

# Part Two: The US Evangelical Roots of African Homophobia

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In part two of our analysis of rising homophobia in Africa we look at how the US right-wing evangelists have used their power base to spread propaganda against gays. Their powerful presence has influenced African archbishops, politicians and lawmakers.

Homophobia has become deeply entrenched in Africa, where in recent years there has been an enactment of a series of harsh laws. The archbishops of the Anglican Church and the African Heads of State speak with one voice when they claim it is a foreign import that has no historical roots in the continent and has to be chased out. The most extreme exponent of the view is Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe who described gays and lesbians as "lower than dogs and pigs", something only practiced by "a few whites" in his country.

Though Mugabe's view that homosexuality is "un-African" has been repeated by many African leaders, it turns the opposite is true. Whilst homosexuality has always existed in Africa, homophobia is largely a foreign and modern import. Through an astonishing flow of conservative Christian resources into Africa, the homophobic US evangelical right has marginalised mainstream African churches and made its toxic brand of extreme and homophobic Christianity the norm. In doing so, they have perverted the thinking of millions of devout African Christians. The heads of state gaining political capital from enacting stronger legislation and demonising the LGBT community are merely taking advantage of widespread prejudices.

"US evangelical conservatives have done a lot of damage to the lives of innocent LGBT persons in Africa. They are operating in a context where religion has enormous power and people believe what they are hearing is the message of true Christianity," said Reverend Kapya Kaoma, an Anglican priest from Zambia and senior researcher of Political Research Associates in the US. Kaoma is the author of *Globalizing the Culture Wars: US Conservatives, African Churches and Homophobia*. "Anyone who doubts the effects of the demonization should look into the faces of a gay person in Africa and see the suffering and how they have become so vulnerable."

Reverend Kaoma has done more than anyone has to expose the links between the powerful lobbying of the US evangelical right and recent changes in legislation in Africa in countries such as Uganda and Nigeria. The homophobic rhetoric of both Africa's archbishops and the continent's heads of state are part of the same phenomenon. Both groups have been influenced by US evangelists. When Archbishop Stanley Ntagali of the Anglican Church of Uganda calls the US Supreme Court's recent decision to legalise gay marriage an "immoral virus", one finds the political echo of his message in Mugabe's statement that homosexuality "destroys nations".

Although several high-profile US evangelical preachers have become household names in Africa, the roots of the evangelical right's hold over the African Church go back to the post-colonial era of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s when Europe's Christians withdrew, leaving native bishops to run the show. Seeing an opportunity, the American right-wing evangelists moved in to fill the vacuum. "As the English and Scots had brought their own values, the American evangelical right brought theirs, which included extreme homophobia," said Reverend Kaoma.

Many of the first evangelical missionaries were CIA agents sent by the US Government in the 1970s and 1980s. As Reverend Kaoma says, the US was fighting its own cultural wars on African soil. Although the express purpose was to battle Communism on all fronts and counteract Soviet influence in Africa, a major concern in the US was the spread of so-called "liberation theology", which was associated during this deeply paranoid period with Communism. "A new form of Christianity was born, which was much more Americanised, founded by the missionaries sent by the CIA to get rid of liberation theology. There were hundreds of new Pentecostal churches built, supported by the US Christian right. When Ronald Regan came to power in 1981 the strategy intensified backed by a lot of funding and support from the US Government."

The US evangelical right built a strong power base across the major African nations. It effectively created the infrastructure to spread its propaganda across a vulnerable continent. One of the main tools was the Christian universities they founded. The most famous is the Uganda Christian University (UCU), which still has strong links with the evangelical right and its homophobic views.

"The Christian universities are the intellectual wing of the propaganda machine, but there are many other aspects," said Reverend Kaoma. "Anyone visiting Christian Africa would be shocked by the number of Christian radio stations spreading the propaganda of the right-wing evangelicals. On the streets of Kampala and Nairobi, most of the Christian literature handed out comes from America, written by evangelicals, and then sold as academic text to Africans. Magazine articles purport to show scientific proof that homosexuality is un-African. There is no counter to all the lies about the LGBT community in the media so how can one expect the community to change its ideas? It's the same as in North Korea, where the media glorifies the 'supreme leader'," said Reverend Kaoma.

The evangelical right's influence on the Anglican Church in Africa has caused it to grow apart from the Church of England, which is more tolerant of LGBT rights and appoints gay clergy. There have been frequent threats from Africa's seven archbishops to break away over the issue. In 2012, the Ugandan-born Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, was one of the favourites to replace the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury. Sentamu is openly sympathetic to gay rights and so the archbishops refused to back their fellow African. If elected, they threatened to leave the Anglican Church - in the end he was not.

The African archbishops are the most prominent mouthpieces for the evangelical right's anti-gay ideas. In many cases, the US evangelists have formed close relationships with Africa's leading clergy. For example, the deeply homophobic US right-wing evangelical Alison Barfoot was personal advisor to the Ugandan Archbishop, Henry Luke Orombi, a strident campaigner against gay rights. Many of Orombi's most extreme ideas can trace to Barfoot's influence.

"Often you find American so-called evangelists like Barfoot working behind the Africans to export their extreme ideology," said Reverend Kaoma. "Another example is Steven Noll, the vice chancellor of Uganda Christian University. He's the major thinker behind a lot of the Ugandan Government's positions on LGBT rights."

The most famous US anti-gay preacher operating in Africa is Scott Lively, from Abiding Truth Ministries. He has written anti-gay books such as *7 Steps to Recruit-Proof Your Child*. Lively has been a regular visitor to Africa spreading his message that homosexuality is against traditional family values. In Uganda, in 2009, he gave talks linking homosexuality to paedophilia and bestiality. A few days later, he met with the lawmakers and government officials who would go on to draft Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2009, which called for the execution of gay people by hanging.

Another big presence on the African Christian scene is the homophobic Californian evangelical Rich Warren who has increasingly targeted Africa as its role in global Christianity has grown. Warren has also compared homosexuality to paedophilia and incest. Across sub-Saharan Africa, they study his bestselling book 'A Purpose Driven Live', and his Anglican Church has close ties with archbishops in Uganda, Nigeria, Rwanda and Kenya. As Warren's "purpose-driven" projects have taken root in Africa, so too have levels of active homophobia and proposed laws against LGBT people. Many of his closest African friends have been at the forefront of campaigns against homosexuality.

The spread of anti-gay propaganda has played into the hands of African politicians looking to gain support. President Yoweri Museveni in Uganda used anti-gay rhetoric to distract from social issues and try to enhance his popularity ahead of the national election of 2016. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, political tirades against gays serve the purpose of uniting Muslims and Christians against a common outsider.

"There's a parallel with Nazi Germany in that it's about creating a sense of moral panic around a scape-goated minority. It unites people around a perceived enemy that is seen as threatening, but is in reality vulnerable," said Graeme Reid, director of the LGBT rights program at Human Rights Watch. "Vladimir Putin has tried the same tactic in Russia to galvanise support in Conservative rural areas with some success. In Zimbabwe, you always know there's an election looming because there's a rise in homophobic rhetoric."

Reverend Kaoma says there has also been a shocking rise in gay refugees across Africa. "There are lots of Ugandan gays in Kenyan camps for refugees. Who would choose to leave their homes and flee? The situation is so volatile for them. There is violence from strangers, but an even more common reason is the threat of violence and estrangement from their own families."

Despite obvious evidence to the contrary, the absurd argument that homosexuality is "un-African", or a foreign phenomenon, persists. "The same ridiculous claim was also made by the Romans during the days of their empire," said Reverend Kaoma. In fact, the laws criminalising homosexuality in Africa date from the imposition of the British colonial administration's penal code.

The reality is that homosexuality has been a consistent feature of African societies throughout history. The Ugandan King Mwanga II engaged in sexual relations with male subjects, according to a report by NGO Sexual Minorities Uganda. The report also pointed to the research of the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard who published a study in 1937 of the homosexual practices of the Azande tribe in present-day Zaire. He found examples of adolescents prior to the age of 17-18 serving as "boy wives" to older men.

In Nigeria the 'yan dandù' (men who act like women, or crossdressers) population was an accepted Hausa subculture in the Muslim north for more than a century. Violent homophobic gangs drove the group underground following Nigeria's draconian anti-gay legislation.

Fighting back against the evangelical right's propaganda is tough. Their influence is hardwired into the African Christian community. Human rights groups recognise the issues and speak out regularly, but their influence has been neutered. "Any institution that brings counter arguments has already been framed as promoting anti-Christian values by destroying the family. Therefore, they have no legitimacy. Even the European Union is said to be controlled by gays on this issue," said Reverend Kaoma.

The only way to combat the malicious spread of propaganda is from within Africa, he believes. External groups have never been able to tackle such entrenched problems. Reverend Kamao remains optimistic that the LGBT community will gain equality one day.

"Africans have to do it themselves and they will. The US Christian right can continue pouring millions of dollars into Africa, but once LGBT people have tasted freedom there's nothing that will stop them. The termination is already there from LGBT persons who have received death threats and refused to run away," he said.

"One mistake of the Christian right is to keep demonising LGBT people. People will see the contrast when they meet people. During colonialism, Africans were presented as less than human, but the prejudices melted away when white people got to know them and realised they were just humans like them."

See also: [The Hidden Cost of Homophobia in Africa](#)



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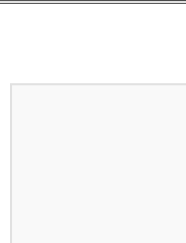
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