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SERENE (Sexuality and Religion Network in East Africa) Project Workshop, Egerton University, Kenya: 18 February 2022.

Conversation between Hassan Ndzovu and Adriaan van Klinken, at the occasion of the launch of the book *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa*, by Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London: Hurst & Co, 2021).

In February 2022, a group of twenty-five religious leaders, activists and academics came together at Egerton University, Kenya, for a workshop on “Religious Leaders as Agents of Change: Promoting LGBTIQ equality and inclusion in East Africa”. The workshop was part of the Sexuality and Religion Network in East Africa (SERENE), a project led by Dr Damaris Parsitau (Egerton University), Dr. Barbara Bompani (University of Edinburgh) and Prof. Adriaan van Klinken (University of Leeds), and funded by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council under its Global Challenges research scheme. The three-day workshop provided a critical space for discussion and exchange, with participants sharing experiences and insights, best practices and resources, as well as the challenges they face in engaging religious leaders on issues of LGBTIQ equality and inclusion. The workshop programme comprised of a celebratory launch of the book *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa*, co-authored by Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando. I had the opportunity to interview Adriaan about the book, and the subsequent conversation insightfully explored questions regarding progressive religious thought and social change. Below is the conversation between Adriaan and me, Hassan Ndzovu.

Hassan Ndzovu: There is no doubt that I consider you as an astute scholar of Queer Studies in Africa. What motivated you in studying this complex and controversial subject, especially in Africa?

Adriaan van Klinken: Many thanks for that compliment. My interest in this field was stimulated by two, initially largely independent, parts of my academic journey. Years back, as a student myself, I discovered queer theory as part of my intellectual, but also personal, journey of understanding sexuality. Queer studies helped me to come to terms with my own religious upbringing and my homosexuality, and to move from seeing these two parts of my identity as a problem or conflict, to seeing them as mutually enriching and as a site of critical energy. Also at university, I developed an interest in religion in Africa, which appeared to me much more vibrant than the religious landscape I was familiar with in Europe. Since my master’s thesis on issues of religion, gender and HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa, I’ve been interested in the public role of religion in

contemporary Africa, specifically in relation to dynamics of gender and sexuality. My PhD research was on religious politics of masculinity in Zambia, and issues of homosexuality emerged as a side-theme in that research. I was in Zambia when, in 2012, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, visited the country and, in a speech in parliament, made a minor reference to the need for the country to respect the rights of sexual minorities. That comment received enormous backlash, giving rise to a heated public debate, with religious language being used to frame Ban as an “agent of the devil” who was trying to impose the “gay agenda” on Zambia as an independent African nation. I ended up researching these religious discourses about homosexuality and wrote some articles about it. But I also came in contact with local sexual minority groups for whom religion was equally part of their self-understanding and their community organizing. Hence, my interest in the complex and multifaceted role that religion plays in the politics of sexual and gender diversity in African contexts. In recent years, I was able to further explore this in Kenya, and my book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* demonstrates how Christianity is creatively appropriated by LGBT activists and communities in that country to support their social advocacy and public visibility.

Hassan Ndzovu: *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa* is an accessible book that offers a constructive account on sexual diversity and Christianity in Africa. Could you briefly expound on this?

Adriaan van Klinken: Much attention is being paid to religion, and specifically Christianity, as a driving force fueling socio-political homophobia in African countries. And of course, there is plenty of reason for that. Yet what often remains overlooked is how Christian belief and practice also inspires more progressive politics around issues of gender and sexuality. In our book, Ezra Chitando and I decided to foreground the latter side of the coin, in order to put the spotlight on largely invisible forms of Christian thought and practice, in support of the dignity and rights of sexual and gender minorities in Africa, and to reconstruct the creative narratives of faith emerging from these. Thus, the book discusses a number of African Christian thinkers, such as the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the Ghanaian feminist theologian, Mercy Oduyoye, the work of organizations such as The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, and the creative religious imagination found in literary texts and movies from different parts of the continent. Foregrounding this side of the coin – of emerging progressive African Christian voices that are LGBT affirming – is important, as it nuances and complicates simplistic narratives of African LGBT victimhood and of conservative religious homophobia. As we know, Africa is a continent with many different realities, and the same can be said of African Christianity.

Hassan Ndzovu: In what ways does Christianity contribute to creative re-imagining of sexuality in Africa today?

Adriaan van Klinken: Where to start? Our book, and some of my other work, discusses so many different examples. For instance, the Kenyan *Same Love*

music video, produced in 2016 by George Barasa, includes a quotation from the Bible and concludes with the statement, “God is love and love is God”, thus claiming that God is on the side of those who are in same-sex loving relationships. The late Kenyan literary writer, Binyavanga Wainaina was very critical of the church, yet he invoked “the Jesus of James Baldwin and Martin Luther King” to suggest that there are alternative, prophetic Christian traditions in support of social justice and human dignity for all. The Nigerian writer, Unoma Azuah, published a collection with LGBT life stories, titled *Blessed Body*, which through storytelling claims the queer body as sacred and divinely blessed. Another Nigerian writer, Chinelo Okparanta, wrote a beautiful novel, titled *Under the Udala Trees*, with extensive conversations about the Bible, and how to interpret it in contemporary contexts, and with critical reflections on social change as part of God’s vision for the world. Recently, I worked with my colleague Johanna Stiebert and with a community-based organization of Ugandan LGBT+ refugees in Kenya, where we used drama and theatre methods for participants to creatively retell bible stories in the light of their own life experiences. In all these examples, we see that religion, and specifically Christianity, is not static, but is open to different interpretations, can be reclaimed and appropriated by marginalized groups, and can be used not only to legitimate a conservative status quo but also to inspire a progressive social and political imagination, thus opening up alternative possibilities of life, individually and communally.

Hassan Ndzovu: In some of your works such as *Kenya, Christian, Queer* and *Sacred Queer Stories* you have demonstrated how members of the LGBT community have used religion to defend their sexual orientation. But critics would say this is not the correct interpretation of the doctrinal texts. Could this be the reason why in *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa* you have argued that “Christianity is a critical discursive field...” Please expound this statement.

Adriaan van Klinken: Interesting point. It’s important to remind ourselves that this whole question of the “correct interpretation of doctrine” is a question of power. Who is in the position to decide which interpretation is the right one, and on what basis do they make such decisions? From centuries of Christian history, we know that these decisions regarding biblical and theological interpretation tend to be made by those who hold social, economic, and political power, and to reflect the interests of those in power. Which is why a male dominated church could exclude, and continues to marginalize, women, and why the white Euro-American church could defend slavery and systematic racism. For similar reasons, the church has adopted a heteronormative ideology that claims that homosexuality is a sin, and that LGBT+ folks need to be delivered from some demonic spirit. But in each of these cases, we also see counter-discourses emerging, which make use of the same Bible, and the same traditions of doctrine and faith, to make counter-arguments and develop alternative interpretations. That’s what we mean when writing that Christianity is a discursive field: it is open to multiple, and often

conflicting interpretations; and because the issues at stake tend to affect real people, and impact on their lives, it also becomes a site of social and political contestation.

Hassan Ndzovu: I guess what you are saying is similar to what Talal Asad, a cultural anthropologist scholar, posited that, “Islam is a discursive tradition.” What he was trying to show here is that there is no form of Islam, which could be excluded on the claim that it is not true Islam. According to him Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is. And this same argument could be extended to the LGBT community that uses Christianity to defend their sexual orientation. And I think this is why in the book, *Reimagining Christianity and Sexual Diversity in Africa*, you and Ezra maintain that, “...Christian Faith is a site of multiple, and often conflicting possibilities, so it can be used for a range of political visions and social struggles. Its meaning and significance are never fully controlled by its official representatives and those in positions of authority. On the contrary, its symbols, texts, languages and rituals can be appropriated, negotiated, and transformed in order to shape counter-narratives and inspire counter-mobilization” (p. 3).

Adriaan van Klinken: yes, exactly. And of course, this is where theologians – at least those who are committed to orthodoxy and the “right” interpretation of doctrines – would take a different approach than scholars of religion. As a scholar of religion, I’m not in the business of evaluating whether certain religious views are correct, but I’m interested in understanding how and why certain groups of people (especially members of marginalized groups) make claims towards religious belonging, in and outside of institutionalized religion, and what the socio-political significance of that is in their context.

Hassan Ndzovu: In the book together with Ezra, you argue that the problem of sexuality in Africa could be linked to the history of colonial imagination of “African sexuality”, which continue to shape perceptions and attitudes today. So, in what ways do you think the decolonization of African epistemologies will influence African Queer studies or support African Queer imaginations?

Adriaan van Klinken: That’s a fascinating question, and I believe more work needs to be done to decolonize queer activism and imagination in African contexts. One problem is that originally Western categories of LGBT identity in recent decades have become global discourses, shaping sexual and gender politics in cultures and societies which, historically, have very different ways of understanding sexual and gender diversity. Traditionally, in many parts of Africa, religious symbol and ritual allowed for considerable levels of sexual and gender ambiguity and fluidity, but the knowledge of that has been supplanted by colonial modernity and missionary Christianity. Decolonizing African epistemologies thus involves rediscovering and recognizing the spiritual realities that traditionally undergirded African queer spaces. This could be relevant, not only in relation to indigenous religions but also in relation to Pentecostal-charismatic forms of

Christianity which, in a very different way, also allow for queer forms of embodiment centered around spiritual power. Western LGBT politics tend to operate from a secular understanding in which religion is almost intrinsically problematic and conservative – it is seen as something that one needs to be liberated from in order to gain queer liberation. Africa and other parts of the global South suggest that there are other trajectories of queer imagination and emancipation possible.

Hassan Ndzovu: I would like to follow up my earlier question with the concept of *ubuntu*. How important is the philosophy of *ubuntu* to the discourse on homosexuality in Africa? This is because in contemporary moral discourse in Africa, homosexuals are considered the contrary others who must be violated and abused in any way.

Adriaan van Klinken: We didn't plan for it, but in our book, the philosophy of *ubuntu* emerged as a thread running through the various chapters. Of course, *ubuntu* has been criticized by some scholars for running the risk of being patriarchal and heteronormative. Yet, many of the thinkers and writers discussed in our book use this philosophy to inculturate their arguments in support of the dignity and rights of sexual and gender minorities. Rather than invoking a secular human rights discourse, which has been critiqued for being too individualistic, thinkers such as Tutu, Oduyoye and others revert to African communitarian ethics, as captured in the notion of *ubuntu*. Hence, they argue that the well-being of the community, and of society, depends on the way in which the most vulnerable and marginalized members of the community are treated. Thus, *ubuntu* becomes a philosophy used to address the stigmatization of people living with HIV, but also of sexual and gender minorities, and to resist and overcome the violence done to bodies of people who are “different” and diverge from socio-cultural norms. Instead of romanticizing *ubuntu*, these thinkers engage it critically and creatively, re-imagining *ubuntu* through queer eyes.

Hassan Ndzovu: Part three of the book focuses on novels, films and poetry to illustrate how Christianity exists outside of institutional boundaries of organized religion. How is popular culture important in the transmission of religious knowledge particularly on teaching issues of sexuality in Africa. Does it have an impact in changing attitude and perceptions of Africans towards homosexuals?

Adriaan van Klinken: Yes, to be honest, this is perhaps my most favorite part of the book. When we say “religion”, we tend to think of religious institutions, their leaders and thinkers. Yet religion is so much more, and religious creativity is not restricted to the realm of organized religion – on the contrary. The creative arts, broadly defined, have always been, and continue to be, a site where religious orthodoxy is contested, and from where alternative ways of thinking about religion, and of religiously viewing the world and human existence, emerge. That's why our book includes chapters about novels, poetry, film and music video

– to show how in these various cultural texts, the dominant views of religion and sexuality in Africa have begun to be challenged and interrogated, and how new imaginations have begun to crystallize. Only the future can tell what impact this will have on young generations. Call me an optimist, or naive, but I am hopeful that change in attitudes can happen, and in fact is already happening.

Hassan Ndzovu: Very well said. And I couldn't agree with you more that change, though slowly, is evident across the continent regarding attitude towards queer persons.

Adriaan van Klinken: I'm reminded of an interview I did a few years ago, with the Ugandan bishop Christopher Senyonjo, a retired bishop in the Anglican Church of Uganda and a strong supporter of sexual minorities. He captured it very well, saying: "The future of Christianity and LGBT rights in Africa is unfortunately not a one-day thriller. Just like the American civil rights struggle, the journey for sexual rights in Africa is one of faith, strong conviction, tears and determination."

Hassan Ndzovu: This last question is based on my personal experience. At one time, in 2003, I was attending a conference in South Africa where I was presenting a paper on homosexuality as a self-regarding act. So, one of the participant later wanted to know if I am a homosexual. Therefore, I am just wondering, does one has to be a queer to be interested and objectively study the subject.

Adriaan van Klinken: Ah, this is a tricky question. Is there something like "studying the subject objectively"? One does not necessarily have to see their scholarship as a form of activism, to recognize that personal experiences and political commitments do shape one's approach to the subject. Instead of trying to be as objective as possible, I would prefer a form of scholarship in which we acknowledge and reflect openly on our diverse positionalities. I don't believe that one has to be or identify as gay, or queer, to study issues of sexual and gender diversity – there can be other motivations inspiring us to do this kind of work. In the same way, people have asked me whether as a white European scholar, I can study African queer experiences. In my own understanding, scholarly positionality is complex and multiple: as much as my white skin and European background makes me different from the communities I've worked with in Kenya and other countries, I also have certain experiences that resonate with theirs, for instance regarding same-sex attraction, the journey of reconciling that with a conservative religious upbringing, and – as a person living with HIV – also the experience of dealing with societal stigma. And fundamentally speaking, what we have in common is human embodied existence, including our diverse vulnerabilities, hopes, aspirations, and struggles. When we recognize this, our research starts from a deeply humane perspective, which will be reflected in our ethics and methodologies. What I try to avoid is "speaking for" or "on behalf of" the communities I work with, and instead I try to use my own privilege to amplify

their voices and make them heard in spaces where otherwise they may not have access to. The biggest compliment I once received from a research participant was that he declared me to be an “ambassador” of the Kenyan LGBT community. I don’t believe that the community needs me as an ambassador, but his message did express his trust in me – and trust is perhaps the most important foundation for inter-human research, especially with members of marginalized communities and in the context of complex power relations. Honestly, doing this work has also greatly enriched me, personally, intellectually and politically.

Hassan Ndzovu: I am so grateful for your generosity in spending time speaking with me and sharing your insights about your new book, personal life experience, thoughts about progressive religion and social change in Africa. I am sincerely honoured for the opportunity you have accorded me to be part of this conversation. Thank you.

Adriaan van Klinken: The honor is fully mine, Hassan. It’s been such a pleasure to be part of this conversation. Thanks for these very insightful questions and your careful engagement with our book, and indeed, thanks for your own work in creating spaces for open and critical conversations about the issues concerned.

## Notes

SERENE is a network of academic researchers and community-based organisations that seeks to understand and enhance the role of religious leaders in the area of LGBTIQ equality and inclusion in the East African region.

Another Report: <https://serene.leeds.ac.uk/religious-leaders-as-agents-of-change-impressions-from-a-workshop/>

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