

HOMOSEXUALITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

AN UNNECESSARY CONTROVERSY

by Wayne Dynes

In recent years we have heard a good deal of the notion that sub-Saharan Africa (and especially West Africa, from which the great majority of American Blacks stem) was originally free of the "taint" of homosexuality. According to this view, the European conquerors imposed same-sex behavior on black Africa during the colonial era to degrade the subject peoples. Hence, homosexual conduct among American Blacks must be regarded as part of the lingering burden of servitude, a "white vice" forced on healthy people to drag them down. Apart from the invidious claim that homosexuality is a vice or a disadvantage, the citations below show that it has been as characteristic of the African continent as any other. In fact, a number of our sources enable us to trace the history of same-sex customs back before the beginning of colonial rule.

Seventy years ago Ferdinand Karsch-Haack noted that the mistaken belief in the absence of homosexual behavior in sub-Saharan Africa surfaces with surprising frequency in the ethnological literature, being embraced by some writers as a virtual article of faith. The German authority suggested two reasons for the persistence of this illusion. First, homosexual customs are often part of the religious or private life of tribal peoples, and therefore not readily disclosed to the visitor, whose presence might profane them or violate a taboo. Certainly, visits of a few days or weeks, which were typical of many informants, scarcely suffice to break through this reticence. From the absence of data, generally reflecting only a superficial inquiry, the visitor rashly concludes — following the principle of *argumentum e silentio*—that homosexuality is unknown. Europeans have often held that "sodomy" is a vice of advanced, even decadent civilizations. The Africans, being innocent "children of nature" must be exempt from such corruption. Claims of this kind, far from showing any appreciation of African cultures, belong to the "natural sense of rhythm" school of patronizing pseudo-praise. A further irony lies in the fact that, far from forcing homosexual behavior on their recalcitrant subjects,

Europeans—especially missionaries—are responsible for teaching them that "filthy" practices, previously a part of everyday life, were something to be ashamed of. Thus the homophobia occasionally voiced by some contemporary African spokespeople would appear itself to share in the crippling legacy of colonial subjugation that the new leaders claim to have shed. Unfortunately, as so often happens, it is the victim—the African homosexual or lesbian—who bears the brunt of disapproval.

What is the origin of the belief that the Africans were originally exempt from homosexuality? It can be traced to Chapter XLIV of Edward Gibbon's celebrated *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781). After describing the prevalence of sodomy in Mediterranean lands and elsewhere, the historian writes: "I believe, and hope, that the negroes, in their own country were exempt from this moral pestilence." A century later Sir Richard Burton inadvertently helped to reinforce the myth of African sexual exceptionalism by drawing the boundaries of his "Sotadic Zone" (where homosexuality was widely practiced and accepted) to exclude sub-Saharan Africa.

For the majority of the following references we are indebted to Stephen Wayne Foster, who has been conducting research on homosexuality in the Third World for a number of years. Additions from readers will be very welcome. The entries are confined to sub-Saharan Africa, since North Africa has an entirely different culture, one belonging integrally to the world of Islam.

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