest in questions concerning structures of power, especially those relating to class, gender and race. In a morning meeting, the executive director, Victor Nkumbwa, turned to me and said that arguments about culture were constantly used against their work. Especially the projects concerning gender equality and LGBT rights were met with contention: "it is not in the Malawian culture," and such cultural claims were seen as grounds not to change practises and beliefs. For this reason, he said, they wanted me to help them understand: "What is the Malawian culture?"

### What is Culture?

The concept of culture has changed meaning in the ethnographic field through time, and I was not sure how to interpret Nkumbwa's definition. I could have chosen to reply that I could answer his question right away, and say that in my view the Malawian or any other framing of culture would not be anything fixed, but a myriad of practices, beliefs and creations of meaning, that both bind people together and keep them apart. I could have given him an example to show what I meant: both myself and my grandmother identify ourselves as Swedish women. I consider Sushi and Zumba to be typical Swedish phenomena. My grandmother has never heard of them. She regards boiled coffee and the Pentecostal church to be core to Swedish society. I feel distant to such a view. But we can do cross-word puzzles together; we will both know how to solve the

riddles in her weekly magazines, and when I go to see her we eat the same traditional meals.

This would have captured the complexity in how culture is perceived from different subject positions and yet creates networks with shifting reach, and thus how impossible it would be to fix culture as a coherent and geographically defined unity.

But this was not what he wanted to hear. The problem remains of how to study the reasons behind why people popularly would claim that homosexuality is not a part of Malawian culture. From a discourse analytical viewpoint, one might pay interest to how such opinions have developed genealogically, and what is at stake in the political field. As Sylvia Tamale writes: “The homophobic gusts blow amidst rising inflation, high unemployment, corruption, repression, and increased hopelessness among the populace.” (Tamale, 2013, pg. 39) Her analysis states that homophobia is political and serves political powers. There is plenty of ethnographical material (e.g. Tamale, 2013, Epprecht, 2013, Epprecht & Nyeck, 2013, Kaoma, 2012, Van Zyl, 2011 and Muthien, 2007, that refer to a vast range of research on this matter) that shows how non-normative gender and sexual practises historically have been both accepted and repressed by different communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, but this is not the key to understanding the rise of homophobia today. I believe that Tamale has a point when she writes about the different political leaders who in recent years have expressed homophobic views and states that: “... the common denominator linking these African leaders most prominently is that they overstayed their time in power beyond the mandated term limits.” (Tamale, 2013, pg. 39)

So, I laughed and said that the assignment was an impossible task, but that I accepted it. I used it to look into a broad spectrum of cultural practises that manifested in the Malawian society around me. I chose to rely on a view of culture as a process of creating meaning through practices. My interest laid in understanding how that meaning was produced and understood, with the overall aim to understand the reasoning and conditions behind gender-conservative and homophobic rhetoric.

## Self-reflexivity

As soon as I started working in the field, questions regarding self-reflexivity were highlighted by the fact that I was white and Western. The colonial structures and race division in Malawi were overwhelming. I found them as rigid and in-my-face as if they were molded into every single word or act. I was the *Mzungo*, which is the term in Chichewa and several other African languages for a white person. The friends I made and the interviews I pursued had the colonial discourse as an inevitable and complicating layer of meaning weaved into our communication. Nothing meant the same when said or done by, or to, a white person. The phenomenological theories of Ahmed, and Algerian theorist of racism and colonialism, Franz Fanon (1925-1961) have helped me to problematize the role of the researcher and open up for a reflexive approach. Their theories from a racialized viewpoint on whiteness (Ahmed) and colonial psychology (Fanon) were crucial to understand how racial structures of power as well as material conditions, feelings, traditions and values are understood and related to by my informants. It was also significantly important to the analysis of how I as a white person relate to the material I gather. Fanon's radical and poignant writings describing the colonial existence were key for me to grasp the confusing mix of how the traditional past and colonialism had affected my informants' lives and constructed the social context in Malawian society. Lacking the authenticity of traditional tribes living in the jungle, nor being white but being seen as people on a journey towards whiteness and civilization is still evident as the ruling image of the urban African, both in Africa and in the West. The fact that since 1964 Malawi has been independent does not mean that the core problematic in Fanon's texts has lost its relevance. The differences and hierarchies between white and black remain and are still crystal clear.

I further draw on Ahmed's emphasis on the importance to bring the standpoint and the conditions surrounding the philosopher into the analysis, (Ahmed, 2006, 2011) which became an obviously relevant matter for a white researcher in a post colonial context. In her work, she explains her own experiences as a racialized, female philosopher used to travelling and changing homes as being a significant part of her perspective and analysis. For me her theory meant to reflect upon how it affected my perception to be the stranger, to be white, to be a woman and to be a researcher. Her own experiences as a racialized subject in the white West could never be translated or mirrored to fit my

experience in Africa, but gave me tools to look at conditions that surrounded me, and in that way became part of my being.

A white researcher in Malawi cannot go unnoticed. This complicated my possibilities to stay in the background and forced me to adapt my methods of research to the circumstances. It made me think of new ways to gain information that I probably would not have thought of if I had not been forced to handle strong reactions on my presence on an everyday basis. In the following chapter I will narrate an example of such an extroverted method that I used to be able to experience myself how reactions against homosexuality manifested and if and how the argument about culture was actually in use.

### Kitchen Entrances

Professor of ethnology Orvar Löfgren describes "The interest in the ordinary, passionate fieldwork, the dialogue between history and present as well as the use of a flexible search light and analytical kitchen entrances" as the basic elements in the art of ethnology that have been upheld through time. (Löfgren, 2010, pg. 77-78) My interest in the ordinary was challenged: my presence as a white person was not. The wish to understand contexts in which I became the centre of attention lead to frustration because of the impossibility to reach into situations as they should have turned out without a white person being present. This matter of fact forced me to examine what took place when a white person *was* present, and it made me try to find kitchen entrances from another angle. Sometimes I chose to, or unintentionally happened to, do things that caught extra attention. Such occasions turned out to be possible sources for insights in the mechanisms behind what is perceived as spectacular.

The example which follows narrates how I started discussions in a bar on the topic of gay marriage<sup>ix</sup>, in order to see if the argument: "it is not in our culture" would actually be used. In this case it was not my whiteness but the fact that I was breaking a taboo that caused disturbance. It was all thoroughly planned. In this incident, the people I asked for advice thought that my whiteness could serve as protection and would

possibly make people explain their standpoints rather than react with aggression. I made an arrangement with two colleagues and one of my friends, and we went to a bar area in the centre. There were a couple of bars that were not absolutely full of people, so I chose one of them. It was a simple place with strip lighting, which made it brighter lit than the other bars around. It had a pool table, some plastic chairs and tables and a few bar chairs. At first, I was worried that choosing an apparently unpopular place could mean that I would not encounter a broad mix of people, but people that for some reason did not feel welcome in the popular bars. It turned out that people moved between the neighbouring bars, and the atmosphere felt colloquial but joyful. The only two women in the room were young sex workers, as I had learned to recognize them. They looked utterly bored and did not want to talk to me, which meant that my informants would only be male. My allies did not pretend to know me but kept a close eye on me while I discussed the subject with five men, of which I had to leave one out since his friend argued cohesively in an interesting way that I chose to follow. The volume was high so I could not record but relied on my notebook and pen, which I regularly had to sneak out to use.

All four repeatedly used the argument: "it is not in our culture," accompanied with religion-based arguments about unnaturalness and abomination. The first man I talked to, a police man, refused to admit that there was such thing as homosexuality in Malawi. Two got very upset after about ten minutes of discussion, where they kept on repeating arguments about naturalness, gender features and culture, which made me choose to leave the bar in order to avoid an escalation of the created tension. Before that I talked to a man, a finance controller working for the government, who started with promptly stating that homosexuality was not in the Malawian culture. He argued against gay marriage and homosexuality as such. I pointed to the rapidly increasing use of mobile phones in Malawi, and how that must be interpreted as a cultural change. He agreed with me and with the idea of a changeable culture. Thereafter I claimed that since culture can change it must be him that does not want it to change. Reluctantly he agreed to that too and said that homosexuality made him uncomfortable. I asked how it can be a problem for him if two people act out of love, in a way that will not affect him or anybody else negatively. He froze and his eyes got wide open for a few seconds, then he frowned with laughter and said: "There is no problem!" (Personal communication, 2013, August 13)



Adding to the satisfaction it meant to turn an initially hostile attitude into an eye opener, this method gave me opportunity to ask questions that I would not have dared to ask under normal circumstances. It meant I could study how emotions were attached to the subject of homosexuality, and how the concept of culture was understood by my objects of research. Absence of homosexuality in Malawian culture was by my informants seen as a self evident and natural argument which showed how wide spread the argumentation is. It was a normalized perspective, and therefore it was not supposed to need arguments, leaving the discussions to fall into repetitive circles. In the three other cases the discussion was stuck soon after it had begun, but in the case of the man that changed his view, his initial views on homosexuality did not match his view on what normally should be considered a problem.

Löfgren advises his readers to try to see things as if it were the first time. That was not hard at all in my situation where everything felt new and unfamiliar. It was harder not to produce endless "meditations upon difference", as Epprecht describes the first written observations of African societies south of Sahara (Epprecht & Nyeck, 2013, pg. 56), but trying to see universal patterns and creation of meaning (Frykman, 2003, pg. 10-11, Denny & Sunderland, 2009, pg. 60) The scenario in the bar is essentially what one could imagine happening in case of verbally breaking a taboo anywhere in the world. What is significant is the shallowness of the argument relying on culture and I interpret it as it is being kept up precisely in the way that Sara Ahmed describes affective economies. (Ahmed, 2011, pg. 68-74) I see the verbal circulations of the arguments as the cause for the accumulating emotional charge. Ahmed sees no origin from where the emotions emerge; they are not a possession of the subject nor inherent in a symbol or object, but moves the subject between different levels of significance through associations of which not all are conscious. In this way they circulate through associations, and an emotion like hatred will stick to a cluster of symbols, figures and objects that are associated with each other. None of the men I talked to referred to any specific occurrence involving homosexuality that would have clustered associations around that specific event. They had not anchored or discussed the reasons for the strong emotions further than agreeing on the fact that homosexuality was not meant to be, that it was unnatural and did not fit into Malawi - arguments that they repeated over and over. This made the strong homophobic emotions a transparent example of accumulating hatred through circulation.

## Participant Observations

The interviews in the bar made an exception; I was not hiding my role as a researcher the rest of my time. Instead I aimed to view things close-up with the cultural practitioners that I was studying. This meant I engaged in all practices that I came across. Hundreds of photographs filled my computer memory, and I structured them chronologically as a part of my diary; a thorough field diary where I noted observations and talks. There, I also tried to collect my sensuous impressions, not least during long meetings held in the local language Chichewa. As Löfgren writes, all senses work together in the creation of collective moods, and thinking of how moods are produced, anchored, sustained and changed can say something about the conditions of cultural production. (Löfgren, 2014) Comfortable or uncomfortable seats, the smell of earth in a village meeting hall or heavy perfumes and cold air conditioning in a conference hotel, loud high-pitched speakers, all contribute to the setting and therefore to how moods can be understood.

During the course of my internship it turned out to be easier to find ways into matters when interview situations were not formally framed as researcher – respondent. Hence, I valued comments and conversations that were held in my everyday life; on the bus, at the market, during a wedding I attended, in the office and other places where the situation was not set up as research. The importance of this method for my overall understanding cannot be overestimated. For ethical reasons, however, I have sparingly used direct quotes from information derived from those situations where people were not fully aware that their comments would be used in my material.

## Interviews

During my internship I made fifteen formal interviews, numerous semi-structured interviews and had an uncountable number of informal talks. This thesis refers to six semi structured interviews of which one is made through Skype. Four of my interviewees' talked about their sexual orientation as lesbians with me, but were not openly gay. Since homosexuality is a criminal offence I did not ask for their full names

or other details, and they will be referred to by fictitious names. One woman is open about her homosexual orientation and stresses the importance of coming out. Still I chose to anonymize her name so that no repercussions for her should be the result of this thesis. Two pastors are interviewed; one informally, which I combine with the same person's script for a lecture. The other pastor, Chitheka Banda, has written a book that I refer to and he appears with his full name. Informal interviews with three sexually non-conforming informants that were aware that I was doing research on the topic are quoted anonymously.

Bliss, Mac and Grace are young biological women, identifying as lesbians and tomboys. I met up with them in the low-status suburb Area 25. Bliss was 21 years old and lived in Lilongwe, but was heading for South Africa to work short after the interview. She is originally from Zimbabwe from where she moved in 2010. Her mother died in 2003 and her father in 2007. Mac and Grace were 20 and 22 years old, and their families had moved in to Lilongwe from small villages in the south when they were small. They now lived in Area 25 with their families, and planned to stay in Malawi.

Another interview was conducted at my office in central Lilongwe with Azalea, a lesbian that liked to dress in men's clothes. She lived with her academic family, was in the middle of her 20's and was studying at the university.

Ateefah is a woman in her 50's that I met during a conference in the southern town Mangochi. She was working for the Ministry of Education and was strongly emphasizing her identity as a lesbian. I observed her, and made informal interviews in relation to the conference. Later on I formally interviewed her through Skype.

At the same conference where I met Ateefah I interviewed the conservative reverend and Pastor Chitheka Banda on the topic of homosexuality, of which he is an engaged debater and has written a book with the title: *Critically Understanding; The Sin and Causes of Homosexuality/Same-Sex Marriages* (Banda, 2011)

I also encountered the progressive Anglican Pastor M at a workshop for lesbians, where he was lecturing in order to present a more accepting view from the church than what was usually preached. I had an informal conversation over lunch with him, I observed his lecture that was held in Chichewa, and I got his English script for the lecture to use for my study.

In my analysis of the two pastors different views I bring in lectures and sermons held by the before mentioned American evangelist Scott Lively that are filmed and shared on YouTube. Besides being widely criticized as a right wing and homophobic extremist for his missionary act in Uganda, he is also known for his book: *The Pink Swastika* (Lively together with Kevin E. Abrams, 1995).

Another source that provided me with useful information was the news, which to a large extent is published in English in Malawi. The bigger news agencies also make their material accessible online. Even though news stories do not make it possible to fully dig into the complex situations regarding the economical, material, religious, political, historical and traditional conditions that were relevant to the lives of the people I encountered, I was able to follow the current discussions which was helpful as it gave a picture of what can be said publically and from what angle.

### The LGBT workshop

As it was the occasion that first caught my attention for the situation for lesbians in Malawi, I centre my study on the observations I did during a two day LGBT workshop the 22 and 23 of June 2013 to which about 40 lesbians had been invited. I also held a lecture myself which I analyze as a topic of my research. In earlier years the workshop had been attacked by protesters and the police, so this year it was held outside of town, in a guarded conference hotel surrounded by high walls. My colleague David was responsible for the project together with some co-workers at other NGO:s. My role was to hold a lecture and participate in a group session. The rest of the time I could make observations and interact. The group session and three lectures, including my own, were held mainly in English. The rest of them were largely held in Chichewa.

Since everyone except for myself and a Ugandan lecturer spoke Chichewa many comments, questions and contributions naturally came in the local language. During the two days I gained a lot of questions around the way the work shop was constructed. It seemed like the participants felt their needs to be of a different kind than the problems that were posed in the lectures. Since my own scholarship is based on an intersectional

view, including a critical view on structures of power, I reacted towards the way knowledge was imparted as coming from the top down instead of starting off with the expressed needs of the participants. It was also striking how the emphasized focus on the security level was hollow since the refunds for transport to get to the work shop had made suspected non-lesbians show up.

Lectures that were held, topics:

- Introduction/gender identity
- Gender as social construction (My own lecture)
- The right to be gay and the political situation
- Safe sex
- Human rights
- Pastor M on what the bible says about same sex intercourse/marriage

The most discussed topics among the participants:

- Unsafe situation with straight people being invited
- Unfair refunds for transport
- Feelings about coming out

Refunds for transport were paid by the organizations. The issue concerning the fair amounts turned out to be repeatedly highlighted as important by the participants. Some were accused to have claimed to be from remote cities in order to get large refunds, others claimed to have taken a taxi and were not refunded. The discussions redirected the focus from LGBT related issues and onto economical sustainability and showed how these factors cannot be analyzed separately.

Regarding how the teaching setting was built up, I find it relevant to look at the workshop as a “temporary institution” inspired by Gail Lewis. She explains: “conferences are relational sites that involve the ‘punctuation of interpersonal space’”. The tools with which that interpersonal space is punctuated are the allocation of task, role, activity, and status, all of which are not only directed to the effective and smooth running of the temporary (or permanent) institution but also structure the relational field in which participants interact.” (2013, pg. 881) In other words also a workshop that is held on the principles of unity and equality as the LGBT workshop, is an arena where

structures of power intersect and shape the communication. What can be said and done is structured by an arrangement of subject positions with given premises and spaces.

When addressing sensitive topics like sexuality in a teaching situation in a cultural context where talking about sex is taboo, the risk is high to fixate and reproduce an unequal relational field where people do not want to share their experiences or ask questions. This is pointed out by professor in sociology at University of Cape Coast in Ghana, Mansah Prah (2011) and Tamale (2011). Both teach gender and sexuality in African contexts, using feminist pedagogy. They stress the importance of creating a safe atmosphere and “do [...] away with the social barriers and work on creating a community in the classroom” (Prah, 2011, pg. 599) since it conditions the ability to gain new knowledge and critically reflect on it. To acknowledge and deal with structures of power thus become essential for the learning outcomes of a course like the LGBT workshop.

## A European Room in Malawi

*“Those of us who stand outside the circle  
of this society’s definition of acceptable women;  
those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference;  
those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older,  
know that survival is not an academic skill”*  
Audre Lorde

### The Room

Before the workshop for lesbians was held I was requested by David to prepare a lecture on gender as a social construction. I asked what the audience would be like. Would people have heard of gender constructions before or would the women there have little or no educational background? He said there would be women with all kinds of backgrounds attending the work shop, but most of them would have heard of gender and sexual identities.

In the morning the first day one of the organizers held a short welcome speech and stressed that we were among friends these two days. He stated that the security was high and that we for once could feel free to be who we are. I was stunned by how the whole situation was so similar to any formal LGBT conference in Europe. The hotel where we were was the most luxurious place I had seen so far in the country. We were in a big hall constructed of visible wooden logs and white chalk walls. All the furniture was undamaged, the windows were high. In this setting, I interpreted the participants to be just as much a part of my own modern and Western life world as their trendy clothing: the male identified in baseball caps and shirts, the women with big earrings and ambitious hairdos. Sara Ahmed writes about rooms as a second skin. Rooms that enclose us and extend our perception of what we are, closely linked to where we are. (Ahmed, 2011, pg. 152) As I felt as an outsider coming from the other side of the globe, I read this room as the second skin of the Malawian participants. Not until I interviewed some of the participants, worked with others and made friends with yet others I realized that most of these women lived under utterly different economical, social and cultural

conditions than what would normally bring people to European standard hotels. The hotel as their second skin was temporary, and my interpretation of them was based on my Western reading of the room. In fact, if the hotel was to be read as a second skin to anyone, it would probably be mine as a white person, being familiar to the whole interior set up that I never saw anywhere else during my three months stay.

The clash between the familiar and the unfamiliar was confusing. I could for example read a person as a radical feminist unlikely to have any interest in going to a church that would condemn women for wearing pants, when I actually was talking to a politically conservative person in favour of traditional gender roles that had a painful relationship to the church that would not let her in. They were expressing who they were just like the anthropologist and material culture analyst Daniel Miller describes Trinidadians' efforts to illustrate their current selves by thought through clothing. (Miller, 2011) I just could not understand the language in a post colonial African context.

## Gender identity

After the welcome speech, David started the workshop up and made everyone write their names on a paper note to have in front of their seats. Above the name everyone was asked to write their preferred gender identity. I was nervous about my own lecture that was to be held, but I made observations and took notes. About a third of the present lesbians were dressed as men. Some of them wrote "he" on their paper. Most women in female clothing wrote "she" and some of the participants, regardless of the clothing, did not write any pronoun. One participant, my later interviewee Azalea, wrote "he" but crossed it over and then wrote "she".

I was wondering why apparently transsexual men had been invited as lesbians, and why they had turned up. The work shop was called "the LGBT work shop" but the participants were referred to as lesbians or WSW, i.e. women that have sex with women. It felt paradoxical to identify a group through a biological sex that some did not identify with, but simultaneously lay emphasis on their own gender identification. The concept of transgender was later brought up and briefly explained by lecturers, but no



actions were taken giving the transgender women occasions to share experiences or further discuss the topic, bearing in mind that I could only fully grasp the lectures held in English.

The male dressed biological women I encountered often referred to themselves, and were referred to by others as tomboys, which became a term I preferred to use instead of lesbian. The seemingly paradoxical use of pronouns and gender categories puzzled me and made me try to understand how these terms were related to people's construction of identity. Even though some people wrote "he" on their name tags, they did not seem bothered at all being called "she", and everyone that I could hear referred to themselves as "she". The whole question of gender identity was a confusing topic that I never entirely came to terms with. When I asked one of the participants about this she gave me a notion of a very different valuation regarding the use of language than what queer contexts in the West in later years has pushed forwards. She had written "he" on her tag, but referred to herself as "she" during her groups presentation of their discussion, where she also referred to the participants as lesbians. She seemed completely unconcerned about the topic and said that she did not care at all: "The categories are there just for practical reasons. In reality there isn't any categories." (Personal communication, 2014 June 22) Another participant, Mac, whom I later on interviewed together with his friend Grace, wrote "M. A. C. He!!!" on his sign and I asked him about his emphasis through three exclamation marks as it seemed to express a strong notion of being male. He laughed and said that it is how he identifies himself, but people would not accept that in his everyday life. Grace agreed and said that they have both known that they were lesbians from childhood. Apparently, to feel like a "he" for them was linked to lesbian identity. I asked if they had thought of going all the way and actually transgress through surgery. They looked at me with raised eyebrows and moved uncomfortably in their seats. "We would want to", Grace said, "but we don't have the money. We cannot support ourselves, how can we think about surgery?" (Grace, personal communication, 2014 July 24)

Thus, pronouns generally seemed to be of low value and the economical situation made surgical sex-change irrelevant for transgender biological women, which made differences between lesbian women and transgender men elusive. But this did not mean that the sexual identities I encountered were vague. Clothes are usually strictly gendered in Malawi and biological women are for example not allowed to enter churches dressed

in pants. This was a topic I brought up during informal talks and in my interviews with tomboys. Answers were varied. Some were saying that this meant that they had stopped going to church and did not care, some were troubled about it. The common point was that putting on a skirt to go was avoided. On other occasions I did hear tomboys become proud of being called “he”, and there were strict bodily rules shaping sexual identities that could not be crossed, as the following story gives an example of.

At one point, I got a moment alone with Anjilu, a tomboy participant at the work shop. We talked about her life as a lesbian, and she got into talking about her wish for children, but how that seems impossible due to the taboo for a tomboy to get pregnant. She said that she had thought about taking drugs to get unconscious and let some male friend make her pregnant, but the whole process of being pregnant and deliver would just be too much for her. She says this with a low voice and noticeable tension. Then she tells me a story about a previous acquaintance. She was known as a very tough tomboy that hustled other people, preferentially sex workers, as a living. Anjilu describes a bullying and threatening person and stresses how she was really bad, someone you did not want to get in trouble with. I interpret her feelings for the acquaintance through the tone in her voice as a mix of aversion and respectfulness, due to the acquaintances’ aggressive but unfeminine behaviour.

Some years ago she went to South Africa to work, Anjilu continues. She stayed away some months and when she came back, she was pregnant. She hid it well and only her closest friends and family knew her condition. When it was time to deliver, she walked with a friend to the hospital at the centre of town, but she did not make it all the way and at the bridge over Lilongwe River the baby was delivered. Since she had no cloth to wrap the baby in, a passing woman gave her one. At some point the acquaintance decided that this was an impossible situation. Anjilu says: “She couldn’t. She say: No. I cannot have a baby. And she throw him from the bridge”

Since there were witnesses to the scenario and the baby boy later was found dead, the whole story became a matter for the police and the media and the acquaintance decided to escape, back to South Africa. And from there she has not returned. Anjilu and I are silent a few moments after the end of this lamentable story. Then Anjilu says: “Can you imagine? She couldn’t bare the disgrace.”

Anjilu speaks from her perspective of herself being a tomboy. As I interpret Anjilu, she wants this to have happened because of the acquaintances reluctance to accept a cultural identity creation that she felt would be unavoidable as a mother. She does not see it as an act of madness or a woman's postpartum psychosis, but as a fight for integrity. As long as the sexual contact with a man and the pregnancy that it resulted in was corporal it could be negotiated and concealed, but when it materialized as a baby it was there for everyone to judge. I interpret the mother to be perceived as the opposite to a tomboy; the mother is what the tomboy is not, and therefore Anjilu's acquaintance would have lost her identity, at least in the eyes of Anjilu. (Cf. Rosenberg, pg. 54)

South African Activist Bernedette Muthien writes that: "The original inhabitants of Southern Africa, the Khoisan, were not heteronormative, and genders and sexualities were seen as fluid and dynamic, rather than as static binaries." (Muthien, 2007, pg. 323) She considers queer theory to open up for a less static view on sexuality, but wants a theoretical development from an African point of view that takes spirituality and traditional views into account. I see the story of Anjilu, and other efforts and sacrifices made for maintaining a tomboy identity, as to some extent speaking against a standpoint that gay identity is more fluid in Africa than it seems to be in the West. At the same time as the tomboys called themselves and each other "she" and did not seem to prioritize the use of language very highly, the performative was regarded as crucial. In this way the identities appeared fixed, and gender expressions binary and constructed through exclusion of non matching looks and acts. Though, importantly, this constructs a non-conformative identity that goes beyond binarities. Even if deriving from ancient traditions of tacit gay practises, as Muthien, (2007) Epprecht, (1998, 2013) O'Mara, (2013) Dankwa (2013) et. al. describe, the African tomboys I met seem to have constructed a way to relate to gender identity that is in part similar to that of updated Western queers. An attitude that from an un-essentialized understanding of gender and sexuality as socially constructed resists heterosexual dominance through non conforming and refusal to position itself as a static negation to heterosexuality.

This way queer theory opens the field for uncountable possibilities of gender identities, and even if identity can be felt as a crucial foundation for an individual's life, it makes the need to frame a certain group of genders a matter of political organizing. The question is if this organizing has to be termed in a Western way?

Butler writes:

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler, 2007, pg. 229)

To view sexual and gender identities through the eyes of Butler shows a tendency to a paradoxical reinvention of the wheel in Africa. Words and concepts borrowed from the West are applied on non-sexually conforming Africans in order to frame sexual identities: constructions which are by Butler and others in the West, criticized as tools for discursive power. If homosexuality is constructed to define heterosexuality, it is of little use to claim power through identifying to that category. (Butler, pg. 204) Queer theory that claims to challenge the order of power through an anti-assimilatory and anti-separatist focus, can open up for more long term change by resisting minoritization and challenge the majority. In Butlers words: “What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject?” (Pg. 55) I understand her as talking about transgender women as well as women that are excluded from feminist movements because of race or class related issues, but I see the pointlessness in a construction of lesbians that only attract a minority because of disidentification with a Western term, as well as for legal and other reasons, as similar and relevant.

## Conclusions

Reading Sara Ahmed, the room in which the workshop was held can be read as “white” both through its material features and the practises that went on within its walls. My confusion as a European observant about how to make sense of familiar and unfamiliar

impressions puts a finger on my own starting point in a post colonial context, and how well that white perspective correlated with the setup for a workshop for lesbians in Malawi. This urges for considerations regarding the correlation it had with the participants' perception of their situation and to what extent it met their interests. As an example the identity categories that were used seemed to be looked at with forbearance, and not as key concepts explaining identity.

In accordance with Butler my question is not regarding a dismissing of identity categories as such, but about how these categories are constructed and how they can be addressed to facilitate the formation of a relevant and coherent group that together can create a meaningful and subversive act of resistance. Queer feminist and professor in Gender studies at Lund University Tiina Rosenberg discusses group identity as something that is felt by a subject when the cultural practises, the social situation and the history can be related to as being one's own. A group can be shaped by force or by choice but not until it is felt as a unity by the members will it function as an identity. (Rosenberg, 2003, pg. 59-61) This makes gender identities a matter to reflect upon, but also how to term and outline homosexuality. The questions of who identifies as a lesbian in Western terms, why they do it and what that means, became highlighted when I analyzed the workshop and my own lecture which I will show in the following chapter.

## A Group of Lesbians?

Both before and after my own lecture, I heard other lecturers talk about the difficulties to get the participants to be active and actually participate. I was impressed with all the other speakers' level of interactiveness: some walked up and down the hall while talking, some started singing, drumming, trying to draw the attention of the audience.

Throughout the whole workshop a couple of the participants assisted by distributing pens and water to every ones seat and had a serious and helpful approach. It turned out that both of them were working part-time for one of the organizing NGO:s. The rest of the group varied their expressions, but all of them showed signs of discomfort most of the time, looking bored and away from the speaker. About half of the group clearly showed distance to the lecturers and what was taught with annoyed faces, whispering of comments and dismissive body language at times. There was a subtle division between the participants in the workshop and the lecturers that was maintained also during the brakes. The participants tended to stay on the lawn around the pool, while the lecturers were seated around the bar where snacks, coffee and tea were served. At a couple of brakes there was a gathering around a car where a finance assistant from one of the NGO:s was seated and from where he handed out the refunds for transportation. It was obvious that many of the participants were unsatisfied with the payments, but it was hard to understand what exactly was going on. When I asked, individual participants told me that they did not get what they should have.

### My Lecture on Gender as a Social Construction

In the afternoon of the first day it was my turn. The microphones did not work so I went to stand by my PowerPoint and spoke loud and slow. The room felt big and I had no idea of how my act would be received. I used Judith Butler and her concept *performativity*, (Butler, 2007) as similar but yet different to the act of performing. At the PowerPoint, I showed a YouTube clip in which she is stressing the possibility to change

one's gender but how strong feelings about what is one's real identity are usually connected to gender which makes gender roles more fixed than a simple performance. This discussion I regarded useful in order to describe gender roles as changing and situated in time and space. In this discussion I brought up the concept of normality and I emphasized how also normality is situated in space and in time, and that the social acceptance of what is considered to be normal is changing. I took Sweden as an example and showed how a prohibition against homosexuality into the 1940's has changed to today's situation where it is taboo to publicly show dislike for gay people. I let pictures of famous Swedish lesbian couples like the singer Eva Dahlgren and her wife the jewellery designer Efva Attling illustrate my speaking, and in between I displayed illustrative quotes that I hoped could be read by someone that had problems to follow my spoken English.

Forty serious faces watched me during the lecture. No one answered my questions except the only other white person in the room, an American anthropologist, who tried to start discussions. She only got some short comments. I had been told to make my presentation as interactive as possible, but the lack of response made me feel utterly stiff and tedious. When I asked if what I said could be understood I got short positive answers but my feeling was different: my message did not get through.

As I see it there were two main problems that affected the communication during my lecture. One I interpret as a general reluctance to identify with Western concepts of sexual identity. The other is the result of an established racial hierarchy that I will get back to in the next chapter. In retrospect, I can see that I overestimated the participants' wish for a gender politics striving to define and normalize gay people. My understanding of the Western gay movements struggle based on individual sexual subjectivity as being universal, did not fit into the political and social context of Malawi. To be "homosexual" has been possible only after the term was invented and spread as is shown by French philosopher Michel Foucault. (2004, pg. 64) This took place in the late nineteenth century, which was contemporaneous with the time of the colonization of Malawi and other Sub-Saharan countries. Foucault describes how "the homosexual" is then outlined and defined, the focus moves from homosexual or other acts of sodomy to identity, and gays became one with their sexuality in the eyes of society. "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy into a kind of interior androgyny, a

hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”(Foucault, 2004, pg. 64 - 65)

In Africa, a range of gay acts have been explained through history, but still the absolute majority of practises were never described since the widespread tradition of silence have surrounded topics regarding sexuality. (Epprecht, 1998, Epprecht, 2013, Tamale 2013) In his article from 1998, Epprecht turns to court cases in Zimbabwe to gain insights on the subject, where he finds nothing regarding lesbian acts. This traditional way to not talk about or name gay practices are still evident in contemporary Africa. It is shown for example by doctor in African history Kathleen O’Mara that has studied non-conformative sexualities in Ghana. She describes a tacit and functional system of sexual practises that must be considered by those reacting to news about publicly expressed African homophobia. She claims that the term homosexuality is something associated with the West (O’Mara, 2013, pg. 191) which is also a widespread notion through political and others appearances in the media that claim that homosexuality is stemming from the West, as a neo imperialistic attempt to spread a perverted disease and recruit children (Tamale in Epprecht & Nyeck, 2013, pg. 227). In this way, Tamale claims, states have distracted attention “from the more significant socio-economic and political crises that afflict society”. From the part of the West, news on aggressive homophobia correlate with colonial historical research and descriptions of African sexuality as undeveloped, compared to a Western civilized society. (O’Mara, 2013, pg. 191)

Homosexuality as a concept is with this background not unconditionally embraced or seen as relevant.

Modern, urban, sexually non-normative Africans implicitly contest this category as they assert their cultural authenticity. At one level, such assertion resists the Wests notion of sexual identity as the core of modern subjectivity, and at the other, it resists the racialized colonial structure of power that inhabits the Enlightenment model of sexual progress – from tradition to modernity – and the diffusionist model of globalization – from North to South. (O’Mara in Epprecht, Nyeck, 2013, pg. 191)

I am later on going to question O’Maras view on cultural authenticity (see Coming Out), but seen as an act within a post-colonial scenario, where the division between the white and the black, the North and the South, is so utterly divided as in Malawi I do read the participants’ reserved attitudes towards the work shop as a whole as a



resistance to a Western framing of homosexuality as (one of) their everyday problem(s). Their reservations do not exclusively have to do with the present, multilayered post colonial setting, but there is also a question of how oppression structures a categorization of the oppressed, in this case sexually non-normative persons that are identified as women. Oppression makes people come together but on grounds that shadow paradoxical interests and values. Just like the black, lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde describes, and this problematic was also the very starting point of intersectionalist thought, a common ground of oppression does not mean there is homogeneity in the experiences of oppression. Her critique is directed towards women's groups that fail to recognize differences within them due to race, sexual preference, class or age (Lorde, 2007, pg. 116) but can be applied to any collective that gathers because of oppression. Differences within the group are thus important matters to deal with, in order to create a sense of unity. Lorde writes: "I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live." (2007, pg. 120)

As a poor young lesbian in Malawi, resembling three of my informants, it is also an impossible way to live since a large functioning social network, one that would react with repugnance if homosexuality was portrayed as someone's identity, is crucial for everyday subsistence. The most common argument I heard against coming out as homosexual, was that one's family would not accept it. This means that identifying oneself as gay would be limited to certain occasions, such as the work shop and within social networks that know, which further weakens the incitements to seriously adhere to a Western conception of identity.

## Conclusions

The Malawian way to be gay as I encountered it, was thus not primarily characterized by being fluid or flexible, but manifested rather as fixed parts of a multifaceted identity that coexisted in flexible ways alongside a heterosexual majority. The people I met did not wish to be queer in the sense of politically resisting heteronormativity (Rosenberg,

pg. 15) but because of a rising oppression against the construction of homosexuals and difficult economical circumstances, they are both acknowledging an identity as homosexual and starting to experience heteronormativity as exclusive. This means that a political use of queer theory is becoming more and more relevant in the context of Malawi, but at the same time the incitements' to take on identities fitting into old labelled boxes of gender and sexuality constructed in the West are growing stronger. Moreover, categorization was not the only explanation to the disengaged audience. As I will show in the following section, the post-colonial structure created a setting that makes pedagogy and social hierarchies important questions to discuss.

## From Those Who Know to Those Who Experience

The second problem with my lecture was an underestimation of the strong boundary that divides the white from the black, the Global South from the Global North. My impression after spending three months in Malawi, was that the image of the North for most people was that of an unattainable paradise where money is never a problem and everything is luxurious and hi-tech. Partly that is a false picture of course, but in comparison it is also partly true. Life expectancy is almost the double in Sweden compared to Malawi, people do handle a lot of technical attributes in their daily lives in the North and also the poor have access to street lights, hot water in showers, well equipped medical institutions and so on.

The post-colonial division between white and black is, therefore, both material and imaginary; tangible and assumed. It confirms the established colonial structure and comes to a clear expression in attitudes and approaches as well as in language. For example I learnt that you do not say “two people” about a white and a black person in Chichewa. You would say “a person and a white” (muzungo). This constitution of the black person as the “person” seemingly goes against the notion of the white person as the human being in the antonym black-white, as for example is explained by late professor of sociology and cultural studies, Stuart Hall, (Hall, 2013) as the base for racist thinking which can be compared to homophobia and the construction of heterosexuality-homosexuality. Seen in a colonial context the use of language in this case can be read as an avoidance to construct an antonym, the white is defined by their skin colour in a reversed order, humanizing the black person. Considering the overall impression of how racial structures were upheld in Malawi, this use of language does not mean that the hierarchies are overturned, but I do see it as potentially expressing resistance. A reluctance to construct binary categories in language can be read as a disinclination towards a disparaging racial order, similar to queer theoretical strategies to subversively contest gender and sexuality based orders of power through refusal to be labelled as defining opposites.

The whiteness in the pictures of the blond and fashionable famous couple Eva Dahlgren and Efva Attling that I had to illustrate the current legal Swedish situation was visual and readable. The meaning of two white upper class women in a picture would usually, as I later would come to understand, be perceived more in terms of race and economy than anything else. Whiteness and wealth as opposed to blackness and poverty, and as follows; the images probably did not encourage a feeling that legal gay marriage is a reachable goal in Malawi, or that they had anything to do with Malawi at all. In retrospect I felt ashamed of showing such pictures; myself seeing how provocative they could seem. I read Fanon and felt that his words about white self image could have been the under text: "I am white. I possess beauty and virtue, merits that have never been black."(Fanon, 2011, pg. 56) I felt that my lecture could be read as an appeal to become, culturally or even physically, white in order to gain the rights I was talking about.

As a white person speaking only English I stuck out as especially prone to repeat colonial patterns, but as intersectional analysis show, subjects can move between positions in structures of power. Any group can potentially be positioned within an established structure of power, where they turn oppressive. In Lorde's classical essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", (2007) she addresses white feminists that are criticized to make use of the tools of patriarchy, i.e. gaining privilege through exclusion of women that are not white, young middle class. In the same way, strong discourses of power such as those found in colonial rule, can become visible as irrespective of racial characteristics.

### Pamoja's Lecture on Safe Sex

At one point a black and white sketch of two women having sex, shown on the power point, caused loud, sudden reactions. It was during a lecture held by Pamoja that worked as a sex educator and was there to talk about safe sex and other highly private matters normally not spoken of. She came from Uganda which meant that she was unable to speak the local language and therefore communicated in English. The topics she was addressing were of a kind that is surrounded by taboo and feelings of shame such as sexually transmitted diseases, sexual protection for lesbians, intercourse with

men and related issues. She made a strong character in colourful clothes and an energetic way of moving her body. Using a high pitch voice, laughter and smiles as a primary tool in her rhetorical approach, almost regardless of the topic that was being discussed, she created a special tension in the room.

Some of the participants knew her from earlier trainings, and sometimes she brought the audience to a quick laughter, but most of the time the participants looked bored and serious. When the drawing of the women came up on the over head projector it was there to illustrate an apparently risky position when it comes to sexually transmitted diseases, called “the scissor position”. The position implies that the mucous membranes of the two partners meet; and hence enables transmission of diseases. It was a simple drawing only depicting the outlines of two bodies, but it’s sexual meaning made the room joyfully go “Ooh!” which made Pamoja immediately proceed to the next image. The audience loudly demanded it back, but Pamoja refused, laughing embarrassed. I wanted to ask why they were not allowed to see the picture again, but I felt it could have put her in an uncomfortable situation if I would have questioned her as a colleague.

Her act could be interpreted as an unwillingness to show pictures of sex due to a moral aversion towards pornography, and maybe there were elements of such reasons behind her decision. But my most striking feeling during her lecture was that the audience seemed to be younger than their actual age spanning from 18 to above 30. The pedagogical tone of her voice and how she approached the audience was defining in terms of it's establishment of power relations between lecturer and pupils. The whole situation with the picture and the reactions of the audience took me back to situations from high school or even primary school. The feeling of not being allowed to watch something is closely connected to childhood and regulations and prohibitions regarding movies and parents or teachers secrecy around adult knowledge, kept away from children’s ears and eyes. Pamoja was black, but a paternalistic approach, Fanon describes, is a common way for white people to address black people. “A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child” (Fanon, 2011, pg. 44) He notes that even though such an approach is not meant to provoke, it is met by anger. An approach that underestimates somebody's mental capacity, constructing them as “primitive and uncivilized [...] makes him angry.” (Fanon, 2011, pg. 45)

I would say anyone is likely to react with anger to a paternalistic attitude, but Fanon describes a colonial existence where this approach is repeated and structural. Therefore it leaves a stronger psychological mark within the black persons in the colonized Algerian society which he describes in his research. He notes that the language of the colonizers is a forceful tool to construct a division between not only coloniser and the colonized, but also between black Algerians with different skills in French. The French language, he claims, makes people be perceived as white. Someone that speaks fluently in French would be commented upon: “Keep your eyes on that one, he is almost white!” (Fanon, 2011, pg. 36) In the same way the colonial structures that shaped everyday life and relations between black and white people in Malawi make the paternalistic approach that was articulated in English by Pamoja an expression of power that intersects with an established racial structure. Fanon quotes Mayotte Capécia, a black woman that dreamt about marrying a white man and states: “One is white over a certain financial level”. (Fanon, 2011, pg. 55) The actual skin colours become irrelevant when the colonial structure provides a set of positions that are already designed.

Pamoja was also talking about use of dental dams<sup>x</sup> and sex toys. No one that I talked to knew what dental dams are, nor owned sex toys. I posed the question in my discussion group at the end of the second day, and I asked randomly when I later on made interviews. The responses were avoiding and negative. The question could be felt as embarrassing which could lead to not wanting to answer, but the faces of my respondents looking at me with open eyes and confused looks made me feel I was asking about something unknown, rather than something kept secret. Also Smith, a close friend to Pamoja, sighed after the lecture and commented it by questioning why Pamoja had talked about dental dams and sex toys as if people would have access to them. She said she knew of only one, very secret sex shop in Blantyre, five hundred kilometres from Lilongwe, where there might be some sex toys for sale. Dental dams she did not think existed in the country. It would also be unlikely that anyone at the work shop would use their money to buy such things, she stated.

It is paradoxical that Pamoja, an experienced sexual educator, talked over the heads of her audience in this way. She spoke on one hand to the audience as they were children, and mixed that approach with information that they could not relate to. The act has equivalent consequences as the “dictatorial techniques” described by the Norwegian social psychologist Berit Ås in 1976. Her concept can be applied to situations as for

example a board meeting, where it becomes obvious that some of the members have exchanged information that is now tacit. This makes the one or ones that lack information excluded from the further discussions or unable to take relevant parts of the decisions that are made. Its aim is to control the decision making and it is pointed out by feminists as a common technique for men to keep women from leading positions. My impression of the lecture was that Pamoja did not fully aim for reaching out to the audience in order for them to gain knowledge constructively, but to keep up a structure of power that constructed her as the one who knows and the audience as the ones that experience, referring to my earlier quote by Gail Lewis. (2013)

## Conclusions

The approaches in the lectures that I have narrated can be analyzed in terms of interpellation. (Ahmed, 2011, pg.136-141) The subject is recruited when it is turning around and that way agrees on following certain directives. The audience go “Wooh!” when they perceive they are talked to as a bunch of messy kids and hence articulate an identity as such. Information that is not understood or irrelevant positions them as being young. From my side, I saw forty serious faces and tried to be loud and clear about my topic that I later understood was beside the point. Pamoja, in turn, is the one responsible to keep order in the room and prohibits her students from viewing the drawing. Reading Fanon, both positions are segmented by the use of the colonial language that already outlines the structures of power in the Malawian setting. The obvious challenge here is to break up the fixation of hierarchies and knowledge in preset formations. Prah writes: “Teaching sexuality is a political act, because sexuality is a concept of power and teaching it critically raises political consciousness. [...] Feminist pedagogy [...] focuses on classroom dynamics by doing away with the power divide between the teacher and students, creating a space in which all voices are heard and legitimized [...]” (Prah, 2011, pg. 594) She has a range of suggestions of how to create a safe and comfortable classroom situation, including to sit all together and to present the teacher as a facilitator more than a teacher. I do believe Prah’s anti authoritarian way to teach would have been fruitful in the setting of the workshop, but there was yet another problem that obstructed

the environment to feel secure and let people open up: the insecurity that came with fears of being revealed by those present that might not have been lesbians, and the repercussions if the world outside would find out. I will further discuss this in the following chapter.



## Coming Out

The topic of coming out includes many of the most sensitive aspects of gay life in Malawi today. It was brought up at the LGBT workshop in a lecture on human rights, held in Chichewa. The lecturer was a jovial man, dressed in a multicoloured, knitted hood sweater. He wandered back and forth, speaking in an engaged and friendly way to the audience, and was comparatively good at getting people to interact. He got some laughs at times, but he was talking for more than two hours and judging by the faces of the participants, he still had some problems in holding their attention.

After about two thirds of his lecture there was a discussion starting up. The voices of the speakers were first shy and hesitating, but grew stronger. Azalea, that I came to interview later on, had until this point acted reserved and detached from whatever was brought up, but now she had raised her voice and seemed to be in the argument on one side. A couple of the others at the other end of the room talked back to her. Azalea was speaking in English about half of the time. I heard her say that she did not care and that she did not have a need to come out and show off. Another person, Mallory, went up and walked around talking as a lecturer. The others that spoke out, spoke in anger with high pitch voices, and receiving countenance from others.

I had it explained to me by my colleague Brenda that whispered to me that Mallory and the lecturer had proposed that they all should come out as lesbians, but many objected that it would be impossible due to their reliance on their families that would throw them out in the streets. Azalea's point was that not coming out did not have to be a problem, but it was criticized both from them that did not see it as a current option and by Mallory and the lecturer that encouraged it as an important step to take.

At this point the lecturer stood at the very far end of the hall with an affected expression on his face. He made slight tries to end the discussion and smooth over the raised revolt. I felt disappointed that he did not manage to handle this potentially subversive debate that included questions that were apparently both relevant and difficult in the daily lives of his audience.

## Silence

The Western term for secretly being gay is to be "in the closet." The American queer studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called the closet the "defining structure of repression against homosexuals in the 20th Century" (Quoted in Rosenberg, 2003, pg. 93). Rosenberg explains homosexuality and the silence surrounding it as an important integrated part of heteronormativity. (Rosenberg, 2003, pg. 160). The role of the homosexual as different constructs the heterosexual as the normal and silence is effectively keeping history and culture heterosexual. (Rosenberg, 2003, pg.118) Rosenberg judges silence hard. She speaks with Kosofsky Sedgwick that claims the closet to be the "premier weapon of heterocultural dominance". Condemnation is, along with silence, two approaches towards same sex relations that have been responsible for upholding and maintaining a negative construction of homosexuality. "To perceive silence as openness is ridiculous" (Rosenberg, 2003, pg. 96) she states, and indicates that an incapacity or a reluctance towards discussing the topic of homosexuality lies behind. But later on Rosenberg continues her discussion with Kosofsky Sedgwick and discusses the negative consequences an identity as homosexual brings. She argues that accusations of pathology and distrust mean an instant disqualification rendering the interpretative prerogative over the subject to others. (Pg. 118) In other words, she recognizes the problems that an identity as homosexual can bring. In the West, gay movements have put a lot of focus on the process of coming out. Gay parades and struggles to change laws and regulations have had the aim to help gay people out of the closet, in order to live fully as whole and dignified citizens.

Researchers studying the African and Asian LGBT context have come to view the closet from a somewhat different perspective, complicating the view on silence. The doctoral candidate Serena Owusua Dankwa at the University of Ghana, and the African historian Kathleen O'Mara, both contributing to the book *Sexual Diversity in Africa* (2013) have made studies over several years in Ghana. O'Mara concludes that her informants do not "necessarily self-define with the dominant Western paradigm of a notion of individualized sexual subjectivity, expressed in coming out of the closet and claiming a fixed identity [...] Indeed, such a benchmark portrays the developing world as the other and West as normative." (O'Mara, 2013, pg. 190) In her field work, she has

found vast evidence of a tacit underground culture, where people are “in the know” and meet, arrange gatherings, help each other and organize themselves to live the way they choose without speaking openly about homosexuality. Ghana’s laws are similar to the laws in Malawi, with long-term imprisonment for gay acts. People are convicted under these laws, and there has been an uprising anti-gay public opinion that shows in media and through demonstrations. Still O’Mara as well as Owusua Dankwa have encountered gay people living their lives as respected citizens, both those that are not engaged in special gay communities and people active in gay networks.

As an example, O’Mara describes a woman dressing and acting as a man, which is accepted as the husband by the family of the wife. She has met socially established gay men that are called “aunties” and other gay individuals that create spaces for themselves in society in which they are accepted. She understands her African interviewees and their context as not conforming to the frames of western gay politics and writes: “Where individuals sit on the continuum at any moment is flexible, situational, and relational. Western ideology obscures those characteristics with regulations and surveillance: language and concepts of unnatural sex that serve to freeze the non-normative subject.” She also argues that silence and secrecy are not words to describe what is tacit and understood or assumed (O’Mara, pg.192)

In this sense, terming identities and sexuality becomes a problem in itself, related to Western ideology even without the use of a colonial language. Serena Owusua Dankwa describes in her article based on an interview with lesbians in Accra how the term *supi*, for lesbian, is growing in popularity through media and because of its ability to define something that was previously unspoken of, becomes responsible for an increased level of hostile gossiping.

I understand the two researchers as critical to a westernized understanding of a flourishing, yet underground or tacit gay life in Ghana, upheld through discrete networks. They question if there is a need to drag gay practises out of the closet and label them with terms that serves a simultaneous political and public discourse against Western imperialism. At the workshop, Azalea seemed to have a correlating view of the topic. In my interview with her I asked her about her statement during the discussions about it not being a problem not to come out. She answered that she will never come out; she lets people speculate and there is never anyone that asks. She used the term

“advantage” about that she has not been publicly identified as a lesbian. (Azalea, personal communication, 2013, July 26)

Still she uses the term lesbian saying for example: “I am just a lesbian that like to dress in male clothing. I don’t want to change anything; I’m ok with being a ‘she’” (Azalea, personal communication, 2013, July 26) when I ask her why she wrote “he” on her name tag and then changed it to “she”. Her clothing attracts attention and makes people ask why she dresses the way she does and she tells me that she has been bugged by people mocking her for the way she dresses. For example people can call her “uncle”. Now, she claims, she has become used to it and it does not bother her anymore. She can laugh about it or give back if she takes offence. She also says that people can be appreciating about her clothing and say; “You look good!” (Azalea, personal communication, 2013, July 26)

Considering that she is continuing to wear non-normative gender related clothing, although it is commented and even jested upon, and the fact that she attends lesbian events, I interpret as she is not hiding in a closet in a western sense but that her individual identity is important to her. To come out publicly is not desired. Still the right to wear men’s clothes and have relationships with women is, and she has to take struggles in order to maintain her style. Azalea can be said to represent a “don’t ask don’t tell” tradition that Epprecht explains as an African tradition and strategy to preserve sexual freedoms. He claims the tactic to work better than “litigation or lobbying for rights could ever be.”(Epprecht, 2013, pg. 149)

Still there is a tension in her way to deal with her identity. All the way through the interview Azalea shows an ambiguity where she on one hand claims that she is comfortable and satisfied with the way things are, on the other hand she shows insecure and vulnerable. She shines when she talks about her education and where it will lead her: to financial stability and possibilities to start up her own company in agriculture or poultry, or maybe a job at a bank. But then she looks stressed and says that she always have to be the best one to cover up for the way she dresses.

Also Bliss gives a picture of a tacit gay life. Her family, except from her grandmother, has known about her “doing that” (Bliss, personal communication, 2017 July 24), which she says in reference to homosexual acts, and they are not giving her problems about it. It is nothing they discuss or talk about, it is just like it is. When she, a couple of years

ago, married a woman in a traditional ceremony, her family were the only ones that knew about it. But she also tells me that they used to hold each other in public so that people started to ask questions: “How can we guys be with you if you do that? They are lesbians! They fuck each other!’ They want to scare us... and they succeed. I want to move.” (Bliss, personal communication, 2013, July 24) Her narrative about wanting to hold her girlfriend in public in a way that attracted peoples negative attention shows a wish to come out that might be corresponding to the opponents to Azaleas view at the workshop, that pointed at the inconveniences that hiding their sexuality brought, but also to the social stigma it would mean to be identified as homosexual. At the same time, Bliss story shows a direct risk for exposure to violence if Mallory’s advice to come out in the open was to be followed. Judging from my experiences in the bar, where the tension considering the topic of gay marriage rose quickly and was considered highly controversial, I interpret Bliss’s concerns to be substantial.

The risks connected to coming out are also strongly expressed by Mac and Grace. When I asked them about their view and possibilities to come out, they immediately rejected the idea. “It’s a sin. [...] People kill others in Malawi” (Personal communication, 2013, July 24), Mac stated. Grace explained that her father supports her and that he regards homosexuality a sin and would not understand. If she would come out as a lesbian he would throw her out in the streets. She said that it is a constant fear and that she would become a beggar or a prostitute if that happened: “I would get HIV and die” (Grace, personal communication, 2013 July 24), she declared with seriousness.

Even if Bliss, Mac or Grace have never been exposed to direct physical violence because of their sexual orientation, they are constantly afraid to be targeted as lesbians. They mention social exclusion, physical abuse and homicide as possible outcomes if identified as such. If the fear is analyzed through Ahmed’s theory on affective economies it is understandable how belonging to a group placed at the centre of emotional clusters of hatred is unappealing. The group of lesbians is a hated group and the belonging to that group is dealt with in tacit ways. A unifying manifestation that could construct a LGBT community is not seen as a reasonable option. To come out, as in for example pride parades, could be compared to Ahmed’s example with the American flags that signal a united country as a reaction to a fear for terrorism. It is done in many countries where homophobia is common and aggressive, and parades have also been violently attacked, but in Malawi the thought of a parade seems

considerably unsafe. At the same time the lesbians I met had different views on if coming out was necessary or desired at all. Bliss's story indicates not that she would want to organize and make a political standpoint, but a frustration since she would want to hold hands with her girlfriend without fear.

## Frustration

Dankwa and O'Mara's research apply to my experiences in Malawi to a certain extent. My informants gave me a picture of their lived reality that made me have to revise my previous Western understanding of what it means to be gay and what a meaningful gay political identity must express. To consider the problems that concerned my informants in the order that they arrange them means to lower the priority of coming out, (if wanted at all) and review the concept. My informants claimed that what they needed was to gain respect in forms of stability materialized in such things as their own house and a decent profession. They repeatedly said that they would be able to live with women that way, and nobody would bother them. In their current situation, though, Mac, Grace and Bliss were frustrated and annoyed with being dependent of families and an intolerant social context. They mixed their future wishes about economically stable lives in Malawi with worries about violence and hatred. Grace remarked on the view of lesbians in Malawi; "People talk. It is a Satanism, it's a sin against God" (Personal communication 2013 July 24). As I see it, they wanted to be in a functioning tacit gay net work, as Dankwa and O'Mara describes, but were exposed to negative reactions such as mocking or threats of violence because of their way to dress, and behave. They did not ask for a movement aiming to come out as lesbians. I interpreted them to most of all wish to be respected, and left alone.

I did not attempt to research the situation for gay men, but from what I saw their situation allowed them to be more open despite the stricter laws on male homosexuality. Some gay men that I talked to informally were "openly" gay in a similar way that is described by Dankwa and O'Mara. It was a couple of male directors living among the elite, who met men when going out to bars, without hiding their interest. One of them was also a gay activist.

Another sexually non conformative biological male that I met through a friend worked in a fashion store. She had a feminine approach, called herself Orlanda and referred to herself as a woman. The lesbians I met all knew her and she was liked and admired for her openness but considered difficult to be with in public for the same reason. JR, a male dressed lesbian that I first met through her, smiled when I brought her name up and said with an admiring tone that Orlanda would always refer to her as “he”, and never make a mistake. But at the same time she would not want to go with her to a bar in a neighbourhood where she was known. She said that Orlanda was “too open” and would put her in trouble. (JR, personal communication, 2013, August 6)

JR is similar in the aspect of being settled to the interviewees of Owusua Dankwa. She dresses in very fancy male suits; she works as a teacher and lives in a nice house in a middle class neighbourhood with her girlfriend of four years. The girlfriend is Italian and lives part time with her husband. The husband knows JR as a friend of his wife and the family but he does not know about the sexual bonds between the two women. When I asked JR about the status of the relationship she said that she had threatened to leave her girlfriend many times as she is not breaking up with her husband. But JR had with time come to the conclusion that she would not do that, since she loved her. She talked about the husband being a constant threat to their relationship, and that sooner or later he would be told how things were. This means that neither JR had managed to find a satisfying solution of how to arrange her lesbian relationship, even though she had the economical stability that the others were dreaming of.

Aside from Mallory, the lesbian woman I met that was most open about her orientation was Ateefah, who I first met at a conference in Mangochi on stigma related to HIV. Politicians, religious leaders and NGO representatives were invited to discuss a new bill regarding the rights of people infected by HIV. At one point she suddenly stood up and interrupted the ongoing discussions by saying loudly: “I am a lesbian and I am so proud!” (Field diary, 2013, July 30) The room got quiet for a moment while people looked at her with stunned faces. She smiled and turned around and went to the ladies room, and the meeting continued without comments on her statement.

Ateefah and I went back to Lilongwe together in her car, and could talk informally during the six-hour car ride. Later on I also interviewed her through Skype. Her standpoint is that gay Malawians must come out, that the starting point is to stop hiding.

She stated this also at the conference and compared to the work against stigma because of HIV. She was met by comments regarding the differences between these stigmas that make them incomparable: first of all homosexuality is illegal and harshly punished by law. Even if the law would change as it has in South Africa, the view on homosexuality in Malawi by the church and within Malawian culture would make life difficult for anyone coming out as gay. (Field diary, 2013, July 30)

During the Skype interview Ateefah still insisted that coming out is the only way to go and that there are people that she meets for example at her visits at universities that are interested in organizing, and to be at the front of a collective act: “there is no way the government are to arrest all the people at once” (Personal communication, 2014, Mars 24), and she argues that keeping on hiding makes gay people a vulnerable group to law suits and public condemnation.

Ateefah is married to a man since 30 years. Marc Epprecht describes this social state of being openly gay and at the same time married and “normal” for the sake of keeping up a functioning family network, which is the crucial base for life in Zimbabwe. (Epprecht, 1998) In the article, the point in this issue is that people in that way have found ways to live functioning lives both as gays and accepted citizens. But again this kind of arrangements does not mean, as I encountered them, a content dwelling in an unproblematic mix of authentic traditions. My informants were all, without exceptions, frustrated about not being able to unchain themselves from obligations and restraints built into the socio-cultural conditions. Many times with an eye directed to the West. At one point in the car leaving from Mangochi, Ateefah said in her loud, dramatic way: “Emma, if I would go with you to Sweden I would live as a lesbian and I would not even call my husband!” (Personal communication 2013, July 31)

To understand a Sub-Saharan context where people act out from cultural discourses that make the creation of meaning in everyday life based on a societal structure and cultural symbolism that cannot and is not desired to be replaced by a Western ideology, is a vertiginous experience for a Western queer theory scholar like myself. My preconceptions when I focus on the right to claim an identity as homosexual can be read as colonial: “In the same moment as the colonial master claims the universal values of the west in his exercise of power, they are revealed as particulate” (Michael Azar’s foreword in Fanon, 2011, Pg. 22) This is what Epprecht, Owusua Dankwa and O’Mara



avoid by telling the stories straight from the perspective of the lived realities of their informants. What I perceive as lacking, is however the frustration that I met because of various reasons in the stories of my own informants. I find Epprecht focusing on gay practises, especially in his study from 1998, to the extent that traditional systems of oppression seems to be thought of as fairly well suited to Africa and unaffected by Europe. Hence, Epprecht leaves out the perspective that Fanon criticizes O. Mannoni for missing: that the authentic Madagasque/Zimbabwean does not exist. (Fanon, 2011, pg. 87-106) He or she lives together with the European, as much today in post-colonial Africa as under colonization. “The arrival of the white man in Madagascar shattered not only its horizons but its psychological mechanisms.” (Fanon, 2011, pg. 97) As I interpret Fanon, I see my informants’ frustration as being partly caused by an overlapping Western discourse that does not only consist of work by NGO’s or Christian evangelicism, but of a Western influenced framing of what is possible in terms of rights and wealth, and the orientation of minds and bodies that follows.

I want to ask the wives of the double-life gays that Epprecht narrates on how they see the situation. Even if it has been possible to live with an outgoing gay husband in negotiated peace in earlier days, it is not a far-fetched guess that wives of gay husbands have found the arrangement unsatisfying. It is neither a brave guess that many gay men would have liked to spend more time with their male lovers than a parallel family life would allow. Thinking in terms of reversing time is surely not the point of Epprecht, Dankwa or O’Mara. I interpret their studies as trying to show, which Epprecht’s later writings are clear about, that there is a complex field of cultural practises and systems of thought in Sub-Saharan Africa, that makes Western thoughts on (how to implement) gay rights a misconstructured tool suffering from a deeply rooted colonial aim to spread western ideology. But to start off from lived experiences as I have aimed to do, includes feelings of frustration, even when they are caused by Western presence.

Desirée Lewis, Professor in Women and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa contributes to *African Sexualities; The Reader* (2013) with a text on representations of African sexualities. She highlights the colonial creation of an image of African sexuality as hyper-developed and different from Western sexuality and suggests that: “In refusing the stereotype, certain writers might have shied away from exploring African women’s sexuality altogether.” (pg. 207) She also points out how “presentation and projection are linked to subject formation and identity

construction.” (Pg. 202) But as I see it, to avoid the colonial stereotypes cannot be done by interpreting current urban African sexualities from a traditional model. That would be just a different type of “othering”.

## Conclusions

As an African, you are forced to relate to Western ideology, which will also contribute to subject formation and identity construction. Even if Western perceptions of Africa as well as Western perceptions of gay rights are severely affected by universalist imaginations that serves a neo-colonial order, an “othering” of Africans as different and not possible to understand from a Western point of view can serve that same order. As Desirée Lewis writes: “Neither gender oppression nor sexual taboos were invented by colonialism [...]” (2011, Pg, 215) Traditional solutions on gay rights carry a risk of keeping other oppressions than the colonial up. Therefore I see an importance in recounting frustration in the life stories of African gays’. The point where my informants were at was affected by both traditional and modern discourses, global and local, Western and African. If Malawi is going to be a place where a gay community can flourish and act constructively, projects has to start from there.

To get back to the quote of Cathleen O’Mara in the beginning of this chapter: “Where individuals sit on the continuum at any moment is flexible, situational, and relational. Western ideology obscures those characteristics with regulations and surveillance: language and concepts of unnatural sex that serve to freeze the non-normative subject.” Homophobia is conceptualised alongside homosexuality and has that same effects. The question is if how to deal with it and if coming out in a Western sense is conditional. In the following chapter I will delve into the construction of homophobia from a religious point of view, where again Western and African influences creates an entangled unity in the development of fears.

## The Sin of Homosexuality

In this chapter I will show how religious arguments against homosexuality were connected to sin and Satanism, in a way that constructed homosexuality as the defining opposite to religious righteousness. Unlike gay people, that lived tacit lives, I felt that religion was everywhere in Malawi. The TV in the office of my work was always on and was constantly showing religious programs broadcasted by one of the numerous religious TV stations in the country, often with an excessive tone in speeches that focussed on existential issues. In the most common vehicles for public transport; the mini busses, there was usually some words of God painted in the ceiling or at the back or the front. Admonishing or encouraging verses from the Bible or own interpretations of the word of God were painted as graffiti on walls around town.

This high engagement in religious movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, argues Tamale, (2013) Epprecht (Epprecht, 2013) and Kaoma, (2012) creates a nutritious ground for Western evangelical campaigns. In Malawi around 80% of the population are Christians and 15% are Muslims. Tamale writes: "... as more and more churches are being converted into theatres, libraries, shopping malls, and even bars in the Western world, bigger and bigger churches are being constructed in Africa. Evangelism has become a global multimillion dollar business." (Tamale, 2013, Pg. 34)

Ahmeds analysis of affective economies does not only apply to negative feelings and words that act as they are sticky and attach to bodies. (Ahmed, 2011, pg. 71) Also symbols, like the American flag, can be looked at as a sticky symbol, associated with certain values and feelings, which attaches to other symbols and creates a sense of unity. (Ahmed, 2011, pg. 80-82) I would like to interpret the religious expressions in Malawi in the same way. Considering the great unifying role religion play in peoples everyday life, the connections between religious views on homosexuality to the changing of the laws that has been pointed out in Uganda and the problematic relation between religion and homosexuality that my informants (including the pastors, below) pointed out, gives potential to a widespread, unifying symbol to affect everyday life if connected to a certain standpoint, such as homophobia. This made it relevant to try to

understand more about the impact of religion on the lives of the sexually non-normative people in Malawi.

During my internship, I met and interviewed two pastors: the progressive Anglican reverend called M and the conservative Reverend BS Chitheka Banda, both engaged in the topic of homosexuality. M was invited to the workshop for lesbians that I discuss in this thesis, in order to give a progressive perspective on lesbianism from a religious point of view. He gave a calm and humble impression. His lecture was held in Chichewa, but he gave me his script that was in English. Afterwards we had lunch and he told me that he was brought up and educated with the conception of homosexuality as an abomination against God, but he had during his theology studies, come to an insight based on the New Testament's emphasis on God's love for all people, and that everyone are indeed sinners. I assumed his lecture could be of great value for a group of what I understood as most likely religious lesbians in Malawi, providing a comforting view on a possible stand on homosexuality by the church. Though, I found that the script does refer to a verse in the Bible that condemns sex between women. He writes: "Romans 1:24-32; citation of the Romans giving themselves to unnatural sex desires where men had sex with men and women did the same." (M:s lecture script, 2013)

The basic points of the lecture, according to the script, are to relativize the sin of homosexuality, and tone down the gravity by comparing it to other sins that are not considered to be very serious in modern days. M was introduced at the work shop as progressive, and his very friendly, low-key appearance made me read the script a few times before I had to come to the conclusion that he actually did not seem to preach an acceptance of homosexuals as such, but a toned down critique of every homosexual act. Still to live as a gay person would mean to repeatedly be sinful in all acts of love and desire to a partner.

Pastor Banda, I met at the conference on stigma related to HIV in Mangochi. He was a large, well dressed and confident man with a deep voice and a winning smile, holding a row of important, responsible key roles such as being the pastor for a large congregation, being a traditional leader in his community, being the vice chairperson of Malawi Council of Churches amongst others. His responsible roles make me interpret him as a popular person not representing a marginalized view. His rhetoric leaned

heavily on the Old Testament, and turned out to often be identical with the arguments of the before mentioned American pastor Lively on the topic of homosexuality. Mr Banda's book: *Critically Understanding; The sin and causes of homosexuality*, (Banda, 2011) reasons around the same arguments as Lively brings up in several YouTube films, for example the one called: *Scott Lively in Uganda: What causes homosexuality?* Uploaded by BoxTurtleBulletin (2009 December 27) They are both pointing out sexual abuse, alcoholic or absent fathers and rape against women as possible causes of homosexuality. Lively uses a more direct judgemental approach, and states that every lesbian has been abused and that homosexuality is "The sin of the end times." In the film uploaded by Elubu Joseph Bulinda (2012 November 28, 3.20). Ahmed describes how emotions of hate directed towards immigrants, ties a collective of citizens together by going through writings by nationalists that are filled with strong emotionally charged words. To the same degree as the detested are produced and their bodies are charged with harmfulness and danger, the normal is produced as a positively charged 'we'. "The ordinary white subject is a fantasy that comes into being through the mobilization of hate, as a passionate attachment tied closely to love." (Ahmed, 2004, pg. 118)

Banda had a more reasoning approach than Lively, and kept coming back to God's love for sinners and his own thoughts of consideration for gays: "First. I recognize they [homosexual people] are people. They are people with a problem: A same sex orientation. Secondly. God loves everyone [...] I love sinners, what's inside is what the lord hates. [...] They need to change." (Banda, personal communication, 2013, July 30)

I asked: if gay people feel they cannot live fully if they cannot be openly gay, is it love to a fellow human to force them to change? He answered: "I love drug users, homosexuals, sexworkers, witches, prostitutes, everyone! Because my lord loves them. I have to help them." (Banda, personal communication, 2013, July 30) Scott Lively has the same view about the need for homosexuals to change and states that since homosexuality is proved to be the result of environmental conditions, it is "Good news! You can change!" BoxTurtleBulletin (2009 December 27, 5.37)

The way to lump detested groups of people together shows clearly how negative feelings are sticking to symbols, which in their turn stick to each other. The "we" in Ahmed's theory, is in this case connected to the sinful body with love, but God hates

what is inside and they have to change. This rhetoric fixates the practising homosexual with no wish to change within a legitimately hated group. Ahmed's analysis of hatred as sliding between subjects through symbols in relations that builds on difference and dislocation (Ahmed, 2011, pg. 67) show how vague groups in this way are constructed and can be pointed out as an object for hatred, such as the immigrant, or in this case, the homosexual. Homosexuals that do not engage in constructing their own, heterosexual family can be pointed out as members of such a collective, as well as suspected homosexuals or those that are caught in action.<sup>xi</sup> The difficulty to know who is really a homosexual creates discomfort and suspiciousness, following Ahmeds reasoning.

Banda preached love, but did not mind to help God in his punishing of gays. When the topic of the conference came up; stigma related to HIV he toned his voice down a little bit and looked thoughtful. "Some people here motivate people to commit sex. There is nothing that God cannot do. [...] he is waiting for the right time to stop HIV/aids, and if people learn safe sex adultery will continue." (Banda, personal communication, 2013, July 30) With other words, his point of view was radically conservative: HIV/Aids is a just punishment from God to gay people, that teachings of safe sex disrupts.

M regards the homosexual *act* sinful. Still, when this sin is committed by a person, that person embodies the sin. The sin as an act and not as an inherent feature has therefore the same consequence for the one that does not change, the person is constructed as a sinner. Both Malawian pastors used the words sin, sinful acts, and sinner. M also quotes the Bible when talking about "unnatural sex." Banda went far further and referred to the Bible where homosexuality is punished by death and he used words as "parasites" and "abomination" when he talked about homosexuality. (Banda, personal communication 30 July 13) All these words and practices are with Ahmed's words glued to the people that can be suspected to be gay.

## Conclusions

The economy of hatred is built upon constructing target groups that are different from a loved “we”. As long as homosexual acts are considered sinful (and God hates sin) and the difference between the “we” and “they” are upheld, as I interpret Ahmed’s theory, the economy will operate. She uses Marx theory on added value to explain how affect is not only moving through objects and symbols, but accumulating while circulating. The more a symbol circulates, the more affective it gets, and the more it seems to contain affect. (Ahmed, 2011, pg.69-70)

Banda’s world is full of similar signs of sin and consequently, collectives of sinners. M has a toned down view that excuses the sin of homosexuality, but does not free the collective of gays from being sinners as such and they are therefore not distanced from the symbols that negative religiously explained emotions cluster around. As I see it, the strong symbolism in religion and the religious expressions manifest and reinforce a forceful unity in Malawi. The “we” in that unity is charged with love, but is created to position against fearful threats. If homosexuality is designated to be part of that threat, following Ahmed’s reasoning, it renders a powerful antagonist to gay rights. This is, I would say, what is happening right now and what people like Scott Lively are counting on. To work against homophobia must thus, in my interpretation, be to work against the view on homosexuals as sinners. Conservative Christian missionaries from the West are finding Africa, with its large and engaged religious communities, to be an amazing place to preach the gospel. Where are the global, gay friendly pastors with a calling to combat stigmatization?

To work against homophobia must further build on a strengthening of positions for the poor majority of gays. In order to challenge dominating views a platform from which alternative interpretations of homosexuality have a chance to develop and work enhancing is necessary. In the last chapter I will discuss a suggestion for how the work to construct such a platform could be initiated.

## What Choices do We Have?

In the previous chapters, the question of economy has been brought up at times, but it has not been made clear how present the topic of money is in everyday life in Malawi, and how deeply intertwined it therefore is in questions of LGBT rights. As an example, it turned out that Mallory, the woman that argued for everyone to come out, was known nationwide for coming out as a lesbian in the daily news a few months before the workshop. Two days after her announcement, it was criticized in another paper as a hoax. I heard her being criticized by several of the participants as someone that “likes money too much” which were an expression that was used for someone crossing moral lines for economic benefit, implying that she came out because of economical reasons. It is impossible for me to draw any conclusions about Mallory’s sexual identity. She continues to work and take stands as a lesbian at meetings where homophobia is debated. She was neither the first lesbian to come out or to be accused for having economical reasons to do so. In the spring 2012, Regina Mmangausi and Ruth Banda were reported to have engaged in a marriage, which was later reported to be fake. (Nyasa Times, 2012 May 21, Malawi Voice, 2012 May 21) These reports say nothing about these women’s actual sexual orientations, but it does say something about economy playing a role in the debate on openness. Since they were accused of being paid to publicly engage in homosexuality, it positions them negatively and weakens the subversive potential.

It is possible that the only reason Mallory claims to be lesbian is because she was paid, and that would explain her heroic and surprising act of coming out publicly as gay in Malawi. But it is also possible that she is a lesbian and came out because she was paid to do it, and it is possible that she is a lesbian and simply felt a need to come out. But a dilemma regardless of her own reasons to come out, came with her strong rhetoric on coming out as something that others should do, even though it would put them at risk for violence and stigma; their whole lives would be affected.

Three of my informants, Bliss, Mac and Grace, expressed an emergent situation of poverty that they saw as deeply intertwined with their possibilities to express their



sexuality. Lacking possibilities to come out and find jobs through or despite a lesbian identity, they were frustrated and restless. Bliss wanted to leave Malawi not only because of threats and to be able to live more openly as a lesbian, but also to find a job. Her parents are dead and her other family was described as supportive but poor and spread out. She has sisters and brothers living in Malawi, in Zimbabwe and one sister and an uncle are living in South Africa where she planned to go a few days after my interview. The African way to call close relatives and even close friends sisters and brothers makes the actual genealogy unclear, but the point is that she has some family around her even though they all struggle for their subsistence. With her words: “They don’t have money”. (Bliss, personal communication, 2013 July 24)

Grace is supported by her father but, just like Mac, would constantly bring the topic of money up. For example Grace sighed and said: “If we were only *independent*. We need help with that. Some people say that lesbians are needy people but what choices do we have?” (Personal communication, 2013 July 24)

The concerns about money also affected their willingness to participate in projects directed to lesbians. When I asked Bliss why she did not go to the workshop, she started by excusing herself, saying that she was busy. Then she said that she would never go to such events ever again. She once attended a workshop for lesbians together with a couple of friends, and the woman that arranged the meeting promised to take them to England. They went there and had arranged for their passports, but it did not lead to any travel.

“She was full of shit,” (personal communication, 2014, July 24) Bliss stated with hatred. She told me that she did not know what organization that woman was from and when I asked her if she could imagine going to a workshop again she first said no but then said that if she trusted the organizers she would go.

Her interests lay in finding a way to support herself more than anything else. I do not have any doubts that she is interested in relationships with other women, because of the way she told me her story and how the other lesbian women talked about her. Though, a friend of mine later on met her in a bar where she was with an older man in a scene that my friend interpreted as prostitution. Bliss had recognized her and became very shy.

Mac and Grace also related to the workshop in terms of economic matters. When the LGBT workshop came up, they were both very critical against the refunds for transport. They missed the bus and took a taxi, which was not refunded. “We *paid* money to go!” (Personal communication 2013, July 24) Grace said with anger. They brought the topic of fake lesbians up and claimed that it was unfair how the payments were distributed.

To summarize, I interpret their situation as extremely vulnerable and as that all three of them would be up for most ideas that would make them get a more sustainable life, Western framing or not. But also Azalea, which was engaged in working with an NGO promoting gay rights and saw her future in Malawi, said pensively that she will have to build something sustainable up, for to be poor and lesbian in Malawi would be very difficult. Then she said: “If I could go I would do it.” (Azalea, personal communication, 2013, July 26)

To take intersectionality seriously, is not only about looking at different axes of privilege and oppression, but also to view them from different perspectives. In a global context, with an aim to move resources from the West to Africa, Western financiers have a tricky task in distributing them. Epprecht points at the dangers vast aid specifically directed to LGBT cases, projects or individuals can bring. (Epprecht, 2013) If financial support suddenly lands on a specific group it will create tensions in the relations to other human rights oriented groups, as well as it will be at risk for corruption. To avoid this he urges aid funders to be cautious.

SIDA has in cooperation with UNAIDS launched several projects that aim to encourage LGBT entrepreneurship in developing countries. It is called a “holistic and innovative way to work” (SIDA, 2014 April 17) in order to strengthen the LGBT movement. Potential partner countries have to: “provide an acceptable environment, with not too high security risks.” RFSL participates from Sweden through a leadership-training course for individuals from established LGBT organizations. The program is called “Rainbow leaders.”

The SIDA project touches upon my ideas of how to develop what I consider to be the most urgent matters regarding the situation for lesbians in Malawi: organization and economical sustainability. To avoid the dangers that Epprecht is warning for, and to avoid tensed groupings where identity, class, concerns about money, distrust in the authenticity of participants sexual orientations and a reluctance to conform into a

Western framed collective I consider trainings like the work shop not to be a constructive way to go. These are just like Professor in Gender Studies and Associate professor in Ethnology Lena Martinsson (2012) describes the function of educations within neo-liberal discourses in Pakistan not invented to construct political action, (Pg.27) but rather serve to normalize a condition in which the lesbians in my study are economically vulnerable and therefore politically passive. The participants needed a productive idea to gather around, where the need for money was acknowledged and where the differences among the participants would be considered and recognized. The training for entrepreneurs in well-established LGBT organizations is not an option for a group as the lesbians in Malawi that lacks organization and forms a very loose network. But they are the ones that really need to find a sustainable way out of their absolute vulnerability.

#### A concrete suggestion

Malawi is an agricultural country and land and property is comparably very cheap. Three of my informants, Grace, Azalea and Anjilu mentioned agriculture as how they pictured themselves to build a sustainable future. To start an organization based on agriculture, where co workers could work and would be offered housing, could be a realistic alternative to conventional aid. The agricultural work would also require non-academic skills, which would create other structures of power than those found in a classroom. A community based cooperative could be a platform from which class divisions could be challenged. It could include the people that already are known by the active organizations, but since the core of the company would be LGBT rights, it would change the power dynamics and strengthen their status. Hence, the risks to be revealed by “false lesbians” would be less disturbing. The Gays And Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) uses a similar tactic in their work to educate individual members in their program “Skills For Life”. They argue that:

... family members who are discovered to be lesbian, gay or bisexual, are less likely to be evicted from home if they are income generators. And should this happen, a person is more likely to have the means to be

economically and socially independent. In addition, lesbian and gay people who are earning generally have a greater sense of self-esteem which motivates them to take better care of their health needs. (www.galz.co.zw, n.d.)

At the same time the type of collective I am suggesting, centred on a business and real estate, could construct a base for an emerging gay rights movement. The space could be used for knowledge exchange, where the participants would gain collective awareness on sexual and human rights, in turn creating possibilities to take stands legally and in debates.

## Concluding Reflections

Lesbian orientation in Malawi means to have the law, the religion and loud homophobia in the back yard. (Cf. Ahmed, 2006, 2011) Still, the financially deprived lesbians that I met perceived the main condition necessary in order to live as lesbians to be economical stability. This would put them in a position of stronger autonomy. However, even the persons with a stable private economy had dissatisfying relations due to the legal and social environment.

How is organization possible under those circumstances? The core question in this thesis is how to organize a movement based on something that is traditionally not talked about. The importance of identity, which is complicated by Western discourse from many aspects, does make the task of creating communities difficult, but tacit gay networks in Ghana and elsewhere has managed to work fruitfully. Gay communities in Uganda (SMUG) and Zimbabwe (GALZ) are highly active and strive for an acceptance of gay people even though they find themselves restrained by the social and legal context and do not urge people to come out.

In Malawi, this was not the case. The lesbians I met did not have a strong sense of unity and their opinions on whether coming out was needed or not were utterly divided. Even if some voices claimed coming out to be the only way to go, it would be extremely risky for individual people to do so. When Kaoma claims extended visibility of gay Africans to be crucial for a strengthening of gay rights he admits the difficulties most Africans would meet in their local contexts. He calls for Human rights organizations to assist them and poses that Africans abroad play an important role in making African homosexuality evident. (Kaoma, pg. 19)

As I see the situation, contributions from Western organizations must focus on the strengthening of a local gay community. In order to engage biological women this should be done by facilitating the organizing of the poor vast majority in a way that is perceived as possible and meaningful. Homophobia is on the rise, forcing LGBT people to constantly argue for a minimum of rights. The starting point for a resistant

development of alternative understandings of homosexuality, contesting Western ideology constructions as well as homophobia must be a platform from which collective argumentation can be made. The NGO:s I encountered In Malawi did an astounding job, advocating for human rights in all public arenas. They can facilitate the engagement of grassroots and help organizing a lesbian community that should be a force to reckon with, both politically and socially. As I have suggested, I believe this has to start off with acknowledging material needs and develop on its' own conditions from there.

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Bliss (2013 July 24) Semi structured interview, Lilongwe.  
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Grace (2013 July 24) Semi structured interview, Lilongwe.  
JR (2013 August 6) Informal talk, Lilongwe.  
M (2013 June 22) Informal talk, Lilongwe.  
Mac (2013 July 24) Semi structured interview, Lilongwe.  
Pastor M (2013) Lecture script, Lilongwe.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. It can also be supplemented with an I, for Intersex and Q, for Queer. The most common use is to stick to the first four letters, but this is criticized for excluding intersex people and people not accepting a belonging to any specific category. On the other hand it is not achievable to represent all possible identities this way in a term. Since this thesis discusses the complications a Western terminology has in the context of Africa and the meaning of words such as lesbian, the use of all such terms can be questioned. Still they are necessary for this text to be written. I have decided to use LGBT as well as gay, in the sense of concepts meaning non conforming sexualities.

<sup>ii</sup> Africa's traditional system of tribes has created a continent where national borders are just one aspect of how societies are separated and linked to each other. Therefore it is often possible to make relevant comparisons between states, at the same time as cultural practices can vary broadly within geographical areas.

<sup>iii</sup> The law from 1930, Penal code section 153 and 156, mentions only male sexual offences. In 2011 section 137a concerning "Indecent practices between females" was introduced. Justice and Constitutional Affairs Minister, Dr George Chabonda, presented it as a correction of an earlier discriminating law, now being "gender sensitive". (Mwakasungula, 2013, pg. 362)

<sup>iv</sup> Tiwonge Chimbalanga identified as a transwoman and Steven Monjeza as heterosexual.

<sup>v</sup> The term sub-Saharan Africa is used to talk about Africa south of Sahara, as a loosely cohesive area.

<sup>vi</sup> The penal code act Cap 120, Chapter 14, "Offences against morality" as consolidated and published in December 2000: "**145. Unnatural offences.** Any person who— has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; has carnal knowledge of an animal; or permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, commits an offence and is liable to imprisonment for life. **146. Attempt to commit unnatural offences.** Any person who attempts to commit any of the offences specified in section 145 commits a felony and is liable to imprisonment for seven years. **147. Indecent assaults on boys under eighteen.** Any person who unlawfully and indecently assaults a boy under the age of eighteen years commits a felony and is liable to imprisonment for fourteen years, with or without corporal punishment. **148. Indecent practices.** Any person who, whether in public or in private, commits any act of gross indecency with another person or procures another person to commit any act of gross indecency with him or her or attempts to procure the commission of any such act by any person with himself or

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herself or with another person, whether in public or in private, commits an offence and is liable to imprisonment for seven years. (Ugandan Penal Code, n.d.)

<sup>vii</sup> See sections 153, “Unnatural offenses” and 156 “Indecent practices between males”. (Malawi Penal Code, 2000)

<sup>viii</sup> In a verdict by the Supreme Court of India on December 11, 2013, the original law was upheld, reversing earlier decriminalization. (RFSL, 2014)

<sup>ix</sup> Marriage is viewed differently in Malawi than in Europe. It both refers to the ceremony that the concept implies in the West, but is also used for any stable relationship. The question of gay marriage is therefore not perceived as a juridical matter, but as a question regarding homosexual relationships in general.

<sup>x</sup> A square of latex or polyurethane (very thin, soft plastic), of about 15cm by 15cm, which is used to cover the anus or female genitals during oral sex. It acts as a barrier to help prevent sexually transmitted infections.

<sup>xi</sup> This happens on a local everyday level but can become widespread news. A recent example is the two teenagers that in an article from the 26 March this year were nationally outed in Maravipost and dismissed from school. (“Caught doing it”, 2014)