



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Homosexuality in Cameroon: identity and persecution

Geschiere, P.

**Publication date**

2010

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Urgency required: gay and lesbian rights are human rights

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Geschiere, P. (2010). Homosexuality in Cameroon: identity and persecution. In I. Dubel, & A. Hielkema (Eds.), *Urgency required: gay and lesbian rights are human rights* (pp. 126-131). Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).  
<http://www.asylumlaw.org/docs/sexualminorities/Urgency%20Required%20Publication.pdf>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# Homosexuality in Cameroon: Identity and Persecution

**Peter Geschiere**

What does it mean to come out of the closet in Cameroon? It is clear that it takes courage, particularly lately, as the law has always expressly prohibited homosexuality. (1) The police, generally feared because of their brutal extortion of money from people, are eager to react to accusations of 'improper' proposals. That provides more opportunity for blackmail of both foreigners or Cameroonian citizens. Moreover, in the last few years homosexuality has become, quite abruptly, a hot issue evoking great indignation throughout society. The result is a hunt for alleged 'homosexuals', not just by the police, but also by the population.

## **Scandalous Practices by Elite Figures**

On January 24th 2006 *L'Anecdote*, one of the many destitute newspapers in Yaoundé (capital of Cameroon) published a list of fifty prominent homosexuals. The list contained notable names: a former first minister, some other ministers, renowned journalists and other well-known figures, mostly men but some women as well. The exact accusations were not quite clear. For each person, a small photograph was published, accompanied by a short text. A recurring theme was the alleged forcing of job applicants into homosexual acts ('... but soon the pants came down ...'). Apparently the idea was that the elite are corrupt to the core and take advantage of the willingness of unemployed youths to do anything for a job, including accepting a homosexual 'initiation'. The list hit as a bombshell. In a few hours the newspaper was sold out. Other newspapers copied parts of the list, adding more general articles about homosexuality throughout the centuries in various parts of the world, but also as a creeping threat to Cameroon society.

The article in *L'Anecdote* did not appear out of thin air. During a crowded press conference a few days later, Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga, the editor-in-chief of the paper, referred to the christmas sermon delivered a month earlier by the archbishop of Yaoundé, monsignor Victor Tonye Bakot, in which the latter warned against homosexuality amongst the Cameroon elite, criticizing also the European Union and the Amsterdam Treaty 'of 1997' (actually 1999) that required member states to prohibit any form of discrimination based on sexual orientation. The archbishop insisted that this was contrary to the express teachings of the bible. His attack on the EU relates to a wider problem: increasing pressure by international human rights organizations to end the penalisation of homosexual acts is one of the reasons why homosexuality has become an increasingly hot issue in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa.

In other respects, the archbishop's sermon may have arisen out of the particular context of Cameroon although there may be parallels with what is happening in other African countries). For some time the churches, primarily the Catholic Church, have been concerned

about the influence of secret societies from European origin, first the freemasons and later the rosicrucians, among high-placed Cameroonian politicians and civil servants. Paul Biya, president of Cameroon since 1982, is a practising Catholic and a typical product of Catholic schools. But since he rose to power he openly admits that he is deeply involved with the rosicrucians. 'Radio Trottoir' as it is popularly called in Cameroon, is a source of constant rumours about black masses and secret confrontations between factions of freemasons and rosicrucians within the elite due to their unscrupulous hunger for power and wealth. Such rumours are encouraged by more or less explicit allusions by the president and his close collaborators to occult sources of their power. But they probably forgot that, since their introduction during the colonial period, both freemasons and rosicrucians are popularly associated with homosexuality. With his christmas sermon and his attack against gay practices, the archbishop apparently wanted to denounce these shady backgrounds.

This relationship may explain also why the list of prominent gays in *L'Anecdote* prompted such keen indignation amongst broad layers of the population, whilst the elite did not seem to know how to defend themselves. Within the country, there is growing anger against Biya and his regime which, prior to 1990, was based on a one-party dictatorship. In spite of the wave of democratisation during the early 1990's, he succeeded in holding on to power due to massive electoral fraud. The rising economic crisis of the same years is placing terrible burdens on the population. Over the last few years the regime, with the consent of the World Bank, publishes very positive figures of economic growth. But all that is happening is the enrichment of a small elite group around the president. This is painfully clear in an ongoing building boom in the elite neighbourhoods of the big cities which contrasts poignantly with the impoverishment of the vast majority of the population. Indeed, it is with good reason that Cameroon has been at the top of the list of most corrupt countries in the world for years now. It is also consistently named as one of the most graphic examples of the 'criminalisation' of a post-colonial state. (2)

For years the regime has been the object of increasingly bitter mockery among the population. However, until now Biya and his helpers have been able to divide the opposition by taking advantage of ethnic divisions in such a way that it had no chance to present a clear alternative. This divide-and-rule tactic is complemented by the ever-present and increasingly brutal show of force by the police. Apparently, the unexpected accusations of immoral gay practices offered an ideal opening for the population to express their suppressed anger, all the more so since the elite did not seem to know how to defend themselves against this sudden wave of moral indignation. It was striking that *L'Anecdote* was not immediately banned. The editor-in-chief was even given the chance to substantiate his accusations at a press conference (though his allusions to concrete evidence remained utterly vague), and on January 31st 2006 the newspaper published a second list of another fifty prominent 'homosexuals.' Some people on the list sought publicity and denied these 'terrible' accusations most emphatically, but most of them just kept their heads low. Only a few of them filed a libel complaint with the Department of Justice, but, as is usual with the Cameroon Justice Department, these cases are still pending. Apparently, *L'Anecdote* had found a weak spot to hurt the regime.

The whole affair had concrete consequences in daily life. At several places in the country a true witchhunt followed. In Yaoundé itself a boy was lynched by his schoolmates because he allegedly made improper proposals to a friend. Elsewhere, boys were removed from school

128 because they were suspected of 'unnatural' practices. And the regime started its determined hunt for alleged homosexuals which goes on till today - young men being sent to jail for longer periods on very flimsy evidence. What is striking is that in the lively debates around this issue - for instance, through letters to the editor in various newspapers and in Internet chat rooms - there was hardly any room for putting the accusations into perspective. Only a few writers defended a 'more modern' approach by emphasizing that sexuality is a private affair and that there is no reason to portray homosexuality as immoral. The great majority expressed great moral outrage about the supposed occurrence of such practices. For instance, one of the accused on the list of *L'Anecdote*, Ms. Rosine Nang, a well-known TV-journalist, felt she had to emphasise how shocked she was by such horrific accusations by stating that if these accusations were true (which of course was not the case) god had to punish her descendants up to the third generation. Almost all commentators appear to view homosexuality as unnatural and as a stigma from which Cameroon society should be spared.

### **Homosexuality: An Unknown Phenomenon?**

The rapid explosion of this witchhunt was striking because until that time homosexuality had hardly been an important issue in Cameroon. In most local cultures the phenomenon had received little attention. Of course, it is difficult to generalise on this point because cultural variation is remarkably large in this country, even by African standards. So there are regional differences in attitudes towards homosexual patterns. In large parts of the South of the country, from where most of the elite group comes, homosexuality was seen as an abomination. Typical, for example, is that in the woodlands of South Cameroon homosexuality is associated with witchcraft, a very effective way to place same-gender sexuality outside of the order.

In this part of Cameroon - for instance amongst the Beti, the ethnic block that constitutes president Biya's mainstay - excited stories circulate among the people about nightly gatherings of witches that often go hand in hand with references to sexual escapades. The central motive of witches is cannibalism. At these gatherings they would present their accomplices with relatives to 'eat' them; in daily life the victim would fall ill and certainly die unless the *nganga* (healer) who can 'see' the witches, will 'fall upon them', and force them to break their spell. But that central motive of eating and cannibalism is often linked to unnatural forms of sexuality that would equally mark these nocturnal meetings: during such orgies men would do 'it' with men and 'even' women with women. The consequence is that insinuations concerning somebody's gay inclinations are immediately associated with occult practices, which no doubt facilitated the equation with a secret society such as the freemasons when this was introduced under colonial rule. The provocative *filles libres* in Yaoundé will still sneeringly ask a potential customer who rejects their advances, 'Tu es donc un franc-maçon?' ('Are you a "freemason"?').

In these societies travesty is also associated with the world of the occult. In practice, many *nganga* (healers) are *cross-dressers*; especially the healers who mark their healing sessions by ecstatic dancing expressly combine male and female attributes. But this does not mean necessarily that they indulge in gay practices.

One can conclude that in these societies homosexuality is present but in very secretive form, although there are regional differences. For example, in some parts of the north where since the eighteenth century Islam has begun to play an important role, there is more room for gay behaviour patterns in daily life, as is so often the case in Islamic regions (think of North Africa and Turkey). Naturally, this does not mean that there is room for openly expressing a gay identity. On the contrary, in North Cameroon the intensification of fundamentalist currents causes a sharp formal condemnation of homosexuality as conflicting with the Koran.

### **Homosexuality Increasingly Profiled**

In spite of this general rejection, certain expressions of homosexuality manifest itself with more emphasis in Cameroon. There have been rumours for some time about gay acts in prisons and in the army, but those are often forms of rape. Nevertheless, that also makes homosexuality a subject of conversation, more so than in the old days. More notable is that in modern environments, for instance amongst students and in the big cities, some youths demonstrate behaviour that clearly deviates from traditional marked ideas about masculinity: hairstyles that are similar to those of women's, elegant ways of moving. There are also increasing rumours about certain meeting places for gays, which include bars and other gathering points. The police seem to take these rumours seriously. In June 2005 in Yaoundé, the police raided what they called a 'gay-bar', arresting eleven men. It is still in question whether there are bars in that city that can be regarded as 'gay-bars'. But, as far as can be ascertained, those arrested are still in custody.

As said before, pressure from international human rights organizations have the Cameroon authorities increasingly worried about homosexuality. Legal and religious authorities claim that this is a sin of the people in the western world that the latter try to export to other countries. Unfortunately, the effect of such foreign interventions is often contrary to their intent: they bring a tightening of police supervision, raids on gay meeting places (such as those mentioned before), and a general concern about homosexuality as some sort of creeping danger.

It is, moreover, important to emphasize that this is not special for Cameroon. Throughout Africa (as in other parts of the former 'Third World') homosexuality is quite suddenly becoming a hot issue. Early in 2008, there was a big stir in Senegal when a newspaper published pictures of a 'gay marriage' that had taken place on the outskirts of Dakar. The police arrested several young men while the couple concerned went into hiding and supposedly escaped to Mali. There they were almost lynched by an angry crowd. When they managed to get to Gambia, this country's President himself insisted publicly on their arrest. According to some sources - I rely here on conversations I had with Senegalese in Amsterdam - they managed to escape again and fled to Cape Town. A few months earlier, a similar episode took place in Morocco: pictures of a 'gay marriage' published in a newspaper, a forceful intervention by the police, arrest of several young men, and a furious debate in newspapers, on websites and in other media about this horrible abomination spread by the West, contaminating Moroccan society. In a recent article, the well-known American philosopher Judith Butler came to the challenging conclusion that 'the promiscuous gay' is becoming the pinnacle of modernity. She argues that to many people in Europe - including people who used to be quite homophobic

130 - acceptance of homosexuality has become the litmus test of being modern. The people who have to be tested on this are, of course, especially immigrants from various parts of Africa or Turkey. No wonder that this has quite dramatic consequences in the countries concerned.

### **Pressure on Europe**

One of the consequences is an increasing influx of gays who ask for asylum in Europe on the grounds of persecution in their own country. I am involved in several cases in the Netherlands and the UK, but similar cases are increasingly being reported in all Western European countries (and also the US). The pattern is the same: refugees report on increasing risk of being arrested and tortured by the police, but also about more and more violent aggression against them in the society at large.

In all European countries the authorities try to put the dangers incurred by these asylum seekers in perspective in case they are forcibly returned to their country. For instance, the Netherlands official report of 2004 on Cameroon - the *landen report*, that on which the Immigration Service bases its refusals of asylum and that is sacrosanct when asylum cases are brought before the judge - states that in Cameroon homosexuality is not actively persecuted. (3) This was highly contestable even for earlier periods; for a long time now, the fearsome *gendarmes* have viewed accusations of gay advances in this country as a welcome opportunity to blackmail somebody. But with the recent turmoil in society and (apparently) amongst authorities as well about a supposedly hidden but omnipresent homosexuality, there are more and more examples of active police actions such as the one mentioned above. Yet, Dutch authorities persist in their refusal to accept homosexuality as a ground for asylum. In 2005, the former Dutch Minister of Integration, Rita Verdonk persisted in her plans to extradite Iranian gay asylum seekers on the ground that as long as gays kept a low profile in the country they would not be harmed. Their expulsion was only stopped at the last moment because of the shocking public execution of two young gay men in Iran.

A particular case attracted a lot of attention in 2007 in the Netherlands and the UK. The Dutch authorities decided to send a gay asylum seeker from Iran back to the UK since this was the country where he first asked for asylum. Dutch action groups protested that returning him to the UK meant he would be extradited to Iran. After much pressure a solution was reached when the Dutch State Secretary, Nebahat Albayrak claimed that the British authorities had promised her not to return the Iranian to his country; therefore he could be safely sent back to the UK. At present he still seems to be in Britain but his case is still not resolved.

Clearly European authorities are very worried that the widespread unrest about homosexuality - epitomized by gay marriage - will push many more gays to ask for asylum in the West. However, it is incorrect to evaluate a country's stance on the issue of homosexuality as if it exists in isolation. Clearly the growing turmoil about homosexuality in Africa and other continents is related to the emancipation of gays in the West and the importance this issue acquired in the context of Human Rights policies. Developments in Europe are particularly confusing in this sense: over the last decades the growing acceptance of homosexuality in ever wider circles - including among people who used to cherish quite homophobic utterances and practices - is clearly related to a growing concern about the ever more emphatic

presence of Islam within these societies. (4) Gays from African and notably Islamic countries risk victimization by this particularly complex and tense configuration. If Western governments take gay emancipation seriously and if politicians want to show that this is not just an opportunistic choice in the context of forceful 'integration' policies towards immigrants, it would be fair to pursue a more open policy for gay asylum seekers who have to flee their country because of frenzied outbursts of homophobia. These outbursts have many reasons but they are certainly also related to popular unease about a model of modernity so powerfully presented by the West. Gays from these countries should not become the victims of this.

*Prof. dr. Peter Geschiere is professor emeritus of African anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He studied history and anthropology at the Free University (Amsterdam). He taught both topics at the Free University, Erasmus University (Rotterdam) and the University of Leiden. He was visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris/Marseille), University of Yaounde (Cameroun), University of Kisangani (Congo/Zaire), University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), Columbia University (New York) and New School (New York). His main interest is in the dynamics of local cultures in interaction with state formation, impact of the market economy and, more generally, processes of globalization. His main field-work is in West Africa (notably Cameroon). He published on the role of the 'local state'; the dynamics of 'witchcraft'; processes of monetization; new struggles over citizenship and belonging ('autochthony'); and the conservation of the rain-forest. Geschiere was chairman of the NWO research programme on 'Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities'. In 2002 he received the award of 'distinguished Africanist of the year' from the African Studies Association in the US. He is fellow of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Sciences and member of the board of the Prince Claus fund.*

## Notes

- (1) The text of the law, section 347a of the penal code of Cameroon, does not concern homosexuality as such, but 'sodomy,' which supposedly includes all homosexual acts. But in practice, neither the police nor the authorities make such a distinction. In practice, 'homosexuality' is said to be prohibited by law. See also: Sabine Jansen, 'Op de vlucht voor homohaar - over discriminatie en discretie', in: *Nieuwsbrief Asiel- en Vluchtelingenrecht* ('On the run from Homophobia - About Discrimination and Discretion', in: *Newsletter Asylum and Refugee law*), vol. 3, June 2006, p. 124-146.
- (2) Cameroon plays a big role in the book *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, written by Jan-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Béatrice Hibou, published by James Currey & Indiana University Press, Oxford, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1999.
- (3) See also the article by Sabine Jansen, referred to in note 1. She writes about the official news releases of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 'Many official news releases use a strange distinction between homosexuality and homosexual acts. The official news release about Cameroon states: "In Cameroon homosexuality is not penalised. Homosexual acts are considered sodomy in Cameroon and are indeed penalised."'
- (4) See Judith Butler's text quoted above.