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# Lesbian Identity and Sexual Rights in the South: an Exploration

**Saskia Wieringa**

Lesbian women, or women in same-sex relations as I commonly call them, are among the most abjected people in the South. Their histories are frequently denied them, under the pretext that lesbianism is a western invention. Their citizenship is at times virtually suspended, as in cases where it is said that homosexuality is un-African. Their sexuality is variously classified as unnatural, sick (so psychiatric treatment is prescribed) or deviant. Yet women's same-sex relations have existed in many places of this world, as far as we know, and there are many ways in which present-day women live their relations with other women. In this article I will give an historic example of a community of women in same-sex relations before discussing various forms of present-day communities.

First a note on terminology. The female-bodied persons that are the topic of discussion here display such a broad range of behaviours and identities that it is difficult to find a label that encompasses all those aspects. What concept can do justice to the fluid, complex, contingent population that is the topic of this article? The boundaries of this group are constantly shifting, as they are being defined and redefined in constant processes of in-and exclusion, both by the heterosexual normative majority as by the marginalised non-normative female-bodied persons themselves. The term Women Having Sex with Women, WSW, is coming in vogue now, following the commonly used term MSM, Men having Sex with Men. This term gained popularity in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, where it became important to investigate sexual networks. However, this debate mostly passed women by, as they were considered to be, and considered themselves as being at less risk. But what to do with women who identify as lesbian but have sex with men or who don't have sex at all? Or with women who are in a same-sex relation but deny that their loving has a sexual aspect? I usually use the term women's same-sex relation, but that may exclude those who are in a heterosexual relation and have occasional sex with a woman partner and who may consider the latter relationship as being more important. Another critical issue is what is considered 'sex'. Often the term is exclusively reserved for penile penetration. It is clear that women have a wide range of other techniques at their disposal. (1) Here I will use both terms, WSW and women in same-sex relations, interchangeably, aware of their limitations. I will use the term 'lesbian' only for women who identify themselves as such.

## **State of the Art**

Although most women in the South who are in same-sex relations live in societies that marginalise and abject them, it is important to realize that in certain historical and cultural

constructs women were (and still are) able to carve out a niche in which their relationships with other women were accepted to a more or lesser degree. In general these women did / do not identify as lesbian; in some cases we don't know whether their relationships were actually sexual. This by the way may tell more about the inhibitions and sloppiness of their researchers, who never bothered to ask the relevant questions. (Wieringa, 2005c) Only in the case of the traditional butch-femme communities some of them engage in struggles for sexual rights. Examples of institutionalised women's relationships are the Chinese sisterhoods, the African women marriages, the Bugis *calalai* and their women partners. (Wieringa, 2007a) Other situations in which female-bodied persons could enter into relations with women is that of those North American native tribes who recognize the existence of two-spirit people (Lang, 1999; Roscoe, 1998), the Surinamese creole *mati* relationships analysed by Wekker (2006) or the Japanese *onabe*. (Wieringa, 2007b) Anthropology has long been haunted by what Blackwood and I called 'Sapphic Shadows', the silence on women's same-sex relations, the colonial and post-colonial misrepresentations of the core elements of those relations, the denial of the erotic. (Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999a) Especially after World War II it was simply 'not done' for an anthropologist to study the topic. (2) I will here give two examples of the cultural dimensions of these communities, the anti-marriage sisterhoods in China and the women marriages in Africa.

*Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade, Johannesburg, 1999 - © Joanne Bloch*



From around the middle of the nineteenth century so-called 'Orchid Societies' existed in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong (formerly spelled as Canton), a province in Southern China. Women who joined these anti-marriage associations were mostly silk workers. They vowed never to marry a man and engaged in sworn sisterhood relations with other sisters. Though the sources are not always clear, the women engaged in emotional, erotic and / or sexual bonds. Due to their income they could afford to live independent lives. In cases where, at a very young age, they had been promised in marriage to a man, they might even contribute to the households of their former fiancées, even when these men would have married other women. (3) The ceremonies in which they pledged loyalty to each other knew several elements that also took place in heterosexual marriages, such as the hairdressing ceremony. The vow of spinsterhood ensured that a sister's soul would be worshipped after her death and would not come back as a Hungry Ghost to bother the family of her birth. (4)

If a sister was forced to keep the promise made on her behalf when she was still a child, to marry a man, she would only be accepted back in the spinsterhood if she had not consumed anything and returned within three days. Or the other sisters might sew her into a suit. If she came back with her suit intact she was again accepted in their midst. (Topley cited in Raymond, 1986) They lived in pairs (as sworn sisters) or groups in spinsters' houses or in Taoist vegetarian halls or monasteries. Buddhism was an important inspiration, particularly the veneration of the androgynous deity Guan Yin. (Topley, 1975; Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986) This bodhisattva is a female manifestation of the male god Avalokiteshvara. The depression of the 1920s affected the silk industry severely and many sisters went off to the cities to become domestic servants. (Honig, 1985; Sankar, 1986) Up until the beginning of the 1980s I saw some of them, the black-and white *amahs*, in Singapore. (Wieringa, 1987) After the Maoist victory the sisterhoods were branded as 'feudal remnants'. Many sisters ended up in the Chinese diaspora, and fled to Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. (Sankar, 1986; Topley, 1975)

What allowed these women to choose a life on their own, in patriarchal China? First industrialization gave them the opportunity to earn an income. Secondly, Buddhism stimulated heterosexual chastity and purity. Also, the monasteries offered sisters a religious and political career as well as economic independence. Religion also offered a justification for sexual relationships among the women. It was sometimes said that if one had found one's true love, the partners would continue to search for each other after their deaths. In case both of them were reincarnated as women, their love would still thrive. (Raymond, 1986) Thirdly there was a tradition of women having their own cultural traditions, for instance in poetry and music. Unmarried girls would also sleep together and be educated in girls' houses. (Topley, 1975; Sankar, 1986) Then, several commentators noted that the Taiping rebellion in which many women had taken the side of the rebels, had left a legacy of strong, militant womanhood. (Croll, 1978; Raymond, 1986) (5) Some of these elements are still relevant today. Another striking phenomenon is the fluidity of their relations, from emotional bonding to strongly erotic love. In this case however the erotic was clearly incorporated within the range of emotional expressions.

## African Women Marriages

African (former) presidents like Moi (Kenya), Nujoma (Namibia) and Mugabe (Zimbabwe) are known for their homophobic statements and their accusations that homosexuality is a recent western import. (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005) Historical and anthropological data however indicate that it was homophobia that was introduced by the western colonial powers into those African societies in which particular forms of women's or men's same-sex behaviours or relations were practised in more or less institutionalised ways. Apart from female husbands formally wedding their wives, other forms of women's same-sex practices and relations have been documented, such as initiation rites, girls' erotic play such as the elongation of the labia, mummy-baby relationships at school and other bond friendships. (6) For instance young women who pledged to become each other's *oumapanga* among the Damara or Ovaherero of present day Namibia might engage in sexual relations. Their elders approved of these friendships also when it concerned daughters of chiefs. The anthropologists who described the institution however were shocked and named these relations 'perverse' (Karsch Haack, 1911, p. 472) or a 'terrible vice' (ibid, p. 475-476). Though it was also noted that these women (who would also be married heterosexually), 'would help each other until death', surely a laudable intention.

Formal, institutionalised women marriages have been documented for over forty of Africa's 200 societies, all of them patrilineal. (Tietmeyer, 1985) (7) In what I call the 'dependent' women marriages a woman married another woman on behalf of some male who didn't have offspring, for instance her own husband, or her deceased son. The children of these marriages would belong to the lineage of that male. In the 'independent' women marriages a woman desired to have male offspring of her own who would honour her as their ancestor. This usually concerned rich and / or powerful women, such as traders or healers. The only way to ensure that they could establish a compound of their own in which they would be honoured as its founder, was to live on through being the (social) father of sons. They would decide who would be the genitor of those children (a genitor might get a present for his services or he might keep a more informal link with his offspring). Women marriages thus contracted were fully institutionalised. (Wieringa, 2005c; see also Herskovits, 1937) A female husband would pay the customary bride price for her wife or wives (polygyny was possible). The female husband would be honoured and served by her wife as any male husband in that society would. The few accounts of the dynamics of such relations however indicate that those relations were more egalitarian than heterosexual marriages.

Women marriages are in decline. Modern inheritance laws, based as they are on European laws, generally do not recognise the claims of the children to the wealth of their female fathers. In South Africa however, Zulu women healers, *sangomas*, are still known to marry so-called ancestral wives (Nkabinde & Morgan, 2005) and the practice doesn't seem to be on the decline. The rationale is that their dominant ancestor is a male who requires a wife to please him. If the *sangoma* is a woman herself she then marries a wife as her dominant ancestor demands. In the rich description Nkabinde and Morgan (2005) provide of such female-bodied *sangomas* in same-sex relations the sexual attraction of the *sangoma* herself to her ancestral wife is more prominent than the religious rationale of the relationship might suggest.

I cannot do justice here to the complexities of African women marriages, apart from men-

tioning two more issues. In several African societies spiritual strength (for instance in fertility rituals) may be associated with the combination of female and male elements: fertility idols with both male and female genitals, women possessed by male spirits or the reverse. That is, there are instances when the binary split between the sexes is not upheld. Secondly women's economic and physical power is assessed positively. Among the Fon for instance (in present day Benin) women marriages were widely known, while their women armies brought many victories to their kings. (Herskovits, 1937; Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999b) Interestingly the *mati* relationships that Wekker describes for Suriname are characterized by similar patterns. (Wekker, 2006)

Traditionally African women's same-sex relations are accommodated within a heterosexual marriage model. Major identity markers may be social status, wealth, spiritual power, rather than the sex of one's partner. Traditional women's same-sex relations may thus give rise to interesting discussions on the conceptualization of sex and gender, of sexual agency and identity, and of gender and sexual multiplicity. 'Independent' women marriages could exist in a situation in which the female husbands were independently wealthy, in societies in which gender was determined by who one married (being a contributor of bride price entitled one to the status of husband) and by a spiritual system that could incorporate gender multiplicity, provided the appropriate rituals were performed.

### **Modern-day Marginalised Women in Same Sex Relations**

I will now turn to modern-day more marginalised women in same-sex relations. It is clear that the distinction between these two groups (institutionalised versus marginalised) is a tenuous one, with the modern butch-femme (b/f) communities straddling the divide. These groups have survived the silence and invisibility into which they were forced by societies characterized by hetero-normative patterns of relations. In order to be accepted by the wider society the partners in a butch-femme relationship patterned their relationship also after this model. Ironically the rise of modern middle class rights-based lesbian groups shatters the silence behind which the partners in a more traditional butch-fem community could hide and exposes the same-sex sexuality of their relation. This may lead to ostracism and violence. Willingly or unwillingly they are drawn into the orbit of the rights-based groups. A similar development occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the West, where the 'old lesbians' as the b/f groups were called, were replaced by younger more militant lesbians fighting for sexual rights. (Wieringa, 1999)

The present-day situation as far as women in same-sex relations in the global South is concerned is complex. There are multiple forms in which women live their desires, divided by class, religion, ethnicity, legal system, political culture and gender regime. The present-day discourses on women in same-sex relations are rather inadequate to capture this wide variety of practices, desires and identities.

Just to give an idea of the diversity of lifestyles of women in same-sex relations, I will list some of the categories I have come in contact with in Jakarta: upper class chique women who quietly live their own lives, and meet in networks of friends; lonely isolated women, heterosexually married or not, who don't dare to speak their desires; married women who have done their duty towards their husbands and now follow their own desires, dating a

butch woman; sex workers who have women lovers; internet-savvy young lesbian activists who have set up websites and are actively fighting for women's and sexual rights; lower class butch women with their wives; single women of all classes who have women lovers but don't identify as lesbian; factory workers living in dormitories during the week with their women lovers, and who go back to their male husbands in the weekends or on holidays; women in the drugs scene who have both male and female lovers, on and on.

This list, inadequate though it is, is important, as it indicates that only the younger middle class lesbian activists are more or less out and visible. Secondly it is clear that there is much isolation and silence surrounding many of these women, and that many of them are only known to their close friends. Their social and sexual contacts take place in small circles, that sometimes overlap. This means that these women may be overlooked by researchers and activists. Unlike their male counterparts women in same-sex relations don't engage in cruising in parks or in public toilets, they don't even go much to bars to my knowledge, as these are expensive and therefore inaccessible to most women, and if they go they may be invisible even there.

Among the better researched same-sex communities are urban women living in b/f relations. In various Asian and African countries (such as Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Uganda, South Africa and Namibia) self-styled b/f communities exist. The butch partners, variously called Tommy Boys (Uganda, see Nagadya & Morgan, 2005), lesbian men (Namibia, see Khaxas & Wieringa, 2005), Toms (Thailand, see Sinnott, 2007), TB (Hongkong, see Lai, 2007), or in Indonesia Tomboi (Blackwood, 1999) or nowadays butchy (Wieringa, 2005a), to different degrees assume the dress codes, behavior, occupations and other paraphernalia of men in their societies. The femme partners, called Dees (from lady) in Thailand, or TBG (Tomboy's Girl) in Hong Kong, or just 'wives' (*isteri*) in Indonesia to all outward appearances assume the female role that is accepted in their societies. Sometimes also indigenous terminology is used, such as *sentul* and *kantil* in Indonesia.

The masculine partners demonstrate different degrees of masculinity. Some reject femininity altogether and feel they are men trapped in women's bodies, or that they have male souls in women's bodies. In such cases the use of the term 'female-bodied' is more appropriate than 'women'. However stereotypically gendered the outward appearance of such couples may be, the research mentioned above indicates much more complexity in their gendered subjectivities. In Indonesia now some of them proudly call themselves '*feminist butches*'.

The urban b/f cultures have different fates under the impact of globalization. In Lima for instance they are being marginalised both by hetero-normative society and by feminist lesbians; in Indonesia too they live a liminal existence, though middle class rights-based lesbian groups have incorporated segments of the b/f culture. This only became possible after a careful process in which the lesbian groups had to give up the arrogance of their politically correct feminist stance ('we are fighting patriarchy while you are following a hetero-normative pattern'). The b/f partners accepted the feminist position of the middle class lesbians and held extensive discussions about the need for feminism also within b/f relations.

Whether it is due to the colonial legacy of homophobia or to what I called elsewhere 'post-colonial amnesia' (Wieringa, 2005b), women's same-sex communities are under pressure. The relative tolerance for transgender relations that used to exist in large parts of south east Asia and in Africa has given way to more overt forms of intolerance. In societies in which transgender relations used to be accepted, colonial power holders introduced the



homophobia by which Europe was characterized at the time. Post-colonial leaders, who have denounced so many aspects of racism and prejudice imposed by their former colonial masters have on the whole accepted their heterosexist biases. The nostalgia with which post-colonial leaders re-invented certain aspects of their past never included tolerance for transgender relations.

In Indonesia women in same-sex relations for a long time have been able to hide to a certain extent behind the layers of public silence on sexuality. In other countries such as Uganda even that is not possible. Silence both hides and protects but it also invisibilizes and isolates. The modern sexual rights campaigns can therefore have diverse effects. Through the use of internet middle class younger lesbians are discovering themselves and the wider lesbian world around them. They find support for their campaigns on the web and can use it for their internal discussions. It breaks their isolation. The web has thus become an important medium for consciousness raising and advocacy. However there are also large groups of women who don't want to be outed as having a sexual relationship with another woman. The increased visibility of the younger lesbian activists may also make the sexual aspects of women who prefer to go through their lives as 'just friends' visible. This may endanger them. However disturbing this is, it seems an inevitable consequence of a struggle that cannot be avoided.

## Conclusion

The internet-savvy middle class, educated young lesbians are the most visible women having same-sex relations. In many countries they are setting up websites or email lists. They are busy raising the consciousness of their constituents, they are conducting advocacy programmes, often in cooperation with other human or sexual rights groups and sometimes they are engaged in research. The international human, women's and sexual rights instruments that have been developed in the wake of the major UN conferences of the 1990s (for instance the 1995 Fourth Women's World Conference in Beijing) and that have more recently been expanded into for instance the Yogyakarta Principles of 2006 are major tools for their struggles. They are faced with multiple constraints, but if they are able to forge alliances with other human and women's rights groups their struggles may lead to the granting of sexual rights to LGBT people in general in the long run. In the short run however their activities may lead to increased lesbophobia. Simply because they alert people to the possibility of women having sex with each other, they may inadvertently 'out' women who so far could hide the nature of their relationship. Historical research that breaks through the amnesia with which present day post-colonial leaders try to ignore past transgender and same-sex practices may also lead to greater tolerance.

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## Notes

- (1) See the discussion on female friendships by for instance Faderman (1980). In the two anthologies Evelyn Blackwood and I published, (1999 *Female Desires*, 2007 *Women's Sexualities and Masculinities in Asia*, with Abha Bhaiya) there are also some examples of this phenomenon.
- (2) See *Sapphic Shadows* (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999) for an account how the anthropologists Evans-Pritchard and Van Lier decided only to publish their findings on women's same-sex relations after their retirement.
- (3) In Japan Kannon (who entered the country as the female Guan Yin, is presented as an androgynous figure, but nowadays is usually venerated as a male god (Wieringa, 2007).
- (4) See Tsukiyama (1991) for an intimate, well-researched literary account of the lives of these 'women of the silk.
- (5) See Sang (2003) for a study on the making of the Chinese lesbian identity from the early twentieth century onwards.
- (6) See Wieringa (2005c) for a short overview of the major forms women's same-sex relations took in Africa.
- (7) African societies are characterized by a great variety of kinship patterns, including matrilinearity and bilinearity.

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