

**Major Research Paper**

**The Politicization of Homosexuality in Senegal:  
Moral Panics and Political Competition in the  
Midst of Social Change**

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March 23, 2016

## Abstract

This research paper examines the case of Senegal in order to provide insight into the micro-level, contextual factors of the politicization of homosexuality in Africa and to inform a more effective understanding of this process. The concepts of homosexuality as a social barometer, moral panic, and issue competition are deployed as a theoretical framework. This paper presents an examination of the processes through which homosexuality is constructed as ‘un-African’ and major macro-level explanations for the politicization of homosexuality in African countries. With this assessment in mind, the theoretical framework is then applied to an analysis of the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal, from *l’Affaire Icône* in February 2008 to the results of the 2012 presidential and legislative elections. Analysis reveals that enduring economic hardship and political disenfranchisement fomented anxieties about sexual morality, which were then manipulated by religious and political actors to trigger a moral campaign against homosexuals. The moral panic over homosexuality was an instrument of contestation of and competition for political power. Similar to cases elsewhere in the world, the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal was not driven by homophobia so much as by political opportunism<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the following people: Professor Rita, Nichelle, and Gene Roddenberry. Without your guidance, this degree would not have been possible. Live Long and Prosper.

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# 1. ‘Most Homophobic Continent on Earth’: Introduction

This paper attempts to address rising concern over homophobic rhetoric and policies of certain African states. Recently, a spate of homophobic speeches and enhancement and creation of antihomosexuality legislation has renewed fears among the international community and media that Africa is ‘moving backwards’ on human rights. While literature on this subject offers many broad, macro-level explanations for the emergence of homosexuality as a pressing political issue, each case of politicization presents a unique interplay of exogenous and endogenous dynamics. This paper deploys the concepts of moral panic, social barometer, and issue competition as a frame through which to analyze the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal, in the hope of offering a valid and effective approach to understanding the contextual factors involved in this phenomenon and ultimately dismantling the myth of one monolithically homophobic Africa.

Particularly over the past decade, homophobic pronouncements and policies of certain African heads of state have attracted the attention of international media and the international community. World leaders as well as international and African human rights organizations have condemned the enforcement of existing and new antihomosexuality legislation and increasing political and social persecution of homosexuals in many African countries. This so-called ‘state-sponsored homophobia’ has come to dominate Western media coverage of African politics and has become a major preoccupation of relations between Western and African states (Ireland 2013). Recent developments in Uganda, Nigeria, and Cameroon have captured the attention of the international community and in the ensuing media coverage, all African states have been painted with the same ‘homophobic’ brush, despite pursuing different positions on homosexuality and gay and lesbian rights, or indeed, adopting no position at all.

Despite certain African governments attracting international scorn for discrimination and persecution of homosexuals, others have taken action to protect the rights of homosexuals. Many African states have officially supported international and regional organizations' efforts to prevent sexuality-based discrimination. Protection of LGBT rights is implicit in the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* when it affirms protection from discrimination based on 'other status' (OAU 1981). The United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* also protects against discrimination based on 'other status' (UN 1948). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states in Article 17: "(1) No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honor and reputation. (2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks" (UN 1966). In 2006, the AU Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights "explicitly endorsed the principle of extending non-discrimination and equal protection for lesbian and gay people" (Epprecht 2008, 22-3). Many African countries have taken unilateral steps to recognize gay and lesbian rights within their jurisdiction. South Africa has enshrined the principle of non-discrimination in its Constitution, and Cape Verde and Malawi have decriminalized homosexual acts (Ireland 2013). Additionally, Mauritius, Mozambique, Gabon, and the Central African Republic have all formally recognized the legitimacy of LGBT rights (Ireland 2013).

Despite the diversity of positions on homosexuality among African countries, international media continues to paint Africa as "the most homophobic continent on Earth" (Smith 2014). Much of the discourse surrounding this issue identifies colonial-era antihomosexuality legislation, religious fundamentalism, exclusionary nationalism, and other broad and vague factors that could explain "Africa's apparent homophobic exceptionalism"

(Ireland 2013, 49). These theories do not explain why many African societies exhibit these traits without being caught up in antihomosexual sentiment and the politicization of homosexuality. Colonial legacy, religion, and nationalism do not account for why, exactly, homosexuality becomes a salient and pressing social and political issue.

This research paper examines the case of Senegal in order to provide insight into the micro-level, contextual factors of the politicization of homosexuality in Africa and inform a more effective understanding of this process. Factors exogenous to this process identified in macro-level analyses play a significant role in each instance of politicization; however, relying on these theories risks simplifying what is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with diverse trajectories. The politicization of homosexuality constitutes an interplay of historical and cultural experience and socioeconomic circumstances, but also of more specific factors such as the interests and strategies of social and political agents and the structures within which they operate. An examination of context-specific components of the process of politicization would provide insight into the role of micro-level dynamics and their interaction with macro-level factors.

This paper employs the concepts of homosexuality as a social barometer, moral panic, and issue competition as a theoretical lens through which to investigate the contextual dynamics at play in the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal. The social salience of homosexuality develops within a context of instability and insecurity, when fears and anxieties are focussed on the destabilization of sexual norms. These fears and anxieties often culminate in a sexual moral panic, whereby a sexual minority is discursively constructed as an existential threat to the moral foundations of society and subsequently denied their rights as citizens. The motivations and strategies of moral entrepreneurs who guide the panic constitute an instance of issue competition, as these actors compete against each other for public legitimacy and political power by attacking

each other's positions on homosexuality. By constructing a theoretical framework that enables the analysis of both macro and micro-level dynamics within their specific context, this paper attempts to demonstrate the validity and significance of a bottom-up approach to understanding the politicization of homosexuality, both in African contexts and elsewhere in the world.

This research paper presents a single, analytical case study wherein empirical evidence is analyzed through a theoretical framework in order to provide both an in-depth analysis of the case at hand and to offer a valid approach to more comprehensive analysis of similar cases. As a research method, the analytical case study ensures internal validity because it involves the application of a theoretical framework to the analysis of empirical evidence and allows for the rigorous examination of different variables when neither they nor the relations between them are easily distinguishable. Essentially, a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Baharein 2008, 1602). A case study approach is appropriate for examining the process through which homosexuality becomes politicized because the former does not require a separation between the phenomenon and contextual factors. This process is present in many contemporary societies, yet despite certain commonalities, each process is a result of unique interactions between exogenous and endogenous dynamics. Thus, the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is fluid and unclear (Yin 1989). The objective of a case study is not to clarify this boundary, but to examine interactions between the phenomenon and context as a whole in order to determine the ‘How?’ and the ‘Why?’ (Yin 1989). In this way, a case study approach enables an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of both context-specific and exogenous factors at play.

In order to capture these variables effectively, this case study involves the systematic gathering of empirical evidence from multiple sources. The research presented in this paper consists of analyses of speeches, interviews, and other discursive acts, as well as of academic literature and other documentation, with further evidence drawn from survey studies and other statistics. The methodical collection of data from multiple sources ensures internal validity by allowing for a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon within its context (Berg and Lune 2012).

The utilization of a theoretical framework ensures that the analysis of the data is as rigorous and systematic as its collection. As an analytical case study, this research paper attempts to “super-impose concepts on the case” in order to understand the phenomenon through a particular theoretical lens (Druckman 2002, 18). An effective theoretical framework captures both macro and micro-level details in order to inform a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in a given case. Utilizing the concepts of moral panic and issue competition in analysis of the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal allows for an examination of the broader context for conditions that feed a moral panic as well as for an assessment of the role of local actors who, in capitalizing on the issue of homosexuality for political gain, guide the moral panic. Therefore, understanding the case of Senegal as an instance of moral panic driven by actors competing for political authority enables an extensive analysis of exogenous and endogenous variables and the resulting process of politicization of homosexuality.

While confining analysis of a case to a specific theoretical framework limits possibilities for external validity, this research paper seeks to demonstrate the importance of examining specific, contextual factors for understanding cases of politicization of homosexuality. How well a specific case exemplifies a broader category determines the generalizability of a study’s

findings, and thus, its external validity (Berg and Lune 2012). Though there are many cases of politicization of homosexuality, the theoretical framework employed in this paper is not likely applicable to many other cases. What this paper does offer, however, is an approach to studying this process that privileges the unique aspects of each case and their interactions with broader dynamics for a more accurate analysis. This analytical case study employs a theoretical framework that is specific to the case of Senegal, therefore demonstrating that empirically grounded and systematic analysis of a process of politicization of homosexuality should begin with internal, contextual variables in order to provide an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the case.

The first section of this paper provides a review of pertinent themes in the literature on African sexualities and politics in order to examine the processes through which homosexuality is constructed as ‘un-African’ and assess major macro-level explanations for the politicization of homosexuality in African countries. The next section presents the concepts of homosexuality as a social barometer, moral panic, and issue competition as constituting an effective theoretical framework through which to analyze the context-specific reasons for the politicization of homosexuality. The theoretical framework is then applied to an analysis of the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal, from *l’Affaire Icône* in February 2008 to the results of the 2012 presidential and legislative elections. Analysis reveals that enduring economic hardship and political disenfranchisement fomented anxieties about sexual morality, which were then manipulated by religious and political actors to trigger a moral campaign against homosexuals. The moral panic over homosexuality was an instrument of contestation of and competition for political power. Similar to cases elsewhere in the world, the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal was not driven by homophobia so much as by political opportunism.

## 2. The ‘Un-African’ Myth and State-Sponsored Homophobia: Literature Review

Homophobic rhetoric and persecution of homosexuals in certain African countries are driven by and reaffirm the belief that homosexuality is ‘un-African:’ foreign to African history and culture, imported by colonial and Western influences. Decades of scholarship have been devoted to proving this affirmation false and to deconstructing centuries of racist discourse that has constructed and reproduced the myth of a singular and exclusively heterosexual African sexuality. Many studies have sought to identify broad, generalizable explanations for how homosexuality becomes a political issue in Africa. Ultimately, the politicization of homosexuality does not necessarily hinge on the validity of same-sex desire as an African experience, and broad, macro-level factors provide a context, but not a trigger, for this process.

### A. ‘Un-African’

“Some people think the future means the end of history. Well, we haven't run out of history quite yet.”<sup>2</sup>

The belief that homosexuality is foreign to African traditions and cultures is not necessarily a recent development, but is instead a product of various discursive processes at work since before the colonial period. A growing scholarship has been devoted to proving that homosexuality is African. However, underlying assumptions about sexuality hinder the success of many attempts to prove this matter and to counter the ‘un-African’ myth that drives antihomosexual sentiment.

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<sup>2</sup> Captain James T. Kirk. *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Released 6 December 1991. Paramount Pictures.

The context in which much of the source material on same-sex sexuality in precolonial and colonial African societies was produced presents a significant challenge for contemporary research. Murray and Roscoe point out that “[m]ost of what is known of ‘traditional’ African cultures was written by individuals who were part of a colonial system that seriously disrupted those cultures” (2001b, 9). Early reports of sexuality in Africa were part of a narrative that sought to diminish African experiences while justifying a racist and gender-based hierarchy and therefore presented distorted interpretations and descriptions of same-sex behaviour in African societies. Today, both African and non-African authors attempt to deconstruct the racist and sexist narratives reproduced by these and subsequent accounts of same-sex sexuality in order to glean indications of the presence and role of homosexuality in precolonial and colonial African cultures. This unpacking of colonial-era texts provides sufficient evidence that same-sex relations are neither absent, random, nor incidental in African experiences, but “a consistent and logical feature of African societies and belief systems” (Murray and Roscoe 2001, xv).

Claims that same-sex behaviour is not indigenous to African cultures are the result of various discursive practices and other factors that have established and reinforced the belief in a singular, exclusively heterosexual African sexuality. From around the 16th century to the postcolonial period, missionaries, colonial administrators, anthropologists, and other authors largely omitted mentions of same-sex behaviour from their writings on African cultures (Epprecht 2008). Racist and heterosexist assumptions, colonial imperatives, and proximity to colonial and postcolonial regimes led many authors to ignore, discount, and trivialize homosexuality in African cultures in favour of affirming that Africans were singularly and

exclusively heterosexual<sup>3</sup>. The general absence of discussion about same-sex behaviours in colonial and postcolonial research has led many to believe that homosexuality is indeed foreign to Africa. The silence that prevailed over decades of research “creates an impression of radical discontinuity between the present and near past, an apparent discontinuity that in turn is sometimes cited as proof that same-sex sexuality did not exist in Africa” (Epprecht 2008, 38). That much of the research into same-sex sexuality in African contexts has emerged since colonialism is often interpreted as proof that homosexuality is a result of foreign influences.

This belief was espoused by many Africans themselves. “Sensitised by missionaries and Western education, defensive in the face of stereotypes of black hypermasculinity, and resentful of sexual exploitation in colonial institutions,” many colonial and postcolonial African figures were reluctant to discuss homosexuality (Dlamini 2006, 135). The concept of homosexuality was imbued with racism and contradicted moralized assumptions of heterosexuality as natural and healthy (Wieringa and Sivorí 2013). African and Africanist scholars thus developed alternative visions of a single African sexuality to combat the racism of colonial ideas, always with the assumption that Africans are not naturally homosexual (Epprecht 2008). African authors reappropriated the myth of African heterosexuality in order to reclaim moral high ground, and in the process, memories of same-sex sexuality were forgotten.

Saskia Wieringa describes this process as postcolonial amnesia. In this sense, amnesia is “a process of selectively memorizing certain aspects of a past while ignoring such aspects as are politically inconvenient” (Wieringa 2009, 208). Nonheteronormative sexual behaviour is omitted

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the discursive construction of African sexuality, see Arnfred, Signe (ed.). 2004. *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.; Murray, Stephen O., and Will Roscoe (eds.). 2001. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. New York City: Palgrave.; and Epprecht, Marc. 2004. *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. Montreal: McGill & Queen’s University Press.

from reimaginings and reconstructions of precolonial histories. Forgotten are historical experiences of “particular sexual practices, politics, and relations, specifically those related to women’s sexual autonomy and same-sex practices” (Wieringa 2009, 206). The result is “primordialist conceptions of sexuality” founded on “the theory of an original African sexuality, rooted in local custom and tradition” (Ndjio 2013, 122). Heterosexuality is constructed as the original, traditional African sexuality, and homosexuality is deemed to be the work of colonial and neocolonial corruption of African societies.

Thus, through the process of postcolonial amnesia, the tropes of colonial discourse on sexuality in Africa are repurposed in order to assert the moral authority of African cultures. “If ‘tradition’ was seen (and constructed as) the site of ‘moral decay’ in colonial days, now ‘tradition’ is invested with nostalgia and reconfigured as a site of heteronormative ‘normalcy,’ while the West is seen as the site of perverse desires” (Wieringa 2009, 206). By solidifying the myth of a singular, exclusively heterosexual African sexuality, postcolonial amnesia both places African cultures on moral high ground and continues the themes by which these cultures were denigrated in colonial discourse.

## **B. The ‘Dark Continent’ Discourse**

“Did I misinterpret you?”<sup>4</sup>

Same-sex behaviour and desire are part of many African cultures and are present throughout the continent’s history, yet conceptions of homosexuality in these contexts often differ from those of Western contexts. Failing to understand how homosexuality is understood hinders analysis and confrontation of the ‘un-African’ myth and discriminatory rhetoric.

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<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant Valeris. *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Released 6 December 1991. Paramount Pictures.

Much of Western scholarship on homosexuality assumes that homosexuality necessarily destabilizes heterosexual norms, yet this assumption does not hold true in many African contexts. “Queer theory, based on queer people’s performances of themselves as nonconformists in gendered societies, privileges both nonconformity and the visible” (Kendall 1999, 173). To be homosexual in a Western context typically implies an outright and overt rejection of society’s expectations of heterosexuality. People who identify as gay or lesbian typically do not marry or enter into a long term intimate relationship with a person of the opposite sex, neither is their difference framed within a specific context. Yet in many African societies, there were various mechanisms through which homosexuality was integrated into heteronormative society. In some societies, same-sex desire constituted a special social role within a heteronormative social structure. Murray and Roscoe note that often, “same-sex patterns were formalized and named social roles existed for individuals who engaged in them. These terms and roles were the basis for social identities incorporating sexual and gender difference, some stigmatized, some not” (2001c, 271). While heterosexual marriage was imperative in many African cultures, social expectations for marriage allowed for opportunities for same-sex sexuality. In most African societies, “very different expectations prevail regarding love, sex, and free will. In their personal relationships, not only women and girls but also boys and men lack choices that are taken for granted in contemporary Western societies. Love (intimacy, companionship, care), while welcomed in a primary relationship, is not necessary or always expected” (Murray and Roscoe 2001, xvii-i). Thus, a person who desires others of the same sex is likely to continue fulfilling their heterosexual gender role (Epprecht 2008). Homosexuals in many African contexts continue to uphold the heteronormative status quo, and therefore, their experiences are markedly different from what some Western approaches have assumed.

Much of the ‘un-African’ myth and antihomosexuality sentiment espoused by many African leaders could be interpreted as a reaction against emerging forms of homosexuality that disrupt the status quo. Epprecht argues that antihomosexuality discourse is not an instance of homophobia, but transphobia: “fear of the public transgression of sexual norms (rather than of the sex acts themselves)” (2005, 254). Indeed, even though same-sex relations have long been present in African cultures, homosexuality has only recently emerged in the public sphere, especially in the form of increasingly visible gay rights and public health movements (Broqua 2012). Increased publicity surrounding same-sex sexuality and identity have incited reaction from African state leaders. Simon Lokodo, the State Minister of Ethics and Integrity at the centre of the ‘Kill the Gays Bill’ controversy in Uganda has stated: “If they were doing it in their own rooms, we wouldn’t mind” (cited in Smith 2014). Ultimately, much of antihomosexuality rhetoric in African countries is driven by “le rejet non pas tant des pratiques ou relations homosexuelles elles-mêmes que de leur affirmation publique et leur reconnaissance sociale ou, plus encore, juridique” (Broqua 2012, 15).

Ultimately, not interrogating the assumptions that underlie much of the scholarship on sexuality in African contexts hinders effective confrontation of antihomosexuality discourse. Epprecht argues that efforts to classify and qualify different iterations of same-sex behaviour in African societies are futile if they fail to take account of attitudes toward homosexuality prevalent in the culture in question (2008). Arnfred argues that in order to confront the ‘dark continent discourse’ on African sexuality, one must dissolve the harmful assumptions that structure it (2004). The author contends that many major studies on homosexuality in Africa published in recent decades have failed to recognize the fluidity and ambiguity of same-sex behaviour and perceptions of homosexuality in African contexts (2004). An effective approach

to countering antihomosexual discourse requires the deconstruction of the assumptions that frame inquiry in order to understand the perspectives and motivations behind the former.

## C. Antihomosexuality Legislation and Colonial Legacy

“We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.”<sup>5</sup>

Scholarship of sexuality in Africa identifies common themes as causal factors in the politicization of homosexuality. Colonial legacy, the influence of Christianity and Islam, and nationalism have been cited as causes of antihomosexuality sentiment and policy. However, these broad theories have limited explanatory value when investigating a particular case.

Analysis of recent politicization of homosexuality in certain African countries often centres on the effect of antihomosexuality legislation left over from the colonial era on state-sponsored homophobia. The criminalization of homosexuality was an important instrument of oppression in colonial regimes. Colonial administrators enforced antihomosexuality legislation and manipulated customary law in order to maintain a sexualized racial hierarchy. Botha and Cameron assert that colonial laws against same-sex behaviour “had the principal aim to stigmatize, punish, and exclude” those who diverged from the strict heteronormative roles and gendered hierarchy imposed by the colonial regime (1997, 5). The language of antihomosexuality legislation was an instrument for excluding and dehumanizing Africans who engaged in same-sex relations.

Colonial legislation against same-sex behaviour discursively constructed homosexuality as perverse and inhuman. Roman-Dutch common law, which was common in colonial Africa, defined what constituted homosexuality based on “a fundamental distinction between acts falling within or without the boundaries of ‘nature’” (Phillips 1997, 44). Homosexuality is thus not only illegal, it is unnatural and against human nature, which implies that homosexuals are unnatural

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<sup>5</sup> The Borg. *Star Trek – First Contact*. November 22, 1996. Paramount Pictures.

and not human. The criminalization of ‘unnatural acts’ in most surviving antihomosexuality legislation continues to be used as a catch-all term (Botha and Cameron 1997). The vague language of antihomosexuality legislation allows almost any sexual behaviour to be punishable as an unnatural offence. Furthermore, the application of colonial legislation was racially biased towards cases involving Africans (Botha and Cameron 1997). Therefore, colonial regimes constructed and enforced antihomosexuality laws in order to persecute anyone who did not follow strict heteronormative codes of conduct, particularly Africans.

In addition to enforcing regime legislation, colonial officials also interfered in matters of customary law, effectively shifting local attitudes about same-sex sexuality. For example, British administrations “entrenched legal restrictions on homosexuality, intruded on indigenous practices, and reinforced reactionary attitudes toward sexuality” (Botha and Cameron 1997, 6). Colonial intrusions into customary law significantly altered the latter’s approach to nonnormative sexuality. For example, while official British colonial policy in Southern Africa was to legislate only in areas where gaps in customary law required intervention, administrators often disregarded this philosophy in the case of nonconformist sexuality. Botha and Cameron cite an example in which a chief testified that ‘unnatural crimes’ amongst the Basotho were rare and thus there was no punishment under customary law. Colonial authorities ignored this evidence, insisting instead that since same-sex conduct was sometimes attributed to witchcraft, and since witchcraft was punishable under customary law, same-sex behaviour must have been criminalized in Basutoland (1997).

The stigmatization and persecution of homosexuality by colonial legal systems continue to have an impact in some African countries today. While colonial-era antihomosexuality legislation survives in most African countries, the vague categories of offences punishable under

these laws continue to stigmatize homosexuality in public discourse. Botha and Cameron cite an increasing tendency of law enforcement officials to avoid detailing same-sex behaviour. They argue that the “refusal to be explicit has compounded the uncertain scope of the crime. In addition, it has perpetuated in the public mind images of depravity and perversion that persist in modern discussion” (Botha and Cameron 1997, 7). In some countries, colonial laws have been reappropriated, though they maintain their role in the repression of sexual minorities. The rediscovery and reinforcement of antihomosexuality legislation is often used “as a way of asserting moral authority and national autonomy *against* a neocolonial West” (Awondo et al. 2012, 154). While much of colonial-era law governing sexuality remains dormant, there are some countries in which its reinvigoration has played a role in the politicization of homosexuality.

## **D. Sodomy and Eternal Damnation**

“You of all people go by the book!”<sup>6</sup>

The role of Christianity and Islam in the rise of homophobic sentiment in African politics is widely discussed in both academic literature and media coverage of African affairs. Some authors argue there is a direct link between intolerance of homosexuality in African cultures and predominant religious beliefs. Murray and Roscoe argue that “there are no examples of traditional African belief systems that singled out same-sex relations as sinful or linked them to concepts of disease or mental health – except where Christianity and Islam have been adopted” (2001c, 270). While both religions have influenced perceptions of homosexuality in African

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<sup>6</sup> Admiral James T. Kirk. *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Released 4 June 1982. Paramount Pictures.

societies, there remains an ambivalence in approaches to dealing with nonheteronormative sexual behaviour, even as some African religious and political actors lead the antihomosexuality charge.

Neither Christian nor Islamic texts offer much guidance on the subject of homosexuality, yet religious practices have developed varying attitudes and approaches to nonheteronormative sexuality. Beyond being grouped in with other sins as ‘fornication,’ explicit mentions of homosexuality in both Christian and Islamic religious texts are rare, allowing for a wide variety of interpretations and punishments (Avery 1997; Ireland 2013). The proscription of homosexuality as prescribed by religious doctrine is often tempered by the tenet of forgiveness upheld in both Christian and Islamic faiths. While Islamic law dictates that homosexuality is a capital offence, the requirement for four respectable witnesses to prove the act took place and the traditional expectation for imams to be lenient make the formal prosecution and punishment of homosexuality a last and rare recourse (Avery 1997). Ward notes that despite official doctrine, “the Church has always in practice had to have a flexible attitude on sexual and marriage issues” (Ward 2002, 102). While certain interpretations of Christianity and Islam take a hardline against homosexuality, the reflection of this attitude in the practice of these faiths is sometimes distorted.

Yet, Christian and Islamic doctrines influenced perceptions of homosexuality in Africa, transforming it in the minds of Africans from a benign transgression to a sin. Continuing and expanding the community of the faithful is an imperative for both Christianity and Islam, and thus both religions consider sex for procreation as the only legitimate expression of sexuality. In Christian teachings, the possibility of sex for pleasure is inconceivable, as the only purpose and reason for sex is reproduction (Arnfred 2004). Any sexual act that is not for procreation is not sex, but a sin of sodomy or fornication (Avery 1997). In Islam, same-sex behaviour is not a sin in and of itself, but because it disrupts reproduction and the strict gendered order that ensures

continuation of the Islamic community (Avery 1997). Most interpretations of Islamic law “mandate a strict separation of the sexes and different rules of behaviour for women and men in virtually every facet of life” (Gaudio 2009, 3). Expectations of each sex are determined by their respective roles in the creation of life; therefore, the sexual act as a means of reproduction is considered an act of worship (Gning 2013). As nonprocreative sex, homosexuality precludes reproduction of the faith and is thus a “révolte contre Dieu” (Bouhdiba 1975, 44). Same-sex behaviour was not simply a transgression of sexual norms, but a cause for eternal damnation.

Christianity and Islam have become so much a part of African cultures that African leaders who have spoken out against homosexuality consider religious reasons as legitimately African as traditional ones. Arap Moi, former president of Kenya, has said that homosexuality is wrong because it “is against African tradition and Biblical teachings” (cited in Niang 2010, 116). Yet, while many African leaders and movements cite religion as a reason to condemn homosexuality, Christianity and Islam have also inspired calls for tolerance and understanding. For instance, many religious leaders in Senegal actively condemn physical violence against homosexuals and argue that they should be encouraged to repent instead (Niang 2010). The role of Christian and Islamic faiths in the rise of homophobic sentiment in Africa is thus not definitive, but varied and nuanced.

## **E. Postcolonial Deployment of Sexuality**

“When is a Vulcan no longer a Vulcan?”<sup>7</sup>

State-sponsored homophobia is often explained as the attempts of regimes to consolidate power amidst instability, principally through the construction of a national identity based on heteronormativity and the cultural value of reproduction. In some African societies,

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<sup>7</sup> Neelix. “Riddles.” *Star Trek: Voyager*. Aired 3 November 1999. Paramount Studios.

homosexuality has become a boundary of national identity. The homophobic rhetoric of certain African leaders demonstrates that “homosexuality is becoming, among other things, a strategy for marking national and civilizational specificity” (Hoad 2007, xi-xii). Homosexuality is thus an instrument of exclusion and inclusion.

Postcolonial regimes employ the discursive construction of a national identity in order to create unity and consolidate power amidst instability and insecurity. Faced with increasing social fragmentation, the state creates a sense of belonging that unites the divisions within the nation, allowing those in power to consolidate their position. Aarmo notes that when they fear that “the nation is ‘falling apart,’ those in power have a growing need for a unifying identity that goes beyond all immediate internal political, economic, and social crises and divisions among people of different classes and ethnic groups” (1999, 267). Yet, for national identity to act as a unifying concept, it must be discursively constructed through exclusion. Aarmo argues that in order to produce meaning, “the nation must appear as a whole, as a ‘we.’ This can only be done by establishing another, a ‘they’” (1999, 267). Margrete Aarmo posits that in the absence of common language, tradition, or historical experience, a national identity project requires a cultural marker that is used to define the ‘essence’ and the boundary of the moral community that constitutes the nation (1999). Because African societies are typically diverse and disparate, any national identity project must involve a single cultural aspect that unites citizens while deemphasizing the difference in their experiences.

The meanings which constitute a culture are fluid and ambiguous, thus the culture is essentialized, boiled down to a single attribute which becomes the marker of belonging. What constitutes a culture does not matter, only that “people are made to believe that they ‘have’ a culture” and others do not (Aarmo 1999, 268). This attribute allows people to identify as sharing

in the culture, without necessarily being able to define what it is. In the construction of a national identity, those in power utilize cultural markers “as an ideological tool in processes of exclusion or inclusion of members of the moral collectivity of the nation” (Aarmo 1999, 257). Because of its fluidity and malleability, culture-based national identity is thus an effective instrument of inclusion.

National identity projects of many postcolonial African states are founded upon the cultural value of reproduction. Heteronormativity becomes the boundaries of the nation and an instrument of exclusion of homosexuals from this imagined community. Through the process of cultural nationalism, “sexuality has been made a cultural tool through which Africanity is expressed” (Ndjio 2013, 126). For the nation to survive, the men must protect it from physical and ideological violation and the women must ensure its reproduction by bearing children (Aarmo 1999). Members of the nation are required to do their part by fulfilling their gender roles, including reproductive sexual relations. The importance of reproduction of the nation amplifies existing cultural values of reproduction and children (Aarmo 1999). Constructing a culture-based national identity involves “the sublimation of procreative and reproductive sexuality, accompanied by the fetishization and ritualization of heterosexual relationships” (Ndjio 2013, 121). Heterosexuality and gendered hierarchy become cultural markers of the nation.

The nation is defined by heteronormative cultural values, and thus precludes the inclusion of sexual minorities. Homosexuality is placed in direct conflict with cultural values of reproduction, family, and collectivity, and thus provides the boundary for the constructed moral community of the nation (Aarmo 1999). Through the discursive construction of this identity, homosexuals are eliminated from the moral community and denied their identity as Africans.

Ndjio notes that “it is through the ‘nationalization’ of the sexuality of its citizens that, in many African countries, the post-colonial state has managed to draw boundaries between Africans and Westerners, insiders and outsiders” (2013, 128). Heterosexuality is defended as a common experience for Africans, one that, despite their differences, unites them within one nation. Homosexuals are attacked as imposters and outsiders, and thus not entitled to rights as citizens.

## **F. Reframing Analysis**

“It depends on your point of view, doesn’t it?”<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, preoccupation with disproving the ‘un-African’ narrative and with explaining how African leaders come to espouse homophobia fail to capture the subtleties of the politicization of homosexuality and the local dynamics at play. Macro-level theories about the politicization of homosexuality in Africa often fail to address nuances and contradictions within this process. Official preoccupation with homosexuality and gay and lesbian rights does not necessarily reflect popular attitudes toward same-sex behaviour. Often, there is a gap between state-sponsored homophobia and “grassroots disinterest or de facto tolerance” of nonnormative sexuality (Epprecht 2008, 12). Homosexuality does not figure into the concerns of most citizens, and political discourse does not always reflect public interest. Furthermore, that colonial-era antihomosexuality legislation continues to exist in most African states and that Christianity and Islam hold a significant place in many African cultures fail to explain why these factors were mobilized at a specific time and in a specific context. Lastly, the role of culture-based national identity in this process does not address many instances in which the agents and forces driving antihomosexuality sentiment are not part of the political establishment. While these theories provide insight into certain conditions that are common among cases of politicization of

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<sup>8</sup> Lazarus. “The Alternative Factor.” *Star Trek*. Aired 30 March 1967. Desilu Studios.

homosexuality in African contexts, they do not enable a comprehensive understanding of what triggers this process.

Analysis of the context-specific factors of each case could be a more effective approach to understanding the process by which homosexuality becomes politicized. Colonial legacy, religion, and nationalism provide instruments of this process, but do not explain why this process occurred when it did and in the way it did. Broqua argues that in analyzing each case of politicization of homosexuality, “à y regarder de plus près, on constate que des facteurs précis, propres à chaque contexte, éclairent spécifiquement l’hostilité à l’homosexualité ou aux minorités sexuelles et les conditions de possibilités des controverses politiques” (Broqua 2012, 13). The frame through which the politicization of homosexuality is analyzed must take account of local, context-specific dynamics in order to illuminate the reasons why this process takes place.

### **3. Social Barometers, Moral Panics, and the Issues: Theoretical Framework**

The concept of moral panic provides an effective theoretical springboard from which to begin analyzing specific reasons for why homosexuality became politicized in Senegal because it offers a comprehensive and systematic approach to understanding the process and motivations that drive this phenomenon within its context. Analyzing homosexuality as a social barometer and the actions of moral entrepreneurs as issue competition further strengthens the explanatory value of this conceptual framework. In a moral panic, fear of and reaction against a shift from established social institutions drive a moral crusade against those who are seen to eschew and weaken these institutions, as leaders emerge in the moral community to challenge conventional authorities in defence of society and their own interests.



## A. Moral Panic and the ‘Folk Devil’

“Have we become so... fearful, have we become so cowardly... that we must extinguish a man?”<sup>9</sup>

Stanley Cohen was one of the first to coin the term ‘moral panic’ in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*, published in 1972. Studying societal reactions to mods and rockers in the UK, Cohen posited that widespread indignation and alarm over this phenomenon was overblown, provoked by an overreaction of the media to the transgressive behaviour of a small number of young people. This overreaction was driven by the belief that the behaviour of these youths undermined the moral foundations of British society, and was therefore a threat to the integrity of the latter. Thus, a moral panic is a society-wide event driven by hysteria through which a “condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 2011, 1).

Moral panics feed off of heightened emotions and thus reflect times of instability and insecurity in society. Widespread anxieties are always present in society; however, in periods of social change, these fears intensify, compounding an already volatile and unstable economic, political, and social situation with heightened emotions. In these circumstances, what are normally considered farfetched and incongruous claims of threats against the moral foundations and values of society find purchase among the broader public (Dunbar and Swart 2012). Heightened tension and emotional instability create a powder keg in which an event or controversy could easily escalate to society-wide panic. Dunbar and Swart note the role of social instability and heightened emotions in their study of moral panics over Satanism in white South Africa (2012). Between 1978 and 1982, a ‘satanic panic’ coincided with increasing uncertainty

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<sup>9</sup> Captain Jean-Luc Picard. “The Drumhead.” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Aired April 27, 1991. Paramount Studios.

over the morality of the apartheid state in the face of international sanctions and the Soweto Uprisings of 1976. During the transition from apartheid to the ‘Rainbow Nation,’ satanic practices became the focal point of moral panic once again, this time the expression of “underlying anxieties regarding white hegemony and cultural unity as South Africa’s political and cultural borders were transformed” (Dunbar and Swart 2012, 604). Despite widespread fears and rumours of Satanism and devil worship, neither instance of moral panic was based on evidence of satanic practices, nor was any ever found. Thus, moral panics “compress social, political, media, and psychological fears and anxieties, whether real or culturally imagined (often a combination of both),” that are particularly salient in times of uncertainty (Herdt 2009, 11).

In the midst of troubled times, moral panics channel heightened social anxieties into ‘folk devils.’ The folk devil is constructed as “a social peril, a perceived apocalyptic threat to the moral order and social stability of society” (Dunbar and Swart 2012, 605). In the case of satanic panics in South Africa, the devil was seen in everything from premarital cohabitation and political opposition to the National Party to pop music, modern art, and, of course, yoga (Dunbar and Swart 2012). While it might seem that anyone or anything could become a folk devil, the process by which an individual or a group come to be identified as folk devils and evildoers is not random.

Cohen (2011) identifies six motifs common to the formulation of folk devils:

They are *new* (lying dormant, perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging in *themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition. They are *transparent* (anyone can see what’s happening) – but also *opaque*: accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless. (vii – iii, emphasis in text)

Interpretations of the above criteria encourage distrust of reasonable explanations and established fact, thus justifying belief in the folk devil despite probable cause or credible evidence to the contrary. That society had not previously perceived such evildoers as threats is explained by the claim that ‘those people’ are not what they seem. That society should be frightened is justified by the construction of the folk devil as the reincarnation of well-known evils. The targets of moral panics are presented as inherently bad, yet the details of how they pose a threat to society must be explained, with or without factual reference. Indeed, moral panics often exhibit “a scurrying around for a causal theory” linking the targets, however dubiously, to broader sources of societal fears and insecurities (Cohen 2011, xiv). Ultimately, “the folk devil becomes a separate entity to the objective problem – a hybrid creature encoded with underlying social anxieties” (Dunbar and Swart 2012, 605). The folk devil is targeted not because of any association with a threat to social values and institutions, but because he or she is an easy target for these anxieties.

While justifications and explanations for why certain people pose a threat to society are not necessarily credible, they are nonetheless effective because those who are identified as threats are often unable to challenge these claims. A moral panic requires “a soft target, easily denounced, with little power and preferably without even access to the battlefields of cultural politics” (Cohen 2011, xii). While not entirely helpless, the people who are labelled as folk devils are often without authority or legitimacy in the public sphere, their voices ignored and their challenges of mainstream discourse discredited. Thus, the folk devils of moral panics are not identified at random, but are targeted because they are on the margins of society.

Through targeting and constructing folk devils, a moral panic is an exclusionary discursive practice that reinforces the marginalization and ostracization of certain individuals and

groups. In a moral panic, “emotions are mobilized in order to stigmatize certain behaviours, either of individuals or of groups” (Wieringa 2009, 208). This process of stigmatization and labelling “dehumanizes and strips individuals and whole communities [of their rights], exposing fault lines of structural violence (e.g., racism, poverty, homophobia, etc.)” (Herdt 2009, 2). The folk devil is discursively constructed as being an outsider in society, without membership or the rights that come with it. The outsider’s humanity is not recognized because of his or her difference, whether it be in race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc. Moral panics thus “reproduce structural violence of all kinds: they serve to embody fear, disgust, and social exclusion in speech, meanings, and practices” (Herdt 2009, 18). Not only do moral panics typically target those who are marginalized and neglected, they reinforce and escalate the structures of violence and discrimination to which these people are especially vulnerable.

This is especially true for sexualized moral panics, wherein sexual minorities are constructed as an existential threat to society and are denied basic rights. Same-sex desire is a divergence from heteronormative status quo, and is thus constructed as a threat to social mores and values, and ultimately as a threat to society’s very survival.

Heterosexual gender relations are “manipulated to appear to be the moral bedrock beneath the social contracts present-day leaders impose on their subjects” (Wieringa and Sivori 2013, 12). In a predominantly heterosexual society, homosexuality is a particular marker of difference, and homosexuals are often portrayed as eschewing the moral foundations of society. Yet, in the case of sexual panics, more is at stake than the transgression of sexual norms. “More than a reference to a normalized sexual practice, the heterosexual order encompasses the normativity of daily life, institutions, laws, and regulations, as well as the moral imperatives that guide people’s personal lives, extending to the deepest layers of their subjectivities and

identities” (Wieringa and Sivori 2013, 9). In diverging from heterosexual norms, homosexuals pose an existential threat to society. The imperative of reproducing and continuing a moral society serves as a conduit through which nonheteronormative sexuality and existential threat are inextricably linked. Essentially, sexual panics are driven by the belief that sexual deviancy is “threatening the future or the reproduction of one’s own society” (Herdt 2009, 12). In Africa, homosexuals are often depicted as destroyers of the African way of life (Ndjio 2013). Thus, sexual panics “generate images of the monstrous,” sweeping society up “with anxieties about what this evil sexuality will do to warp society and future generations” (Herdt 2009, 3-5). With society’s survival at stake, homosexuals are constructed as an unimaginable peril that must be opposed.

Constructed as a threat to the reproduction of society, homosexuals are excluded from it, and are consequently denied their rights as citizens. Homosexuals are targeted by sexual panics because they are often on the margins of society. Homosexuals are at the bottom of the heterosexual hierarchy of society, outside of the ‘charmed circle’ of the moral community (Herdt 2009). In the crusade against the mortal enemy of homosexuality, the moral community denies the citizenship of homosexuals; their rights are qualified and even revoked (Herdt 2009). Because homosexuals do not conform to society’s sexual expectations, they are refused membership in the moral community. In many African contexts, homosexuals are constructed as “‘uprooted’ and ‘acculturated’ Africans, and especially as agents of the perpetuation of Western imperialism” (Ndjio 2013, 122). Because homosexuals are not African, and especially because they are accused of serving destructive foreign interests, they are denied the respect and rights that citizens are granted. Thus, sexual panics are essentially “the sexual disciplining of modern nations’ citizenry” (Wieringa and Sivori 2013, 9). Already marginalized, homosexuals

experience the further degradation of their rights as targets of sexual panic. Thus, the process of constructing a folk devil out of homosexuality demonstrates that structural violence is a definitive factor of sexualized moral panics (Herdt 2009). Society-wide instability and feelings of insecurity materialize to push homosexuals and other minority groups further outside the boundaries of the moral community.

## **B. Institutional Flux**

“Fear is the most honest of all emotions, Captain.”<sup>10</sup>

Homosexuality is often the target of a moral panic because the instability and insecurity that drive this process also destabilize established sexual mores and values, in which the moral community is deeply invested. Divergent sexuality comes under attack as a threat to the social codes and institutions that define the moral community.

Due to societal instability and economic hardship, social expectations regarding sexual relations become increasingly unrealistic for younger generations. Notably, the structural adjustment programs and similar policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have had a profound effect on African societies for thirty years. The neoliberal development project undertaken in many African states affected every aspect of society, comprising “a wide range of development interventions which involve a wide range of ‘sectors’, projects and programmes” (Harrison 2005, 1307). Most importantly, these programs increased socioeconomic inequality and limited citizens’ access to the state, effectively disenfranchising them politically and economically (Honwana 2012). Rising unemployment and weakened social services have impeded many men from performing their heteronormative roles as heads of and sole providers for the family, disempowering them and destabilizing the gender hierarchy. The man’s privileged

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<sup>10</sup> The Clown. “The Thaw.” *Star Trek: Voyager*. Aired April 29, 1996. Paramount Studios.

role in society “a subi un déclassement parmi les catégories les plus démunies de la population, notamment là où le pouvoir de nourrir ne peut plus être pleinement exercé faute de moyens” (Mbembe 2006). For young men, growing youth unemployment in many African countries means that the material attributes of adulthood – a salary, a house, marriage, etc. – are increasingly unattainable (Honwana 2012). Marriage, an important social institution that reifies men’s privileged position in sexual relations, is no longer realistic for many men in African societies. Faced with limited access to legitimate realization of sexuality, young people are increasingly engaging in unconventional relations, creating “new geographies of sex” that challenge the imperative of marriage and family (Honwana 2012, 102). Thus, society-wide instability and hardship undermine established sexual mores that regulate gender relations and provide the moral foundations of society.

Society-wide transformation of normative sexuality provides a catalyst for underlying uncertainties and fears. Van de Grijsparde et al. describe the weakening and reshaping of social structures as a process of ‘institutional flux,’ whereby changes in social, political, and economic systems foment the confrontation and reformulation of norms and values (2013). In this state of normative ambiguity, “the real source of unease is the sense that the foundations of power are undergoing change, and that in those communities ‘caught in the middle’ there is a genuine uncertainty about the rules, and who is in charge” (Van de Grijsparde et al. 2013, 44). Because people must feel certain of their place in society, the ebb and flow of social insecurities and fears are linked to perceived stability of social structures and hierarchy.

In need of greater stability, society becomes preoccupied with strengthening the norms and morals that structure and define it. In defence of established mores, public opinion often turns to “the resurrection of moral values rooted in custom” in the hope of reinforcing

conventional social institutions (Kaarsholm 2005, 144). When the destabilization of social institutions affects normative sexuality and gender relations, such as through increasing unemployment and disenfranchisement, society becomes myopic about nonheteronormative sexuality. Thus, the salience of sexual minorities in the collective awareness is “a moral barometer indexed to declining economic fortunes” (Nguyen 2010, 161).

Evolving sexual practices and relations become a topic of interest across society, and people become engrossed in the question of how to stop this change. The result of these discussions is to identify those who transgress established sexual norms as a reason for the latter’s demise. Van de Grijspaarde et al. argue that when “the impact of misfortune falls on familiar and trusted social institutions, defence involves not physical protection but the search for groups or persons to blame” (2013, 27). For homosexuals, conceptual linkages between homosexuality and liminality focus much of the blame on them. Such is the case in many African contexts, where people who practice same-sex relations “are seen to occupy a space between masculinity and femininity; tradition and modernity; Africa and the West” (Reid 2010, 48). Homosexuals come to represent the transition from established sexual norms to new forms of sexuality. As a social barometer, homosexuality is closely linked with feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Therefore, homosexuals are often the targets of moral panics and are invested with the fears and anxieties that drive the latter.

## C. Moral Entrepreneurs

“... Villains who twirl their moustaches are easy to spot. Those who clothe themselves in good deeds are well camouflaged.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, despite connotations of being uncontrollable and irrational, these phenomena are orchestrated, purposeful, ‘culturally staged’ processes (Herdt 2009). The marshalling of widespread emotion is managed and guided by actors hoping to dominate public discourse and instigate change within society. These actors are what Howard Becker describes as ‘moral entrepreneurs’: “individuals or groups who seek to provide a society of certain moral codes or rules” (Dunbar and Swart 2012, 606, citing Becker 1963<sup>12</sup>). These entrepreneurs position themselves to shape the discourse by claiming moral authority. As Stanley Cohen notes, “the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions” (2011, 1). By claiming expertise over social morals and values and by using this position to influence public discourse and opinions, these actors challenge the legitimacy of more conventional authorities in society, particularly those of the political system. Thus, moral panics become an arena for “the tug-of-war between state and nonstate and between political, religious, and social coalitions and civil society” (Herdt 2009, 7). Established authorities engage with the moral panic narrative in an attempt to defend their legitimacy and power over public opinion, presenting their own pronouncements on how to neutralize the threat posed by the folk devil. Both moral entrepreneurs and those they challenge manipulate underlying fears and anxieties that surface during moral panics in order to win public sympathy and confidence. Therefore, a moral panic is

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<sup>11</sup> Captain Jean-Luc Picard. “The Drumhead.” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Aired April 27, 1991. Paramount Studios.

<sup>12</sup> Becker, Howard. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York City: Free Press.

“not ‘an isolated phenomenon but a connective strategy’ for moral campaigns and the cultural politics and hegemony of civil society” (Herdt 2009, 6, citing McRobbie and Thornton 1995<sup>13</sup>). Moral panics encompass the process by which marginalized individuals or groups, as the focal point of social anxieties, become devices for societal actors competing for power and authority in the arena of public discourse.

The behaviour of those who guide moral panics is analogous to the dynamics of issue competition, which intersects a moral panic. Beyond affirming that moral entrepreneurs manipulate and capitalize upon a moral panic in order to gain authority, the concept of issue competition provides a systematic breakdown of the motivations and strategies of these actors in instigating and driving a moral panic. This concept is especially useful for the analysis of a moral panic because it provides a context-driven examination of how interactions between competing actors within a certain structure determine their trajectories. The concept of issue competition was developed through the study of party politics in democratic systems, and is essentially the process by which political parties either emphasize different issues or take different positions on the same issue in order to differentiate themselves in the competition for votes and public support (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). In competing for authority, actors use issues as platforms to attract attention and as markers of difference, either by championing an issue on which the competitor has no position, or by defending an opposing position on the same issue. Often, an actor will dominate the arena by highlighting an issue on which they share the same position as the public, then presenting themselves as the expert, champion, and owner of this issue while competitors struggle to find an appropriate position (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). This is often the case with moral entrepreneurs, who capitalize on a salient issue to gain

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<sup>13</sup> McRobbie, Angela, and Sarah Thornton. 1995. “Rethinking ‘Moral Panic’ for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds.” *British Journal of Sociology* 46(4): 559-74.

public support, to claim moral authority, and to challenge conventional authorities on their inability to protect the moral foundations of society. Dominating an issue can give the actor certain advantages by enabling them either to attack competitors or to force competitors to engage on their issue, thus controlling the discourse (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008). Furthermore, the potential for political gain through issue competition increases with instability in the political system and heightened social tension (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). Societal fears and insecurities inflamed by a moral panic provide moral entrepreneurs with many opportunities to manipulate and ultimately dominate public discourse by employing the tactics of issue competition.

When underlying anxieties and fears culminate in a moral panic, leaders emerge to guide articulation of the outrage, manipulating the discursive construction of the folk devil in a competition for moral authority and public legitimacy. Homosexuals are often a target for moral panics because not only they are relegated to the margins of society, but also because the political and socioeconomic dynamics that heighten tension and fear destabilize established sexual mores and norms, thus prompting backlash against those who transgress the latter. Understanding the role of homosexuality as a social barometer, the process of moral panic as a manifestation of fear in troubled times, and the actions of moral entrepreneurs to trigger and centre this process on certain issues provides an effective lens through which to examine why homosexuality is politicized in a specific context, within a specific time.

#### **4. ‘... Ne va pas avec nos réalités’: Case Study of Senegal**

Since before colonization, homosexuals have had a significant presence in Senegalese society and continue to play an integral role in Senegalese culture. The first Western reports of

same-sex behaviour in Senegal are from the nineteenth century and refer to *goor-jigeeen*: a term literally translated as ‘men-women’ but more appropriate for men who play the receptive role in anal intercourse (Niang 2010). In precolonial and colonial Wolof culture, *goor-jigeeen* played a ritualized and institutionalized role in women’s ceremonies and social relations (Niang 2010). As recently as 1960, the future President of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, benefitted significantly from the mobilization of *goor-jigeeen* and their networks during his election campaign (Niang 2010.). After independence, however, rising homophobia has led to *goor-jigeeen* withdrawing from the public sphere and abdicating much of their role in Senegalese society.

### ***A. L’Affaire Icône***

The politicization of homosexuality in Senegal began in 2008 amidst increasing tension and instability. A succession of scandals over sexuality and arrests under colonial-era antihomosexuality legislation provided momentum for political and religious actors looking to mobilize homophobic sentiment in a competition over public support and political authority.

In February 2008, amidst a surge in arrests for homosexuality and increasingly negative and derogatory media coverage of homosexuals, the magazine *Icône* published photos of a gay marriage celebration in the suburbs of Dakar, prompting the arrest of tens of men on charges of homosexuality (Servent 2009). Many of these men were released arbitrarily days later, supposedly upon intervention by the federal government (Bop 2008; Awondo et al. 2012). In response, the opposition party *Mouvement pour la réforme et le développement social* (MDRS), led by Madické Niang, organized an antihomosexuality march in Dakar (Gbaya 2008). While police, on the request of the prefect of Dakar shut down the march, the initiative nonetheless triggered a surge in unrest and violence against homosexuals (Gbaya 2008; Gning 2013).

Frustrated with the government's ambivalent response to homosexuality, members of *l'Assemblée nationale* from both governing and opposition parties introduced a bill to increase the penalty for homosexual acts to five to ten years with a possible fine of 1 to 5 million CFA francs (approx. \$2300 to \$11400 CAD).

In January 2009, police raided the home of the president of AIDES-Sénégal, an organization that provides HIV/AIDS information and services to men who have sex with men, and nine men were arrested on charges of committing an “acte contre nature et association de malfaiteurs” (Gning 2013, 94). In April 2009, the Dakar Court of Appeals dismissed the charges and ordered the men's immediate release (Servant 2009). A few weeks later, the *Front islamique pour la défense des valeurs éthiques* was founded (Servant 2009). The *Front*, “frustrated by the apparent laxity of the government and also by the waning of popular indignation” about homosexuality, denounced the release of the nine men by issuing a *fatwa*, calling for the death penalty for all homosexuals (Awondo et al. 2012, 156). Violence against homosexuals escalated, including attempted executions and exhumations of bodies of presumed homosexuals (Gning 2013).

Homosexuality continued to be a socially salient issue until the 2012 presidential elections, in which the challenger, Macky Sall was able to rally support from religious groups and ultimately defeat Abdoulaye Wade.

The case of Senegal demonstrates the validity of macro-level theories on the politicization of homosexuality, particularly pertaining to the role of religion and colonialism, though these factors are exogenous to the process and do not fully account for the timing and trajectory of politicization.

Though traces of colonial repression of same-sex sexuality remain, since independence, the state's interest in continuing such policies has been ambiguous. While France decriminalized homosexuality in 1791, it continued to impose sodomy laws in certain of its colonies, including Senegal (Gupta 2008). Much of colonial-era legislation against same-sex sexual acts survives in Senegal's Penal Code. Article 319 of the Code forbids "toute acte impudique ou contre nature avec un individu du même sexe" and imposes a punishment of up to five years in prison with a fine of 100,000 to 1,500,000 CFA francs (cited in Gning 2013, 96). While legislation criminalizing same-sex behaviour is still on the books, enforcement has been intermittent and contradictory. In the 1960s and 1970s, a movement for moral regeneration as part of a national identity project caused a resurgence of state-sponsored homophobia; however, the establishment of multiparty democracy marked the "return in force of a more tolerant political discourse" (Niang 2010, 122). Though people are still arrested for homosexuality, the Senegalese government has often intervened against violence and discrimination of sexual minorities (Awondo et al. 2012). Furthermore, Senegal is signatory to international legal doctrines that provide protection against discrimination, including the UN Charter, the AU Charter, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. For the past few decades, the state's position on homosexuality, if indeed there was any, has been largely incoherent.

Islam's long history in Senegal has provided both a moderating influence and a reactionary dynamic on the issue of homosexuality. Islam has been part of Senegalese society since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and is largely practiced in the form of Sufism. Sufism, especially Mouridism, practiced by 40 percent of Senegal's population, espouses the tenets of tolerance and renewal (Bop 2008). While formal doctrine condemns homosexuality, traditional Muslim leaders in Senegal have tended to stress repentance, in line with the Quran's emphasis on harmony,

social cohesion, and God's mercifulness (Niang 2010). However, since the 1970s, Senegal has experienced intermittent surges in fundamentalist strains of Islam, which advocate moral puritanism and strongly condemn homosexuality (Niang 2010). Because most practicing Muslims in Senegal cannot read the Quran and other holy texts (as they are written in Arabic), interpretation of Islam has been monopolized by a few learned religious leaders, a few of whom have become increasingly conservative (Bop 2008). While traditional Islam has contributed to building a tolerant society in Senegal, the rise of reformist Muslim leaders has altered the nature of Islam's influence on antihomosexuality sentiment in society.

The fact that colonial law criminalizing homosexuality remains on the books and that Islam has played a significant role in shaping Senegalese society seems to have little to do with the politicization of homosexuality in the past decade. While much of the literature on the politicization of homosexuality in Africa identifies surviving colonial-era antihomosexuality legislation and significant presence of monotheist religions as important factors in this process, their impact in the case of Senegal is far from definitive.

The issue of homosexuality has become an increasingly prevalent topic of public discourse in Senegal, coinciding with rising economic inequality and uncertainty and failing confidence in the political system. The Senegalese economy has been recovering from several shocks since the 1980s. The 1980s began with a recession and economic and fiscal hardship, followed by failed structural adjustment policies, and then the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 (Gning 2013). As economic growth and government capacity deteriorated, social inequality and tensions increased. The enduring economic crisis was accompanied by "bouleversements majeurs dans la société sénégalaise;" urbanisation, unemployment, and delayed attainment of material adulthood drastically altered social dynamics and institutions (Gning 2013, 110).

Economic hardship was turning Senegalese society on its head, destabilizing an established way of life. Simultaneous to the continuing economic crisis was increasing disenfranchisement with the political system. In addition to the state's demonstrated inability to provide economic wellbeing and security to its citizens, the rationalization of the state apparatus under the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade limited citizens' access to the state and frequent manipulations of the democratic process fomented distrust in the political system (Coulon 2000). Both Wade's re-election in 2008 and his attempt to win a third mandate in 2012 intensified tension and triggered widespread protest (Gning 2013; Resnick 2013). Senegalese were lashing out against a government that had failed to maintain trusted social institutions.

Among the uncertainties and anxieties arising from societal instability and transformation was the preoccupation with sexual behaviour and the destabilization of sexual norms. Antihomosexuality sentiment was part of a larger consequence "de la désacrilisation de la sexualité dans un contexte de crise économique, morale et politique" (Gning 2013, 95). Pressure from economic, political, and social flux was corroding sexual morality at the heart of Senegalese society. Many prominent figures blamed the apparent rise of homosexuality on the economic and political crisis. Contributors to the public discussion of homosexuality argued that faced with unemployment, disenfranchisement, and a dismal future, and without guidance from eroding social values and morals, youths often turned to deviant behaviours such as homosexuality (Gning 2013). Homosexuality was conceptually linked to institutional instability in the economic, political, and social spheres. Thus, preoccupation with homosexuality was a social barometer for Senegalese society, directly related to feelings of fear and uncertainty.

The process by which homosexuality was politicized is consistent with the characteristics of a moral panic. Outrage over homosexuality and attacks against homosexuals were spurred by

“a feeling that crucial moral values were undermined by an inversion of sexual norms that threatened the very reproduction of society” (Awondo et al. 2012, 157). Fear that the economic crisis was fundamentally altering the moral foundations of society and that conventional authorities in the political system were powerless to stop it prompted citizens and society figures to take action against homosexuality. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Icône* publicly stated that he published the gay marriage story to warn authorities of the rising popularity of homosexuality among young people (Bop 2008). Fear for the survival of the moral community amidst economic, political, and social instability was invested in the discursive construction of homosexuals as an existential threat to society.

Attacks on this folk devil constituted an exclusionary discursive practice, centred on the claim that homosexuals were not true Senegalese citizens and that violence and discrimination against them was therefore legitimate. Excluding homosexuals from the moral community was imperative for the survival of the latter amidst society-wide volatility. Gning argues that “la non-reconnaissance de l’homosexualité apparaît pour les acteurs comme nécessaire à la revendication d’une identité nationale sénégalaise, dans un contexte où la crise que traverse le Sénégal paraît devoir en menacer les fondements” (Gning 2013, 94). Thus, homosexuality was constructed as “une occidentalisation des mœurs,” a foreign influence that threatened to change the moral foundations of Senegalese society for the worse (Gning 2013, 98). The fact that local HIV/AIDS and gay and lesbian rights associations were emerging in the public sphere with help from international donors and organizations confirmed this hypothesis (Awondo et al. 2012). Enforcement of Article 319 and other forms of state repression was justified as a means to defend national sovereignty and social integrity against incursion by foreign influences, of which homosexuals were considered agents (Gning 2013). Excluding homosexuals from the moral

community and denying their rights as Senegalese citizens was an integral part of their discursive construction as the embodiment of uncertainty and fear and thus as a threat to the continuation of established moral norms and social institutions.

The case of politicization of homosexuality in Senegal demonstrates that the salience of homosexuality is an effective barometer of social tensions and anxieties, and that the process was driven by moral panic. Economic hardship and political disenfranchisement precipitated instability of established social norms and institutions and society-wide preoccupation with homosexuality. Fears and anxieties arising from this context of volatility fueled a moral crusade against homosexuals as a threat to society's reproduction. Through a context of instability and a process of moral panic, homosexuals were singled out and excluded from the moral community.

### ***B. Le candidat des homosexuels***

The role of moral entrepreneurs is also apparent in the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal, as both religious and political actors engaged with and guided public discourse on the issue. The moral campaign against homosexuals provided an arena for these actors to compete for legitimacy and political authority by championing and challenging socially salient positions on the issue.

Religious leaders have historically played a significant role in Senegalese politics, and have seen their influence grow with increasing disillusionment with the political system. Seeking to capitalize on this opportunity, many of these actors positioned themselves as champions of the defence of social norms and values against homosexuality, fanning the flames of moral panic in order to challenge conventional political actors and gain greater access to political power.

There are several Muslim brotherhoods in Senegal, the most significant one being the Mouride brotherhood. Since independence, these religious groups have been integral to the

political process, at first through informal, patrimonial relations with state leaders, then through the creation of religious political parties both in opposition and in association with the government (Coulon 2000; Gning 2013). While these parties have not had much success in elections, they nonetheless hold considerable influence. The Muslim brotherhoods are able to effectively engage with the state due to their “‘capacité à agréger des intérêts’, leur ‘autonomie’ et leur ‘force’... ainsi que la ‘flexibilité’ dont elles font preuve dans leurs réponses aux actions de l’État” (Coulon 2000, 81, citing Villalón 1995<sup>14</sup>). Leaders in the brotherhoods, called marabouts, actively influence every aspect of their followers’ lives, especially politics. Since the beginning of multiparty democracy, marabouts have issued *ndigel*, or directives, to their followers to influence their vote. Political leaders often provide financial support to marabouts in exchange for *ndigel* (Honwana 2012). Political actors depend on the ability of religious leaders to engage with and influence the Senegalese public.

Over the past two decades, the influence of marabouts among voters has grown as interest in the political system has waned. Analysis of this trend has found that “l’investissement de nombreux Sénégalais dans les groupes confrériques est inversement proportionnel à leur participation à la vie politique” (Coulon 2000, 82). Senegalese are increasingly becoming disaffected with the political system, believing that politics has become inaccessible and incompatible with their interests and problems (Coulon 2000). Religion becomes the primary avenue for expression and realization of citizenship. For many, “l’islam maraboutique tient lieu du langage politique pour légitimer le contournement de l’État, la critique des pratiques politiques dominantes, ainsi qu’une certaine indifférence à la politique en général” (Coulon

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<sup>14</sup> Villalón, Leonardo A. 1995. *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal, Disciples and Citizens in Fatick*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2000, 82). The Muslim brotherhoods have experienced a surge in public support as the legitimacy of the conventional political system has deteriorated.

Many religious leaders took advantage of the opportunity presented by the reinvestment of political agency in the brotherhoods. These actors incited antihomosexuality sentiment in the public sphere and presented themselves as effective guardians of established moral codes and institutions. They claimed to be champions of the Islamic, and therefore Senegalese, way of life and portrayed the government as incapable of protecting Senegalese society from corruption.

Codou Bop deconstructs the strategy of religious actors:

La manœuvre utilisée est toujours la même. Un fait d'actualité susceptible de déclencher la vindicte populaire est sélectionné, une cible est désignée en l'accusant de mener des actions contraires à l'Islam et aux valeurs morales ou de copier 'les perversions des sociétés occidentales'. Ces mêmes islamistes manipulent les médias pour se rendre visibles comme défenseurs de la foi et de l'ordre moral... et présenter l'État comme faible ou complice. (2008).

For religious leaders looking to gain political power, the *Icône* publication was a catalyst for the redoubling of efforts to capture the public's attention and challenge the government's authority. The photos emerged just as the *Coordination des associations islamiques au Sénégal* (CAIS), the main fundamentalist political movement, was recovering from having won only 1% of the vote in the 2007 elections (Bop 2008). Many groups used this event to strengthen their position against homosexuality and attract support for their political agendas. At the antihomosexuality march organized by federal opposition party MDRS, Madické Niang took advantage of the media presence to announce that they would take part in the upcoming local elections (Bop 2008). Many religious leaders amplified social tension and outrage over the *Icône* publication and used the event as a platform for their contestation and achievement of political power.

Their voices were joined by others hoping to weaken the government's hold to power. Indeed, the moral panic over homosexuality exhibited "striking cooperation" between political leaders, the Mouride brotherhood, and more orthodox Muslim groups (Awondo et al. 2012, 156). Religious and political leaders of all stripes attacked the government for its inaction against what they claimed was a profound threat to Senegalese society (Gning 2013). CAIS called on the government to "lutter contre l'homosexualité avant qu'il ne soit trop tard" (Bop 2008). The *Front* declared that fighting homosexuality was "un devoir religieux et patriotique, auquel ne peut se soustraire toute personne éprise de paix et soucieuse de préserver notre jeunesse de la turpitude" (Gning 2013, 102). Madické Niang argued that decriminalizing homosexuality "ne va pas avec nos réalités" and that if the government does not explicitly refuse international pressure to do so, it is complicit in foreign intervention of domestic affairs (Diop 2009).

This strategy emphasized public frustration over the perception that the government was not doing enough to address the problem of homosexuality. Up until the arrest of men associated with the *Icône* affair, the position of the Wade administration on homosexuality had been largely ambiguous (Gning 2013). An exception was the government's decision to delay release of the men arrested in the aftermath of the *Icône* publication until after the local elections (Bangré 2009). The government also took the aggressive action of raiding a private home and arresting nine men in 2009. Despite these demonstrations of a hard line against homosexuality, for most of the process of moral panic, the government "attempted to play the role of negotiator, arbitrating between the demands of a rising tide of religious orthodoxy and the responsibility to protect" its citizens (Awondo et al. 2012, 157). The government failed to address increasingly homophobic sentiment effectively, and in comparison with the hardline positions of religious leaders, appeared weakened and incompetent.

This perception continued to hound the Wade government, though the 2012 presidential elections provided some opportunity to distinguish itself and win back support. The main rival of Abdoulaye Wade was Macky Sall, a former Prime Minister and leader of opposition party *Rassemblement pour le changement*. When asked how he would handle the problem of homosexuality, Sall replied that he would approach the issue in a ‘modern’ and ‘responsible’ way (Olivier 2014). The Wade camp pounced upon Sall’s apparently soft stance on homosexuality, accusing the latter of being in the pocket of “les lobbies gays,” of being “le candidat des homosexuels,” and even of being gay himself (Olivier 2014; Gning 2013, 113). Many voters reacted strongly against Sall’s statement, and threatened to vote against him (Gning 2013). Sall was forced to clarify his position and reassure his supporters, particularly marabouts and imams who had sided with him, along with their followers (Gning 2013). Thus, Wade was able to rally public support and distinguish himself from Sall on a key issue. However, Sall ultimately won the election, partly because he was able to maintain support from religious leaders (Resnick 2013).

The results of the presidential and legislative elections demonstrated the growing influence of religious parties in Senegalese politics. In 2012, more representatives of religious parties were elected than ever before; eight representatives were elected to *l’Assemblée nationale*, as opposed to one in 1998 (Gning 2013). Moreover, Sall altered his position on homosexuality quite markedly. When American president Barack Obama visited Dakar in 2013 and urged Sall to consider decriminalizing homosexuality, Sall insisted he would not do so because “les cultures sont différentes, comme les religions et les traditions... Sur la dépenalisation de l’homosexualité comme sur la peine de mort, les avis sont partagés” (Olivier 2014). As a result of opportunistic manipulation by religious and political actors of underlying

anxieties in their competition for political authority, the politicization of homosexuality continues to have an impact on Senegalese politics.

## **5. ‘One Monolithically Homophobic Africa’: Conclusion**

Ultimately, the determining factor in the politicization of homosexuality was the manipulation of fears and anxieties in a context of society-wide instability by actors competing for political power. The salience of homosexuality was due to enduring economic hardship and increasing disenfranchisement. Religious leaders hoping to build upon their influence and power in the political system turned a single controversy into a moral panic, manipulating insecurities to claim moral authority and legitimacy. Claims that homosexuality was un-Islamic and un-Senegalese promoted exclusion of and discrimination against homosexuals while justifying certain actors’ moral authority. The homophobic rhetoric and positions of these actors “ont simplement une visée destructrice aux fins de gagner en sympathie populaire et aspirer à une ascension politique” (Gning 2013, 113). The case of Senegal was not an instance of homophobia, but of political opportunism.

Macro-level theories of ‘state-sponsored homophobia’ in Africa do not provide a comprehensive explanation for the case of Senegal. Despite the long history and significant influence of Islam in Senegal, the continued existence of colonial-era antihomosexuality legislation, and a brief experience with exclusionary nationalism, Senegal was considered “l’un des plus progressistes d’Afrique sur la question de l’homosexualité” (Servant 2009<sup>15</sup>). In the case of Senegal, neither colonial legislation, nor religion, nor nationalism provided a definitive trigger for the moral panic over homosexuality.

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<sup>15</sup> Citing Joel Nana, West Africa program director of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

Yet, academic and media analysis of the rise in homophobic sentiment in certain African countries tends to overlook complexities and subtleties in favour of promoting a generalizing and homogenizing understanding of this process. Research into sexualities in African cultures continues to be plagued by Western assumptions about homosexuality and a failure to appreciate the ambiguity and fluidity of the concept in other contexts. Furthermore, broad, macro-level theories of politicization of homosexuality continue to be popular among academic and media analysis, despite presenting significant conceptual limitations when applied to the contexts of this process.

The tendency to neglect specificity and context in analysis of the politicization of homosexuality in African countries encourages the discursive construction of Africa as a singular, static unit of analysis. Mbembe argues that “what is called Africa is first and foremost a geographical accident. It is this accident that we subsequently invest with a multitude of significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which, by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives” (2007). Hoad notes that “‘homosexuality’ is one of the many imaginary contents, fantasies, or significations (sometimes in the negative, sometimes not) that circulate in the production of African sovereignties and identities in their representations by Africans and others” (2007, xvi). Through the study of sexualities and politicization of these sexualities, Africa is essentialized, the complexities and diversity of the continent are collapsed into a conceptual object of little dimension. Thus, the apparent rise of homophobia in the continent is often taken at face value, resulting in the propagation of a perception of ‘one monolithically homophobic Africa.’ (Awondo et al. 2012).

Essentialist and generalized approaches to the politicization of homosexuality in Africa fail to recognize both the specificities of each case and their similarities with cases elsewhere in

the world. Hoad argues that in Western discourse, questions of homosexuality and homophobia in Africa have become ‘overdetermined’ and do little to further understanding of the process through which homosexuality is politicized (2007, xiii). Neglecting analysis of context-specific factors precludes opportunities for comparison. The case of Senegal is certainly not the only one that involved actors vying for political power and public legitimacy. Failing to recognize the role of issue competition in the homophobic rhetoric of Senegalese religious and political leaders is also failing to recognize that “it is very easy to find public officials in the ostensibly more tolerant Western world expressing very similar sentiments” in the pursuit of votes (Hoad 2007, xiii). A comprehensive and effective understanding of the politicization of homosexuality requires that analysis of this process in any context be framed in such a way as to illuminate both macro and micro-level factors.

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