

BLACK INTERSEX LIVED REALITIES. Being Intersex and African or of African descent

It is impossible to examine the lived realities of black intersex people – whether living in Africa or in the diaspora – without drawing attention to the role and effects of western colonization. The curtain is often partially drawn to reveal just the intolerance of dictatorial regimes or “barbaric” practices when we consider the inconceivable violations suffered by many African intersex children and people, from infanticide to abandonments to crude genital mutilations that happen as standard treatment and concealment of intersex bodies.

However, for black intersex people (and for non-black intersex people too) to get a real sense of what it means to be a black intersex person and the intrinsic mental dispositions that one lives with within this reality, one must draw the curtain entirely to reveal the root of these realities of intolerance, shame, and abuse.

- **What role did colonialism play?**

Western colonialism introduced a misogynist society, which transformed culture, religion, and all other “social norms” into tools to impose and justify prejudice and the need for some members of society to exert power over others, merely on the basis of appearance or perception.

This misogynist agenda gave way to the normalization of hegemonic masculinity, which validated the dominant social position of men, and the subordinate social position of women. By so doing, ambiguous or indeterminate sex classification was buried into extinction. Very few societies, which insisted on keeping parts of their indigenous ways or worship kept intersex bodies in reverence as miraculous bodies ordained by the spirits. For the main part, however, for hundreds of years since the western scramble for Africa, body politics have played a central role in determining how privileged or under privileged one will be.

Christian and Muslim missionaries – who controlled both inland and coastal African territories introduced the idea that God is a man, a father – and Jesus Christ too, His son who is the head of the church – or in the event of Islam, Mohammed the prophet also bearing a male sex. This scriptural qualification of male supremacy born from this assertion, meant for hundreds of years afterwards, that the male sex would be treated supremely as the head while the female sex subsequently treated as the “weaker” sex, and expected to submit to the governance of the male sex. Also, sexual relations and the founding of families began to narrow down to this theory and other western moral impositions, which – among others – sternly condemned and discouraged polygamy or polyandry. Binaries were set and cast in scriptural authority as God’s ideal standard. So, our colonialists introduced to the African context, that anything outside the binary would be deviant, sick, maimed, crooked, and in need of fixing.

- **Why was the fixing or erasure so important?**

The hegemonic masculinity gospel that had been widely preached and taken root, defined what the female/woman is or is not and what a male/man is or is not. It called on men to prove that they are not women by their ability to “control” their women while exhorted women to passively show their womanhood through the bearing and raising of children, keeping of homes, and plantations. This was important because African women were deemed stronger in resilience, mental aptitudes, and physical strength than men prior to the arrival of western colonialists. The threat of fluidity in gender and sex determination in pre-colonial Africa, as a gift of the gods had to be gotten rid of in order to eliminate the strength of African women – and also that of people who had non binary bodies and deemed deities of some sort. The bottom line was to ensure that women must never look like or act like men and their power must be subdued. The intersex body therefore posed greater threats to this agenda because it challenged this hegemony, and it had to be erased.

- **The aftermath: Post-colonial realities of black intersex lives**

It’s been decades since western colonialists officially left Africa but the realities of black intersex people have not changed much. A neo-colonial form of propaganda and indoctrination continues to plague Africa through a cultural cocktail of

- Religion
- Education
- Modernization
- Legislation
- Popular culture
- Geopolitics
- Medicine and economics

While the truth is often more liberating than fiction, to be politically correct in today’s world seems a more lucrative option for many intersex people in Africa or of African descent and so many will hide their intersex experiences, because they don’t want to be associated with “strangeness”. Furthermore, the fear of being thrown to the scrutiny table of ridicule and possibly forced into traumatic corrective surgeries against one’s will is mortifying. These realities follow an intersex baby from the time of their birth way into adulthood – if they are fortunate enough to survive. All the above factors above contribute to several facets of violations, hardships, and self-denigration for many black intersex people, regardless of where they live.

Examples of these lived realities:

Social, cultural and economic realities

In many African societies, there are stories of how people have witnessed intersex babies being killed by parents and midwives a few hours or days after birth, or taken to traditional shrines for exorcism rites, which often involve slipshod and lethal genital mutilations. In one Ugandan case, for example, an intersex teenager Richard (*not real name*) was discriminated by both the society and his parents. He was denied a right to education as his parents considered it a waste of money to send him to school. And at the age of fifteen, he was forced to leave his parents' home because he was at a danger of being killed any time. In other communities, mothers of intersex babies are abandoned by their husbands and blamed for the birth of intersex children.

In Kenya, for example, the parents would rather throw the child out than endure marital separation. In the words of a Kenyan intersex person, he says, *"In my country, they would rather throw out the baby than end their marriage."* At a very young age, he was forced out on the street with no survival skill whatsoever and as a result, he turned to alcohol and substance abuse to cope with the situation.

Society has constantly accused him of being a homosexual since he exhibits both masculine and feminine traits, and has constantly been harassed and beaten by people who have homophobic and insular religious mind sets, which have become synonymous to African culture through religious dogma.

Sexual identity, reproductive health and rights

Medicine - whether traditional or modern - has had so profound an effect on African culture and social processes that to date, it is seen as the single one solution to the intersex body.

In several countries all across Africa, many intersex young people, caught between fearing the outcomes of medical processes and lacking resources to access them, have felt safer to identify with the LGBT community than the intersex community. This has created a double margin for intersex people because even in these assumed safe spaces, their imprecise bodies need defending.

Since there is hardly any specialized institution dedicated to "fix" intersex bodies in most of black Africa, many find shelter in the services of traditional medicine and spiritual solace. While the end result is to try and "fix" the situation or "tame" the body into the acceptable binary, these traditional and spiritual interventions, it can be argued, may for the adult intersex person be a more palatable alternative to the non-consensual "normalizing" surgical options offered by western medicine.

For the few black African intersex people who see western medicine and sex re-assignment surgery as a solution, accessing it becomes an unattainable goal, which intensifies the feeling of

isolation and helplessness – often leading to suicidal tendencies. Claire (*not real name*) a thirty year old black intersex person who discovered her condition in her early teenage years has failed to raise the kind of money needed to undergo the desirable surgery. In so desperately seeking this surgery, she reiterates the need to conform: *“I also want to be like other girls so that can get married and have a family, but who can marry me with all this ambiguity?”*

The pop culture yardstick

Most of black Africa is being steered by a pop culture index that defines “normal” and “ideal” as far as bodies and sexuality goes. This index sends a very strong signal of what masculinity and femininity looks like, albeit through a western lens. It displays the western world and its way of life as the ultimate utopia. As a result, most black intersex people have lost hope of ever finding a place to call home as the gap between the bodies they live in and the ideal bodies they wish they had widens. Some have had to sacrifice a leg and an arm to reach the relentlessly marketed western utopia, only to face a new set of racial trepidations to battle with.

Another example drawn from the role of pop culture and sport is the outrageous controversy that arises from outstanding achievement at the world games by women who are viewed to be too masculine to be women. Black African women exhibiting intersex traits in sport have been forced to undergo humiliating invasive “gender verification” tests. Even more disturbing is the implied gendering and black-white racialization of performance in sports, particularly depicting women, and black women in particular, as having less sports competence. The suggested exclusion of intersex and gender non-conforming individuals in mainstream sports participation is also a disturbing reality for black intersex people. All of these invasive, humiliating verification processes that black intersex people are forced to undergo, whether in hospital, on the sports ground, in accessing identity documentation, in asylum protection procedures are neo-colonial extensions of sadism and a major human rights violation against all black people with intersex bodies.

On a brighter side, there has been a growth of awareness done on intersex bodies over the past ten years in the black community – particularly in Africa, from Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, South Africa, Rwanda, to the west African coast – and it’s encouraging to see that intersex human rights are taking center stage in global human rights conversations, including at the United Nations. It is time to make the world realize – regardless of cultural inclination - that not everyone was designed to or will fit into the stereotypical sex classification binary.