

“We Are Not Gays”: Regime Preservation and the Politicization of Identity in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe

Yolaine Frossard de Saugy 

Abstract: Politicized homophobia has become a dominant theme in the study of regime preservation tactics in southern Africa. However, a consensus on the potency of this tool has prevented researchers from fully exploring the conditions of its general success and occasional failure. Frossard de Saugy fills this gap with a thorough examination of the strategies of politicized homophobia deployed by the Robert Mugabe regime, their connection to hegemonic masculinity, the liberation war, and land questions, and the conditions which led them to lose their potency and ultimately fail to save Mugabe from mounting domestic challenges.

Résumé : L’homophobie politisée est devenue un thème dominant dans l’étude des tactiques de préservation des régimes en Afrique australe. Cependant, un consensus sur la puissance de cet outil a empêché les chercheurs d’explorer pleinement les conditions de son succès et de ses échecs occasionnels. Frossard de Saugy comble cette lacune par un examen approfondi des stratégies d’homophobie politisée déployées par le régime de Robert Mugabe, de leur lien avec la masculinité hégémonique, la guerre de libération et les questions foncières. Frossard de Saugy explore de même les conditions qui ont amené ces stratégies à perdre leur efficacité et finalement à ne pas parvenir à sauver Mugabe des défis domestiques croissants.

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Resumo : A politização da homofobia tornou-se um tema dominante no estudo das táticas de preservação do poder na África meridional. Porém, a prevalência de um consenso sobre o potencial desta ferramenta impediu os investigadores de explorarem plenamente as condições do seu sucesso generalizado e dos seus fracassos ocasionais. Frossard de Saugy preenche esta lacuna através de uma análise exaustiva das estratégias de politização da homofobia utilizadas pelo regime de Robert Mugabe, a sua relação com a masculinidade hegemónica, com a guerra de libertação e com os problemas da terra, bem como as circunstâncias que levaram a que perdesse eficácia e acabasse por não conseguir proteger Mugabe face aos crescentes desafios internos.

Key words: Zimbabwe; homophobia; cultural identity; identity politics; Robert Mugabe; LGBTI

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Speeches made at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) rarely attract intense media scrutiny. However, soon after then-President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe stepped away from the podium in New York on September 28, 2015, his speech was quoted in news outlets ranging from the British *Telegraph* to *France 24*.¹ Most commentators focused on one point in particular: the moment when Mugabe steered away from his prepared remarks to assert, “We are not gays.” This addition was referred to in strikingly similar terms across various publications: he “blurted [it] out” (*Telegraph* 2015; *Mirror* 2015); he “shouted” (*Slate* 2015); he “barked” (*Independent* 2015a); he “launch[ed] a bizarre tirade” (*France 24* 2015). All these terms seem to suggest that this was an irrational outburst, seemingly outrageous but resolutely outlandish. Yet this assertion was made in a rather measured tone, devoid of the emotions implied by the journalistic rhetoric, and it was not the only addition to the script, though it became the most famous. President Mugabe included a few other seemingly spontaneous comments directed toward President Obama and the alleged imperialist tendencies of the US. These, as well as other important parts of the prepared speech, actually reflected a recurring theme of Zimbabwean political discourse, the idea that President Mugabe and his party (the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front [ZANU-PF]) stood as a bulwark of anticolonialism against the West’s imperialist attacks, which included the so-called promotion of homosexuality.

During his thirty-seven-year tenure as head of the government of Zimbabwe, President Mugabe built a narrative justifying his hold on power through a mystique of anticolonial liberation, masculinity, and violence.² As political and economic conditions in Zimbabwe deteriorated, first in the 1980s and 1990s due to mismanagement and the implementation of a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and then more famously in the early 2000s along with the implementation of a land ownership reform, President

Mugabe increasingly retreated behind this rhetoric, blaming the West, Whites, and anyone finding themselves outside of a gradually narrower definition of citizenship for the country's woes. Homosexuals as un-African "others" and so-called "agents of the West" progressively became one of the symbols of this alleged menace, which was described as nothing less than an attack on the values and sovereignty of Zimbabwe.

However, though this rhetoric built on powerful tropes and succeeded in galvanizing support for his party for a long time, there are numerous signs indicating that by 2015 the tide had begun to turn. Enduring socioeconomic issues were becoming too pressing to ignore, and the use of scapegoats was becoming less and less effective. Western journalists were thus doubly mistaken; Mugabe's use of discourse, far from being anecdotal, was an attempt at mobilizing what had once been a powerful political tool aimed at consolidating power by symbolically defining insiders and outsiders and using a wide array of resources to enforce these distinctions. The fact that it was used in such a brazen way at the United Nations was not a sign of erratic behavior, but rather a clue that the Mugabe regime was less secure than it wanted to appear and was attempting to rely on a tried and tested strategy to shore up its position.

This article thus argues two points: first that, building upon a conception of Zimbabwean identity that he had long worked to forge, in 2015 President Mugabe attempted to leverage a growing clash of discourses around homosexuality in Africa to strengthen his position in national and regional politics at a time of domestic crisis. This speech at the U.N. pulpit owed nothing to chance or anger. It was a calculated political move born from a precise regional context, in line with a long tradition of attempts at redefining Zimbabwean identity and instrumentalizing anti-Western rhetoric for political gain, deployed at a key moment in Zimbabwean politics—in effect, an escalation in the use of the international stage for domestic matters. Second, it explores the limitations of this strategy and hypothesizes factors that explain its loss of potency for a government that had made it one of the defining features of its discursive attempts at regime preservation. The key claim of this analysis is that the very factors that led to the use of this diversionary tactic, the mounting socioeconomic issues faced by the population of Zimbabwe, left unaddressed, ultimately caught up with the government and undermined its discursive power.

The instrumentalization of homophobia by Mugabe has been studied extensively (e.g., Campbell 2003; Epprecht 1998; Gaidzanwa 2015), but this article goes further by weaving together existing accounts of sexual politics under Mugabe and linking them to other strands of state rhetoric and policy to demonstrate their interconnectedness. Such a thick description is necessary to fully understand not only the dynamics and the potency of politicized homophobia in Zimbabwe, but also the erosion of its power, and to do justice to the historical specificities of the case as well as to the complexity of politicized homophobia as a state strategy. The analysis therefore relies on a wide array of secondary sources as well as some primary material, including

interviews with Zimbabwean activists and Mugabe's UNGA speech, to provide an in-depth case study of the instrumentalization of homophobia in Zimbabwe. The choice of a single case is necessary here to explore the mechanisms at play in sufficient detail and ensure the reliability of the findings (Bennet & Elman 2006); it can nonetheless provide enough material to generate a hypothesis regarding the limits of this strategy, which further research will potentially be able to generalize.

The first part of this article retraces the existing literature on this topic and its key contributions, as well as the gap that this analysis contributes to fill. The second part outlines the discursive practices of the Mugabe regime and the construction of its foundational myths. The third part explores the 2015 speech itself, its resonance at the national and regional levels, and its aftermath.

Making Sense of Politicized Homophobia

A Rising Issue

The first challenge faced by the literature is to define what is meant by the concept of politicized or political homophobia. Though there have been some misgivings related to the use of homophobia as overly focused on fear and eliding local specificities (van Klinken & Chitando 2016; Thoreson 2014), most of the recent literature begins with the idea of going beyond personal hostility to focus on the strategic use of the negative meanings associated with same-sex sexualities by actors seeking to achieve political goals—going beyond the notion of fear itself to the parameters of its instrumentalization (Currier 2010; McKay & Angotti 2016; Serrano-Amaya 2018). This analysis thus follows Ashley Currier in using the term “politicized homophobia” to best reflect the idea of a purposive strategy leveraged against multiple forms of opposition, what she terms a deliberately activated public spectacle, but a similar concept of purposeful state strategy can be found under the umbrella of political homophobia in most works on the topic (Bosia & Weiss 2013; Currier 2018; McKay & Angotti 2016).

In these works, politicized homophobia is mainly understood as a tactic of othering, similar to other processes of nationalist construction stressing the distinction between the collective “we” and the outsiders (Slootmaeckers 2019). As such, it is usually deployed either in situations of political competition for control of the state, as in José Fernando Serrano-Amaya's study of its role in political transitions, or as a tactic of regime preservation through the invention of a common enemy conjured up at critical junctures and against which the state can coordinate efforts (Amusan et al. 2019; Bosia & Weiss 2013; Korycki & Nasirzadeh 2013; Serrano-Amaya 2018). It is in this context that politicized homophobia comes to encompass more than sexual minorities and is applied to all critics of the state, bundled together and dismissed through these attacks (Currier 2018), as was the case in Zimbabwe.

Though these tactics are part of a wider effort at constructing the nation against its perceived enemies, politicized homophobia presents some unique characteristics and deserves to be explored as a standalone phenomenon with specific consequences (Currier 2010; Serrano-Amaya 2018). This distinctiveness has been approached in two ways: its unique relationship to masculinity and its construction as a gendered strategy, with authors relying on feminist literature showing how homophobia works as a structural, institutional mechanism of reproduction of a normative masculinity associated with the nation and bolsters masculinist control over the state, often by rewriting its history in the process (Currier 2010, 2018; McKay & Angotti 2016); and the idea that politicized homophobia is often used preemptively, in places where there are none or few pre-existing demands for gay rights along a Western model, which distinguishes it from other strands of identity politics that rely on locally entrenched divisions (Bosia & Weiss 2013). In the African context, the other characteristic of politicized homophobia found almost unanimously in the literature is its depiction of the West as an imperialist force which needs to be resisted; most leaders mobilizing politicized homophobia usually do so by associating homosexuality with “white culture” and constructing it as an outside force threatening the local sovereignty, culture, and values that the nationalist rhetoric seeks to defend, thus both contesting and externalizing homosexuality (Bompani 2016; Currier 2018; Kaoma 2018; van Klinken & Chitando 2016; Manyonganise 2016; McKay & Angotti 2016). As will be demonstrated, all these strands are relevant to the Zimbabwean case.

There is also agreement on the rise of politicized homophobia in Africa in recent years and the need to consider its regional dimensions, including the use of similar rhetoric and tropes such as the “unAfricanness” of homosexuality and its immorality (McKay & Angotti 2016; Bosia & Weiss 2013). Zimbabwe is often seen as a leader in this area, quickly emulated by others in the subregion and throughout the continent after Mugabe's first forays into politicized homophobia in 1995 (Bosia & Weiss 2013; Epprecht 2013b). However, these parallels must not be construed as signs of a uniform or unifying phenomenon; though politicized homophobia has risen as a key element of many political struggles, it becomes politicized for different reasons and through different mechanisms in each country, and most scholars call for a nuanced, in-depth approach of each case to weigh the influence of a wide range of factors such as socioeconomic tensions, religion, democratization, and specific historical trajectories (Awondo et al. 2012; Bompani 2016; Epprecht 2013b; Geschiere 2017; Kaoma 2018; van Klinken & Chitando 2016; Manyonganise 2016; Nyanzi 2013; Pierce 2016; Serrano-Amaya 2018; Tamale 2013; Thoreson 2014). Such precautions are seen as crucial to avoiding easy and essentializing dichotomies between Africa and the West or the erasure of local forces putting forward alternative understandings and meanings (Epprecht 2013b; Kaoma 2018; Serrano-Amaya 2018). Though nuance is indeed central and necessary, the underlying consensus on a rise of politicized homophobia has prevented many scholars

from interrogating a potential shift in this trajectory and considering the possibility of an erosion of its influence.

Indeed, a central question that has received less attention so far in the literature concerns the conditions of success (or failure) of this strategy. Kapya Kaoma has hypothesized that the success of the anti-gay movement is due to the existence of domestic and global infrastructures for social mobilization and to the impact of globalization, which makes cultural imperialism a potent threat (Kaoma 2018); and Tara McKay and Nicole Angotti state that anti-homosexual discourses “are made meaningful through their intersection with other social and cultural logics in particular historical moments” (McKay & Angotti 2016:401), thus underlining the need to explore each case separately. However, there have been few studies following this line of inquiry and seeking to understand not only what made politicized homophobia a powerful political tool in a specific context but also whether it could lose its potency and what factors would lead to such an outcome, a gap that this article attempts to fill.

Tackling Politicized Homophobia

To conduct such an in-depth analysis of the Mugabe regime’s use of politicized homophobia and its limitations this article follows Serrano-Amaya’s approach, emphasizing the process of deployment and the results of politicized homophobia as much as the groups involved in its elaboration. This permits an understanding of “the use homophobia not as mere instrumental actions but as mechanisms of construction, destruction and reconstruction of social power relations” (Serrano-Amaya 2018:14). Focusing on the dynamics of the phenomenon also allows the inclusion of a wider array of intersecting factors such as socioeconomic issues, liberation war discourses, religious influences, and personal political calculations in shaping the state’s rhetoric and the modalities of its use and thus delivers the type of in-depth case study that does justice to the complexity and particularities of the Zimbabwean trajectory while highlighting its influence and parallels with other countries in the region.

The analysis also builds on Ashley Currier’s insistence on the specificities of homophobia as more than a symptom of authoritarian rule, the “gendered and sexualized contours of this strategy” (Currier 2010:112) and the need to consider its material consequences. Studying Namibia, Currier argues that homophobia “underpins African nationalist masculinities” (Currier 2010:113) and is essential to the retelling of the patriotic histories of the liberation struggle which reaffirm the masculinist control of the state by the liberation movements. This article follows this line of inquiry by highlighting the central connection between myths of masculinity, liberation, homophobia, and ZANU-PF’s claims to legitimate power and authority. However, it goes beyond the implied dichotomy of Currier’s approach by taking into account the role of competing masculinities as discussed by Koen Sloomaeckers, who emphasizes the relevance of competing and hierarchized

masculinities and focuses on the processes through which hegemonic hierarchies of masculinity and nationalism are maintained instead of treating men and masculinity as stable, undifferentiated categories (Slootmaeckers 2019). This differentiation is essential to a fine-grained understanding of the articulation of masculinist myths and discourses in ZANU-PF's discourses and its consequences, as developed below.

Ruling Discourse, Ruling Zimbabwe

Foundational Myths: Mugabe, Patriotic History, and Masculinity

The history of Mugabe and ZANU-PF's rise to power has been abundantly described elsewhere and does not bear repeating here (Alao 2012; Blair 2003; Muzondidya 2009; and Raftopoulos 2004). The current analysis focuses instead on one particular strategy of regime preservation, the use of discourse to shape and re-shape the nation and legitimize political control. Indeed, Mugabe's thirty-seven-year rule over Zimbabwe was underpinned by a carefully crafted narrative justifying his hold on power by constantly rewriting the national past, turning it into what was dubbed a "patriotic history" behind which the party could unite (Kriger 2006). To this aim, Mugabe and ZANU-PF mobilized a cultural identity of Zimbabweans as "patriots," mostly defined as those supporting them, as opposed to "sell-outs," which covered virtually anyone else (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). Only "patriots" could be deemed "real Zimbabweans," a definition which became increasingly narrow and self-serving as the regime faced mounting opposition and sought to delegitimize its enemies by restricting the number of people who could pretend to participate in the nationalist project (Thompson 2012).

The resonance of this constructed identity was ensured by relying on a shared cultural template, the history of the country's liberation war. However, ZANU-PF used a heavily doctored version of the story: the role of the other liberation movement (ZAPU, the Zimbabwe African People's Union) or Britain's mediation of the independence agreement in 1980 were erased from official history as "the ruling party ZANU-PF propagated the fiction that the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), its military arm, won the war on the battlefield and therefore the right to rule" (Compagnon 2011:3). Mugabe and ZANU-PF essentially worked to create a form of foundational myth, the tale of a glorious rebellion taking back its land and its freedom, with its leadership at the heart of the epic. Long after the end of the war, Mugabe continued to exploit this narrative of liberation; he presented himself and his government as permanent freedom fighters, always engaged in a struggle for the emancipation of the nation. This made them the only ones fit to rule, with every election a test of the people's patriotism and their support for this foundational struggle against colonialism (Alao 2012; Compagnon 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems 2009).

This liberation war imagery thus served as the basis of the "imagined community" of Zimbabwe, in Benedict Anderson's terms (Anderson 2006),

and helped bind its members together. In this imagined community, the figure of Mugabe loomed large:

Robert Mugabe [came across] as the tormented, self-righteous messiah, a father and strong-armed figure whose life [was] an instance of mythopoetic narrative of suffering and fighting for “the people.” His life, and that of his political party, [was] both a trope of the narrow path to the salvation of “the people,” and iconic material for the constitution of what it means to be “Zimbabwean.” (Muponde 2004:177)

The personality cult centered around Mugabe emerged as early as the 1970s and was faithfully cultivated; his image as a central figure of the liberation was mobilized for every election after 1980 (Compagnon 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). This brand of nationalism even came to be dubbed Mugabeism, a doctrine in which substance evolved to fit the circumstances and the audience, but the nationalist core remained unchanged. “Mugabeism consistently imagined the postcolonial state and the nation in skewed partisan terms that included use of the state media to promote only ZANU-PF and ZANLA (ZANU’s military arm) war contributions, war songs, party slogans, and symbols, even at national events” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009:241).

This discourse was indeed intentionally disseminated at every turn to shore up the legitimacy of the regime. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni mentions the creation of a National Youth Training Service as well as National Strategic Studies in every college “to inculcate issues of national ethos and patriotism” (2009:30). Laws were passed to “define *local* in ways that serve the values and interests of the ruling party” (Thompson 2012:18), complemented by shows on state-owned radio and television, state-sponsored galas and concerts, and education programs in rural areas, all aiming to disseminate a narrow, monolithic interpretation of nation and identity (Muzondidya 2009). Mugabe was once again central in this propaganda effort, with his speeches “endlessly quoted” in state-owned newspapers and TV programs (Thompson 2012:14).

As theorized by Currier, masculinity occupied a key place in this mythology of the liberation war (Currier 2010). Becoming part of the guerrilla cohort was a rite of passage only fit for “real men” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009), and the liberation was understood in “political paradigms that link[ed] the winning and losing of power to manhood and conquest” (Muponde 2004:180). Colonization was conceived as an emasculation of the black man, which was to be counterbalanced by the strong masculinist message of the liberation struggle leading to a “growing confusion of male virility with African nationalism” (Epprecht 2005:260). Therefore, “the reassertion of male power framed much of the nationalist discourse,” and those who did not support the armed struggle “were branded as sell-outs/quislings, loyal ‘lapdogs,’ effeminate (and often homosexual), too cowardly to lay down their life for family, culture and nation” (Parpart 2008:187).

This morphed into a gendered view of Zimbabwean politics after independence and an emphasis on the hegemonic masculinity as defined by Sloodmaeckers; the ruler had to embody this triumphant version of masculinity, and “competing masculinities [were] regarded as, at worst, pale versions of ‘real men’ [...]: incompetent, shifting, and vulnerable others who can only be used to denote how unwell the nation might become if they should be allowed to rule the country” (Muponde 2015:138; Sloodmaeckers 2019). Masculinity later continued to occupy a central role in the nationalist rhetoric, while Mugabe and ZANU-PF engaged in “a campaign to [...] somehow feminize the [opposition party Movement for Democratic Change] MDC” (Hammar & Raftopoulos 2003:29). ZANU-PF and Mugabe thus put forward a reinterpretation of the national history that solidified their control of the state through a reassertion of dominant masculinist tropes (Currier 2010).

The Third Chimurenga and the Specter of the West

This foundational myth of masculinist liberation took a new direction in the 1990s with the worsening of Zimbabwe's economic situation, which precipitated the crystallization of state rhetoric against one particular enemy: the West. Because of mismanagement and the added stress of the SAP, by 2000 the country's inflation had reached 57% and unemployment 50%; the loss of a constitutional referendum the same year threw the government into a crisis. To rally support, Mugabe turned to a very sensitive topic in Zimbabwean politics: land ownership reform. Arguing in a famous slogan that “The Land is the Economy, the Economy is the Land,” Mugabe promised to take land back from white farmers to give it back to black Zimbabweans to finally conclude the liberation struggle and save the economy (Raftopoulos 2003). This episode was named the “Third Chimurenga,” a direct reference to the liberation war: the first Chimurenga took place at the end of the nineteenth century when black leaders rebelled against white domination, while the second Chimurenga was the anticolonial fight of the 1970s. The third Chimurenga would thus be the final one, which would allow Zimbabweans to complete the liberation by physically taking back their land from the remaining white farmers. The land issue was depicted as the only issue that mattered; “all other aspects of the national liberation struggle, such as the right to vote, democracy, human rights, and equality, were erased from the narrative of the liberation struggle as the land issue became elevated into a singular basis of freedom” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009:237). Margrete Aarmo argues that this connection between land and liberation was particularly significant, as it tapped into a symbolic association between land, fertility, wealth, and the regeneration of the nation, again making masculinity and sexuality central aspects of the national imagining and the Zimbabwean identity (Aarmo 1999).

The 2000 crisis thus saw a readjustment of the liberation myth and its masculinist undertones to a contemporary struggle against Western

imperialism. The ensuing radicalization of rhetoric would define the political stage in Zimbabwe for years to come. The political crisis at home was redefined as a fundamental struggle between African sovereignty, embodied by Mugabe and ZANU-PF's constant fight for liberation and independence and the reappropriation of the land, and a looming imperialist threat aiming to defeat the liberation movement. Any form of opposition, including domestic opposition parties, was necessarily a stooge for the West, and any discourse that was not the official line was an attempt at importing foreign cultural values. Democracy and human rights were constructs insidiously aiming to weaken the fight against neo-colonialism led by the liberation heroes, and anyone opposing the land seizures—even to protect black farmworkers who lost their livelihoods—was sabotaging the national project, subverting the nation's autonomy, and part of a plot from outsiders seeking to reassert control over its assets (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems 2009; Raftopoulos 2009; Tendi 2010; Worby 2003). This violent rhetoric had concrete consequences; acts of violence against white Zimbabweans notably increased, the government strengthened its control over state media and doubled down on patriotic propaganda, repressive legislation and outright violence by the police and the military were recorded, and local administrations were purged (Meredith 2002; Thompson 2012).

As noted by Erika Harris, defining national identity and nationalist discourse is not just a matter of being but of acting; identity, once defined, legitimates a particular range of actions (Harris 2009). Casting himself and his party as the defenders of African sovereignty and true Zimbabwe allowed Mugabe to violently repress any form of opposition and mobilize support. ZANU-PF's majority in the polls can be deemed dubious, but it nonetheless managed to keep control of enough of the police, military, and war veterans to successfully face off any challengers. Defining who the real citizens were thus allowed Mugabe to continue ruling as their alleged protector, even as the internal crisis deepened.

Homosexuals as the Anti-Zimbabweans

Mugabe and ZANU-PF had thus constructed a complex and potent national discourse blending hegemonic masculinity, liberation and land, African sovereignty, and anti-imperialism to justify their hold on power, deflect blame for the mounting economic hardships, and reject any attempt at opposing their policies. In this context, homosexuality and homosexuals became a recurring theme of the Mugabe rhetoric.

Some have attributed this phenomenon and Mugabe's dislike and increasingly frequent attacks against homosexuals to his religious education and personal views (Epprecht 2005, 2013a), with three episodes often mentioned to explain his virulence, including the outing of former president Canaan Banana, which led to persistent rumors about past and present officials and durably embarrassed the government (Gaidzanwa 2015); the 1999 attempt by British gay activist Peter Tatchell to have Mugabe arrested for

torture, an episode which “angered Mugabe so much that he called Tony Blair and his government ‘little men’ and accused them of ‘using gay gangster tactics’” (Gaidzanwa 2015:163); and the accusations of same-sex relations leveraged against the Minister of Information Jonathan Moyo in 2002 which again embarrassed the government (Human Rights Watch 2003). These events have certainly marked public discourse but seem more like consequences than causes of the resentment; many elements point to a larger dynamic at play which was closely related to the national identity narrative previously delineated and more particularly the patriarchal and macho nature of its obsession with the liberation war.

First, it must be noted that Mugabe displayed no overt hostility to homosexuals before the rise of opposition and economic troubles in the 1990s, despite having potentially known about Banana since the 1980s (Epprecht 2013b; Manyonganise 2016). Indeed, his first famous attack came in 1995 at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair; the government prohibited the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) organization from attending the Fair, and Mugabe justified his actions by saying that he “[found] it outrageous and repugnant to [his] human conscience that such immoral and repulsive organizations like those of homosexuals, who offend both agents of the law of nature and the morals and religious beliefs espoused by our society, should have any advocates in our midst or even elsewhere in the world” (Campbell 2003:155). This rhetoric, repeated over the years including when the government banned GALZ from attending the Fair again in 1996, amalgamates many of the tropes usually found in anti-gay discourse including religious beliefs, morality, and cultural particularism (Epprecht 2013b; Kaoma 2018).

The timing of this incident was no accident; the 1995 speech took place close to the launch of the presidential campaign and at a time of massive worker protests and other demonstrations against the SAP (Campbell 2003). As the economic situation worsened and disillusionment with the regime grew, official harassment of homosexuals increased. In addition, in the mid-1990s GALZ was becoming a strong voice among civil society, openly criticizing the government. “Such unprecedented assertions of individual freedoms, gay identities, and the right to criticize if not outright mock one’s elders were seen by the ruling party as a dangerous foot in the door heralding wider attacks from civil society” (Epprecht 2013a:178), which explains the mounting attacks against the organization.

Indeed, homosexuals became such notorious boogiemens that one Zimbabwean LGBTQ rights advocate once referred to homosexuality as one of Mugabe and ZANU-PF’s “campaign tools” (*Washington Blade* 2014; Manyonganise 2016). Electoral periods thus regularly saw increased threats on GALZ as the driving organization of the “gay agenda” in Zimbabwe. The organization and by extension its members (and anyone assumed to be gay due to their appearance, dress, or mannerisms) faced increased pressures during this time (Anonymous source, interview, 2018).

The choice of homosexuals as scapegoats is not surprising; as argued by Aarmo, homosexuality came to be viewed as a useful symbol because it

represented an ideal other to this nationalist construct, “a simple, binary opposition to the extended family, the heterosexual, patrilineal institution that constitutes the ‘cultural backbone’ of the cultural tradition in Zimbabwe,” even if this culture was actually an artificial construct (Aarmo 1999:268). This fits with Currier’s argument regarding homophobia as key to the reaffirmation of a masculinist control of the state and the bundling together of opposition forces as outside of the national imagining (Currier 2010). Notably, as Mugabe’s dominant rhetoric shifted from liberation history to a reemphasis on the West as the central enemy, homosexuals went from symbolizing the subordinate masculinity over which the liberators triumphed to the anti-Zimbabwean agents of imperialism, a rhetorical evolution which allowed them to continuously embody the “other” of the nationalist construct and be readily available to shore up support as requested by the circumstances (Epprecht 2013a; McKay & Angotti 2016).

Resonance

This emphasis on the threat posed by homosexuality is notable, not only because it occupied an increasingly central role in the party’s narrative but also because it found a receptive audience. By September 1995, the Zimbabwean Parliament had voted in favor of repressing homosexuals, and Marc Epprecht relates that during the trial of Canaan Banana’s bodyguard in 1997, who admitted to murdering the man who had called him Banana’s wife, “the judge still felt that to name this relationship in public constituted an insult so horrible that it diminished [the murderer]’s responsibility,” betraying the depth of prejudice against homosexuals (Epprecht 2013a:4). Though most Zimbabweans seemed to remain moderate and were “baffled by the ‘anti-homo’ campaign of 1995” (Epprecht 1998:633), it seems that the government was able to impose its perception of the situation and shape public attitude, at least in part. One activist stated that “the general perception of homosexuality has been widely shaped by the rhetoric from political leadership in Zimbabwe” (Anonymous source, interview, 2018). Segments of the media, the churches, and the political elite quickly rallied behind this banner, as well as members of the public. During the 1999 hearings related to the amendment of the Constitution, a sizeable number of people sought a ban on homosexuality and a *Human Rights Watch Report* found that “homosexuality [...] galvanized press and public alike” (Human Rights Watch 2003; Aarmo 1999; Campbell 2003; Hoad 2007). The government’s articulation of cultural identity seemed to have taken hold.

Many elements can be cited to explain the resonance of this discourse, including a rejection of homosexuality dating back to the colonial era and its internalized codes. Africa had long been described by colonial ethnographers as a land of primitive purity and thus naturally heterosexual, a consensus which was later adopted and perpetuated by African scholars, contributing to the imagining of homosexuality as foreign to Africa or limited to the darkest corners of colonial oppression (Campbell 2003; Epprecht

2008; Msibi 2011). Others have pointed out the fact that male homosexuality could represent a threat to women's access to resources and moral rights through marriage, which could explain why the Zimbabwean Women's League so enthusiastically supported Mugabe's discourse (Epprecht 2013a). The HIV/AIDS epidemic, dismissed as "a white man's disease or a scourge amongst the few black men who, perhaps out of too much love for money, agree to be made 'wives' by white perverts" (Gundani 2004:97) as well as the disproportionate visibility of white gay men, particularly in South Africa, also contributed to the image of homosexuality as white, foreign, and distant (Hoad 2007).

The contemporary difficulties faced by Zimbabwe also played a role. Anxiety about morality or social conduct often "reflect deeper social and material insecurities about the future," which would be understandable in a country afflicted by civil war, the stress of debt and neoliberal reform, and HIV/AIDS (Rao 2014:194). The difficult economic situation in particular "undercut several of the principal stays of masculinity in Zimbabwe—the ability to provide for a wife and children above all" (Epprecht 2013a:177–78). As men found their position increasingly challenged, they developed a need to reassert their dominance and reject those who could question their standing and status, including homosexuals (Msibi 2011). In this understanding, "the well-publicized turmoil over homosexuality in Africa is in fact a poorly choreographed distraction from the tenuousness of hegemonic African masculinity and is also imbricated with the socioeconomic development-related failures of Africa's ruling men" (Ratele 2014:116). Homophobia thus has it "uses" in Africa "as a kind of explanation (or better still, displacement) of the impossibility of attaining and maintaining traditionally hegemonic African masculinity. The 'homosexual', then, is what a real African man is *not*, and a defining characteristic of the dominant male position is violence" (Ratele 2014:118). Homophobia "worked" because it was articulated in a context within which it provided answers, however misguided, to very real concerns and fit well between the socially accepted understandings of self and identity. The anti-Western turn of Mugabe's rhetoric itself agreed with the already existing and potentially influential narratives of anti-imperialism which held currency even among those most at risk. Strikingly, Aarmo reports a conversation with a lesbian woman in Harare who felt threatened by the president's rhetoric but was nonetheless supportive of Mugabe's general attitude toward the West (Aarmo 1999).³

Regional Dimensions

This rhetoric was also significant within the regional context. In the 1980s, Mugabe had sought to distance himself and ZANU-PF from the legacies of the white Rhodesian regime they had just replaced and to position themselves as leaders in the fight for liberation and independence in Southern Africa (Nyakudya & Jakarasi 2015). The patriotic discourse of ZANU-PF was thus deployed beyond Zimbabwe's borders, and it succeeded for a time in

solidifying Mugabe's status as an elder and a war hero. His star shone particularly brightly toward the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when in addition to being a leading voice in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and among the Frontline States he chaired the OAU and the Non-Aligned Movement and received the Jawaharlal Nehru Peace Award.

However, the end of the apartheid regime upset the regional balance, with Mandela's star rising as crisis engulfed Zimbabwe (Nyakudya & Jakarasi 2015). It is thus not surprising that as South Africa was developing its democratic constitution, which included protections for gay rights, Mugabe increasingly sought to portray his regime as the regional protector of African values against "the South African political leadership's capitulation to the international capital" (Campbell 2003:269). South Africa was derided for not being Africanized enough and not having won a military victory; indeed, "the class in power in Zimbabwe considered themselves guardians of African male power, and the silent text of many of the intellectuals and leaders in Zimbabwe was that South Africa had succumbed to a constitution that gave rights to gays and lesbians because its liberation movement had not conquered power and were, hence, not 'real men'" (Campbell 2003:166; McKay & Angotti 2016).

This seems to have been a potent tool, and Mugabe is often described as leading the way in the dissemination of homophobic language at the end of the 1990s. Horace Campbell states that "Presidents Arap Moi of Kenya, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Sam Nujoma of Namibia reproduced [Mugabe's] homophobic statements" (Campbell 2003:179); indeed, "President Sam Nujoma of Namibia vowed to 'uproot' homosexuality from Namibian society [...] on December 6, 1996, employing almost identical rhetoric to that of his Zimbabwean counterpart" (Hoad 2007:77). Most of those who echoed Mugabe's rhetoric did so using a similar frame of anticolonial nationalism, constructing themselves as repositories of tradition against foreign incursions (Hoad 2007).

The fact that this discourse seemed to spread does not mean that it was the only one nor that it was justified in claiming to represent genuine "Africanness." Despite allegedly intending to defend African values, these approaches mostly reproduced European codes, including Western conservative arguments and colonial-era laws (Epprecht 2013a). As stated very vividly by Neville Hoad, "President Mugabe is obviously less worried about Western cultural imperialism when he puts on a suit and tie in the morning, and no one accuses monogamous heterosexuality of being a decadent Western import (which, given the historical polygamy of many sub-Saharan African societies, it clearly is)" (Hoad 2007:73). The narrative constructed by Mugabe and ZANU-PF remains just this, a narrative, serving political aims.

It remains nonetheless that numerous African countries adopted stronger stances against homosexuality toward the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, explicitly linking it with renewed attempts at colonialism and framing their answer as anti-imperialist resistance.

Homosexuality had left the realm of the intimate to become the focus of a myriad of public discourses as NGOs, activists, and politicians in Africa and elsewhere attempted to shape the narrative according to their own perceptions and political aims. In this Mugabe was not alone, and if his rhetoric appeared sometimes bizarre, he was not out of step with his domestic or regional context (Nyakudya & Jakarasi 2015; Tendi 2010). To the contrary, homosexuality grew into a symbol of opposing conceptions of modernity and international relations in the mid-2000s and 2010s. In 2011, then-Prime Minister of the UK David Cameron suggested that aid could be linked to improvements in LGBTQ rights, and then-President of the US Barack Obama later made similar comments (*Guardian* 2011; *Atlantic* 2015). This caused a violent backlash from countries such as Tanzania, Ghana, and Uganda, where presidential adviser John Nagenda “accused Mr Cameron of showing an ‘ex-colonial mentality’ and of treating Ugandans ‘like children’” before insisting on his country’s status as a sovereign state (*BBC* 2011). In 2014 in Uganda, the infamous Anti-Homosexuality Act was ardently defended by Members of Parliament who chanted “our bill” “as a way of asserting moral authority and national autonomy *against* a neo-colonial West” (Awondo et al. 2012:154). From regional politics, this debate had come to be framed as a battle between two systems, national sovereignty versus human rights, which echoed larger preoccupations regarding the nature of international governance and South-North relations.

The clash continued in 2015 and beyond, with President Kenyatta stating during a news conference with then-President Obama that “while Kenya and the US share some values—democracy, value for families, entrepreneurship—there were ‘some things that we must admit we don’t share’” (*Independent* 2015a). While more subdued than Mugabe’s message, Kenyatta’s answer nonetheless made it clear that he did not agree with the perceived imposition of Western cultural values. Former Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete spelled out similar views in an interview with Christiane Amanpour (*CNN* 2014) while his successor, John Magufuli, attacked gay rights activists in 2017 by saying that they brought to his country “homosexual practices that even cows disapprove of” (*Vox* 2017), and was accused of encouraging harassment and policy brutality against LGBTQ individuals (*HRW* 2020). In 2016 a group of African nations also attempted to suspend the nomination of the first UN expert monitoring LGBT rights, a position justified by the Botswana Ambassador to the UN, Charles Ntawagae, in familiar terms: “African nations ‘are alarmed’ that the Human Rights Council is delving into national matters” (*Guardian* 2016).

2015: Once More with Higher Stakes

Friendly Audience

When Mugabe stepped toward the podium at the UNGA in 2015, he therefore came prepared. He had for years put forward a narrative about who he

was, who his party was, and the role they played in national, regional, and international politics, and he banked on the reception of this narrative at home and abroad (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). He could expect his views on sovereignty and anti-imperialism to be shared by at least some countries of the region, and indeed his more conventional points on the need to reform the United Nations Security Council, promote self-determination, or stop interference in domestic affairs, even when they were spontaneously added to his written notes, drew applause and apparent approval from at least some in the room. His view that rights should not be imposed if they are contrary to traditions and values, which is how he introduced his “we are not gays” assertion, also drew on regional precedent and could be expected to receive some support from his African counterparts.

Homosexuality had come to occupy an outsized place in international conversations, enmeshed in a larger discourse on neo-colonialism and imperialism. While African politicians, among others, continued to present their opposition to it as a defense of Africa’s traditions against so-called Western values and ideas, Western leaders increasingly took what they perceived as progressive stances to satisfy domestic demands. By taking this position at UNGA, Mugabe aligned himself with a regional consensus he had helped to create and signaled his will to remain a strong voice in this new kind of culture wars; as stated by an expert who preferred to remain anonymous, his message was clear:

He wanted to show the public opinion that he wasn’t afraid of the international community and that it didn’t really matter that promoting human rights were action that were agreed by UN agencies, the global North, that it was against Zimbabwean values, African values, and there was nothing that could be done to steer [them] away from [their] normal, regular beliefs” (Anonymous source, interview, 2018).

Sending a Message Home

However, this speech was not only intended for a global audience. Mugabe’s discourses were always diligently broadcast home, and this one was no exception; it was extensively echoed in the press and on social media, with the aim of sending a message⁴. Like previous instances of televised homophobia, this statement came at a tense moment in Zimbabwean politics and can be read as an attempt to rally support for Mugabe and his followers. Indeed, in 2014 the economy was dramatically in the red, forcing Mugabe to seek help. He was also seen as aging, taking frequent trips to Singapore for his health, which meant that the fight to determine his succession was brewing. In 2014 his wife Grace Mugabe was nominated to run the ZANU-PF’s Women League, and it was understood that she was being groomed to succeed him, especially after she launched a violent smear campaign against Joice Mujuru, another promising candidate and ZANU-PF veteran. At the December 2014

ZANU-PF Congress, various factions fought to eliminate their rivals, and Grace emerged as the rising star behind Mugabe, who was seen as too old to continue ruling for long (Gaidzanwa 2015).

In 2015 the infighting worsened. According to Sue Onslow and Martin Plaut, the cabinet was reshuffled to include 72 Ministers that year, and internecine struggles culminated in Mujuru's dismissal and expulsion from the party, accompanied by a purge of her supporters, leading her to create a new party (Onslow & Plaut 2018). Mugabe was endorsed as party leader and candidate for the next presidential election, but accusations of dementia, and that he was generally too old for office, continued to abound (Gaidzanwa 2015). Opposition also grew within the population; Itai Rusike, executive director of the Community Health Working Group in Zimbabwe, stated that "the political climate was marred with violence and intimidation. A lot of people were being arrested [...] for demanding their rights or speaking against the government and Mugabe" (I. Rusike, interview, 2018). Finding himself in a dangerous position, Mugabe thus went back to his old "toolbox" and sought to use the rhetoric that had served him so well in the past to once again bolster his position and reassert his influence.

The Fall

It would take two more years before Mugabe was forced to leave power, and it might therefore be difficult to state that his speech was a clear indication of things to come. But there were nonetheless signs. If Mugabe's rhetoric fit within the region's general discourse, one that he had participated in building, his pronouncement was met with more embarrassed laughter than applause—as opposed to some of his other points in the same speech—indicating that it might be a bit out of step. In addition, attitudes toward homosexuality may not have drastically changed in Zimbabwe in recent years, but the appeal of this rhetoric seems to have faded in the face of the seriousness of the other challenges encountered by the population. As stated by one activist, "By this time, the general feeling of the masses was that of indifference towards the President and his speeches as this message had run its course, people wanted to hear messages that spoke to their daily struggles, addressing poverty and getting the economy back on track" (Anonymous source, interview, 2018).

This is not to say that Mugabe's rhetoric had always succeeded in imposing the state's narrative until then. James Muzondidya states that despite the use of both discourse and violence, ZANU-PF failed to impose a total control over the state apparatus; there had been infighting and opposition from within the party since the 1980s, and the government's narrative was in constant competition with others in the media and elsewhere (Muzondidya 2009). But it had nonetheless been enough to generate a movement, to rally crowds, and to strengthen Mugabe's status and his party's unity, and for a long time the government had been able to control the narrative. However, in recent years a shift had begun. As summarized by one

activist, there had been a “gradual positive shift in public discourse on the issue. There has been an increase in the coverage of LGBTI lives and issues in the media, from a time when it was sensationalist in nature to now when we almost see positive profiling of LGBTI issues. There has been a steady creation of spaces for dialogue and inclusion of LGBTI people socially” (Anonymous source, interview, 2018). In addition, these identity debates were increasingly perceived as a distraction from enduring issues which remained unaddressed. Epprecht quotes opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai already decrying this in the early 2010s when he referred to the anti-homosexuality discourse as “an elitist debate when people have no food, when people have no jobs, when people have so many problems” (Epprecht 2013b:4–5). Molly Manyonganise agrees with this interpretation, arguing that “Zimbabweans are not that dumb [sic] and they have begun to question why the President is focusing his energies on a theme that is of no consequence to their wellbeing while he turns a blind eye on bread and butter issues” (Manyonganise 2016:70).

The moment when Mugabe sought to use the international stage to send a sure message home was thus the moment when his rhetoric began to fail him. This tool had perhaps been used too many times and was not enough to distract from the seriousness of the population’s more immediate challenges. What failed to rally the population also failed to unite the party. Fighting within ZANU-PF worsened in the next months, and “by early 2016, party internecine struggles reached such a pitch that observers were warning the country risked descending into civil war” (Onslow & Plaut 2018:147). Infighting continued, and critiques kept mounting as Mugabe made more explicit his desire to see his wife Grace succeed him; in 2017 this led to the sacking of Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had opposed Grace’s promotion. This proved to be a step too far, and it was accomplished without the necessary support including within the military. Mnangagwa staged a successful coup a couple of days later (Onslow & Plaut 2018) and remains in power today.

Conclusion

For Mugabe, taking a stand such as this made sense on both a national and an international level. Homophobia appeared as a convenient tool at the meeting point of his personal myth and regional trends, especially as Western leaders as well as African governments had made homosexuality a symbol of their approach to international relations and cultural issues. It was not an outlandish outburst, but rather a logical choice in the continuity of previous political rhetoric, the mobilization of a carefully constructed cultural identity. This international forum provided him with an opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to the narrative he had carefully built and from which he hoped to reap benefits at the regional and national levels. But precedent was not enough to ensure its success; this time the rhetoric ultimately failed because it became disconnected from the reality and needs of the people it was supposed to rouse. This illustrates the limits of cultural identity as well as its potency. Cultural

affiliations and symbols can function as potent political tools, but alone they cannot constitute a political program in the long term.

In addition, it must be noted that Mugabe's speech created such an uproar in the media because it was an easy source of indignation, fitting conveniently within the narrative of a homophobic and backward Africa, but it was made possible in part by the rhetoric of the West, which promoted this view and pretended to come to the rescue without considering local practices or perceptions (Rao 2014). Commentators failed to note that there was a reason why Mugabe would use this language or that the small quote they extracted from the speech was part of a wider narrative that they preferred not to see or address, as it raised questions of resistance to their own system of beliefs in ways that have been and that still remain potent in African politics. They also failed to see that this posturing did not reflect the actual nature of the perception of homosexuality in Africa, as proven by the ambivalence of the response to it. In this, Mugabe's 2015 speech is doubly significant; it illustrates how homosexuality had become a symbol of South-North relations, and how this dynamic, which had taken its roots in actual cultural trends, had taken on a life of its own, more connected to leaders' ends than to the expectations of the population. By the end of Mugabe's tenure in power, what had been a potent political tool of mass mobilization had turned into a rhetoric shared and spread by the elite, popular adhesion to which could not be taken for granted anymore. It is likely that the dire material conditions in Zimbabwe ultimately overtook identity concerns and these specificities might not apply to other cases where political turnover had been more frequent or socioeconomic conditions more favorable. More research is thus needed to evaluate the popularity and potency of politicized homophobia in different national contexts and to assess the generalizability of these findings.

A deeper understanding of this complexity is key not only to academic understandings of politicized homophobia but also to re-shape Western policy on LGBT rights and activism in Africa. The trend of Western heads of state making statements regarding the need to protect gay rights has not abated in recent years, most recently illustrated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada's remarks to President Macky Sall during a 2020 trip to Senegal (*AP News* 2020). Such declarations, though potentially well-intentioned, tend to backfire. Playing into the hands of "hardline politicians who are raising the counter-rhetoric of state sovereignty" (Amusan et al. 2019:61), they force the topic in public debates in ways that might do a disservice to local activist movements by associating them with the West and imperialist designs and provide an opportunity for politicians who might otherwise be losing influence to deploy this strategy with renewed vigor (Awondo et al. 2012; Currier 2018; Epprecht 2013b). It therefore risks presenting more opportunities for each side of the debate to score domestic political points (Kaoma 2018) than allowing for any kind of progress in the protection of minority rights and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about an overwhelmingly homophobic Africa when the reality, as shown, is much more complex. In-depth understanding of the actual dynamics and further explorations of

the limitations of politicized homophobia as a strategy, as outlined in this article, need to be pursued to further both academic understanding of the phenomena and more nuanced and effective policymaking.

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Interviews

Itai Rusike is the Executive Director of the Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) –Zimbabwe. The CWGH works to enhance community participation in health through advocacy, networking, and capacity development, with a focus on sexual and reproductive health rights. Mr. Rusike also served as Chairperson for the Peoples Health Movement Zimbabwe and was a member of the first Zimbabwe National AIDS Council Board.

Another prominent activist was interviewed for this paper, but his name has been withheld for his protection.

Notes

1. Video recording of President Robert Mugabe's speech at UNGA: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1263&v=y3oUmgBudT0 Original text of President Robert Mugabe's speech at UNGA: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/70/70_ZW_en.pdf
2. Mugabe served as Prime Minister from 1980 to 1987, and then as president from 1987 to his ousting in 2017.
3. In her own words, she stated "I still admire the president for his courage to tell the West to go to hell!" (Aarmo 1999:269)
4. In our interview, Itai Rusike stated that state-run media always put together dedicated news coverage for such events, and that this one appeared in news bulletins in print media, TV, and on the radio, and was hotly discussed on social media.