

Mapping Political Homophobia in Senegal

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Abstract: This contribution examines the instrumentalization of homophobia in Senegal by developing on the concept of political homophobia. Since 2008, non-heterosexuality in Senegal has been the subject of frequent attacks in mass-media, political discourses and religious speeches. An analysis of political and public rhetoric reveals that political homophobia is a modular phenomenon inscribed in broader power dynamics between Senegalese society and the West, religious authorities and political leaders, and between political leaders and their opponents. The instrumentalization of political homophobia by political leaders and religious authorities emerges as a strategy to strengthen their position in a context of crisis.

Key words: political homophobia; homosexuality; same-sex sex; Senegal; cultural decolonization; power relations

Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s, several African political leaders have spoken against same-sex sexualities and pushed for the reinforcement of criminal penalties sanctioning same-sex conducts.¹ In Cameroon, for instance, popular concerns about an alleged spread of same-sex practices in the early 2000s triggered a wave of support for harsher anti-homosexuals laws.² In Uganda, an Anti-Homosexuality Bill—also known as the “Kill the Gays” bill—was submitted to the parliament in 2009, proposing life sentences for “aggravated homosexuality.”³ This re-politicization of homosexuality has come as a surprise to many observers: while homosexuality has gradually been decriminalized in many areas of the world, state-sponsored homophobia has conversely gained ground in parts of the African continent.⁴

Like other forms of oppression, homophobia manifests in feelings of prejudice, aversion, or hatred towards another group, as well as in hostile behaviors such as discrimination or violence.⁵ More specifically, it encompasses a range of negative attitudes and behaviors towards same-sex sexualities and people who identify or are perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.⁶ On the individual level, academics have attributed homophobic sentiments to individual psychology and pathology.⁷ Others have instead examined the role of cultural, social and structural influences on homophobic sentiments, and have stressed the relations between religion and homophobic attitudes, masculinity and homophobia, and the interconnections between state and society attitudes towards non-heterosexuality.⁸ Rhetoric, ideologies, stigmatizing representations, and laws, constitute the medium through which homophobia take place.⁹

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In the context of collective homophobia (that is, homophobic sentiments shared by a group or a community) research has identified several processes whereby same-sex sexualities become perceived as alien, different or inferior to those of the dominant group. A first process is state homophobia, which refers to situations in which hatred towards homosexuality is based primarily on legal and penal processes that sanction same-sex sexual practices and identities.¹⁰ This includes situations in which the state legally criminalizes non-heterosexual relations in its penal code. Social homophobia conversely refers to a shared feeling of aversion, rejection, disgust or fear against homosexuality.¹¹ While it does not necessarily lead to criminalization, social homophobia still contributes to the repression of homosexuality through the exclusion of individuals engaging in same-sex sexual practices.

Weiss and Bosia suggest a third type of homophobia, which they describe as political homophobia. Political homophobia refers to “purposeful [strategies], especially as practiced by state actors; as embedded in the scapegoating of an ‘other’ that drives processes of state building and retrenchment; as the product of transnational influence-peddling and alliances; and as integrated into questions of collective identity and the complicated legacies of colonialisms.”¹² Although it may entangle with social and state homophobia, political homophobia needs to be distinguished from these other forms for it intertwines with political calculations that serve the interest of various actors. Such a phenomenon, according to Weiss and Bosia, deploys through political rhetoric and policies observable across a wide range of cases.¹³ In the context of Russia, Sleptcov for instance shows how political homophobia is being used to create a sense of national unity in the face of an “other” portrayed as the collective West with its values, discourses and policies. Homosexuality is perceived not only as non-Russian, but as Western.¹⁴ “Anti-gay” propaganda consequently becomes propaganda against Western influences. Phillips similarly reports that in the mid-1990s, Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe made several statements linking homosexuality to “white culture.”¹⁵ The assimilation between same-sex sexual practices and Western culture did not only lead to the widespread perception that homosexuality was foreign, but that it was hostile to a nation colonized and oppressed by white power.¹⁶

Although political homophobia has manifested in some parts of the world in remarkably similar terms, it resonates more strongly in some places and historical moments than in others.¹⁷ Local, national and transnational contexts thus also determine the extent to which homophobic discourses are assimilated in society. Actors involved in the production of homophobic rhetoric and sentiments may additionally diverge from one country to another. Although political elites remain key actors in the articulation of political homophobia, other social actors such as religious authorities or moral entrepreneurs may also strategically adopt stigmatizing discourses against homosexuality. Moreover, studies on political homophobia show that the rationale for resorting in homophobic discourses as a political strategy significantly diverges from a country to another.¹⁸

Addressing these considerations, this contribution examines the emergence of political homophobia in Senegal. Until 2008, Senegal was known as one of the most tolerant countries in Africa towards homosexuality.¹⁹ Although violence sometimes occurred, the implementation of public health programs that especially addressed men engaging in same-sex sexual practices allowed greater public acceptance of homosexuality.²⁰ From 2008 onwards, however, Senegal faced a significant increase in violence and arrests targeting individuals suspected of homosexuality. From a tolerant country, Senegal became known as one of the most homophobic nations.²¹ Coinciding with rising economic inequality and distrust towards the political system, violence and arrests have been accompanied by homophobic rhetoric demonizing homosexuals in political discourses and public speeches. World leaders and human rights organizations have condemned

this trend towards what Western media have identified as “state-sponsored homophobia.”²² Yet, we argue in this article that homophobia in Senegal is not simply the result of an internal process of exclusion promoted by the state. Instead, it is inscribed in broader power relations and involves a wide range of social actors with various motivations.

Building on a range of qualitative data collected by one of the authors during fieldwork in Senegal, this contribution overall shows that political homophobia in Senegal is highly modular, finding its roots in political power, social changes and state sovereignty. Fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2018 in Dakar consisted of observations and interviews with political figures, NGO and associations for homosexual rights. We additionally analyzed several case studies, as well as public and elite discourses on homosexuality. The resulting findings are divided into four sections. First, we examine the historical significance of same-sex sexual practices in Africa and in Senegal by building on the *Goor-Jigeen*, a sexual and social figure that occupied several social functions in Senegal. Second, we demonstrate that the politicization of heteronormativity and homophobia functions as a cultural marker that reaffirms national identity and resistance to neocolonialism. The third section shows that political homophobia also entangles with clientelist relations between political actors and religious authorities. As such, political homophobia also functions as an instrument of political mobilization. Last, but not least, we discuss how political homophobia has been used against political opponents to discredit their political project or eliminate them from political competitions. Political homophobia thus describes the modular nature of homophobia, which involves several actors within a state participating in the promotion of the “fear of small number.”²³

Once Upon a Time: The Figure of *Goor-jigeen* in Senegal

It is important to recall that the concept of homosexuality is a relatively modern invention that emerged during the nineteenth century with the medicalization of sexuality in Europe. Although same-sex sexuality has always existed, it was from this period that it moved from being a category to a psychological disposition.²⁴ McIntosh notes in this regard that “the creation of a specialized, despised, and punished role of the homosexuals keeps the bulk of society in the same way that the similar treatments of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law-abiding.”²⁵ Although homosexuality today refers to both a practice and an identity, it exclusively designates sexual practices between individuals of the same sex in this contribution.

In the case of Africa, historical and anthropological research has shown that same-sex sexuality has been part of the practices that regulated sexuality before and during the colonial era.²⁶ Although heterosexuality remained the dominant norm, various mechanisms integrated same-sex sexuality into the social structure and organized life of people.²⁷ However, it is important to recognize that beyond recent work, the historicity of sexual practices between same-sex people in Africa, are marked by a silent trouble or strange consensus.²⁸

In Senegal, the *Goor-Jigeen* embodied same-sex sexuality, a figure that appeared in the writings of several European travelers.²⁹ As early as 1884, Armand Corre described his encounters with *Goor-Jigees* in Dakar:

I met blacks in Saint-Louis dressed like women and walking the same pace (...) At Boké, I saw a Foulah prince with a griot whose lascivious dances reflected the more intimate role he had to play in the house of his Highness. Pederasty habits do not come out of Muslim circles.³⁰ In Wolof language, the expression to designate such behavior would be of recent date and would not exist in most African idioms.³¹

During this period, the Senegalese figure of the *Goor-Jigeen* mainly referred to the adoption of attributes and social roles attributed to women by men, which included mannerisms, clothes,

make-up, and hairstyle.³² These social attributes did not necessarily correspond to the biological sex of the individual but sometimes extended to men.³³ The writer Michel Leiris for instance described an evening in a “Negro dance hall” of Dakar during which he saw “Negro pederasts [dancing] together in little arched jacket, [as well as] a white pederast with the appearance of a dancing clerk, a flower in his mouth, [dancing] with a negro sailor with a red pompom.”³⁴ According to Leiris, adoption of female attributes was not limited to natives. Nor was the practice of same-sex sexuality. French soldiers also regularly exchanged mutual services with locals or, in absence of consent, engaged in forced same-sex sexual intercourse.³⁵ Such activities were sometimes practiced among these soldiers. Corre for instance reported to have seen “a [military] post where three soldiers in a group of five were having a [sexual] relationship. One of them, a young corporal, fulfilled the role of the woman, while the fourth member...was masturbating to death.”³⁶ These practices, according to English Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, did not suffer from social illegitimacy during colonization. As he explained:

It is said that homosexuality is recent among the Wolof, at any rate in any frequency; but it now receives and has for some years received such extremely august and almost publicly exhibited patronage, that pathics are a common sight. They are called in Wolof men women, goor-Jigeen, and do their best to deserve the epithet by their mannerisms, their dress and their make-up; some even dress their hair like women. They do not suffer in any way socially, though the Mohammedans refuse them religious burial; on the contrary they are sought after as the best conversationalists and the best dancers.³⁷

Journalist Michael Davidson goes as far as describing Dakar as a “gay” city in a text originally published in 1970:

In 1949, (...) Dakar was already the “gay” city of West Africa. When I returned nine years later, the French rulers had gone, and Dakar was gayer than ever... For some reason, buried in history and ethnography, the Senegales (...) have a reputation in all those regions for homosexuality, and in Dakar one can quickly see that they merit this reputation.³⁸

Although the term Goor-Jigeen primarily referred to the adoption of social attributes associated with women, it should however be noted that it was not a homogenous category. A French teacher in Dakar for instance described the Goor-Jigeen as two distinct categories, emphasizing the complexity of same-sex sexuality during the colonial era:

The issue of the Wolof Goor-Jigeen is complex. There are ‘tapets’ who are homosexuals and quite similar to their European counterparts...often [they] enter in contact with them in the stopovers where they are overrepresented, but there are also Goor-Jigeens who are somehow related to shamanism. [They are either] dressed as men but in feminine ways with feminine gestures, or as women [and they] wiggle on the rhythms of drums [made] of fanal or false lion.³⁹

According to this testimony, the notion of Goor-Jigeen referred in Senegal to two types of realities: the existence of men who engaged in homosexual practices; and the existence of men who were not necessarily involved in same-sex sexual relations but adopted feminine attributes. Hence, the Goor-Jigeen was both a sexual figure and a social identity. This latter dimension reflected the position that Goor-Jigeen occupied in society. Particularly appreciated by women, they often accompanied them to the fields, advised them, and more generally spent time with them.⁴⁰ During weddings and baptisms, they entertained the guests and played the roles of poets, musicians or

performers.⁴¹ Goor-Jigeens could also marry a man, although it did not necessarily mean that the couple had to share the same household. Instead, weddings between a Goor-Jigeen and a man were considered a festive occasion and an opportunity to meet people in the community.⁴² The Goor-Jigeen was consequently a socially accepted figure in Senegal who fulfilled a number of social functions.

Since the 1980s, however, the term Goor-Jigeen has undergone a process of “re-signification.”⁴³ Today, Goor-Jigeen no longer refers to a social identity but exclusively to a sexual orientation, and more particularly to male homosexuality. As Senegalese anthropologist, Cheikh Ibrahima Niang notes:

The Goor-Jigeen is [today] only associated with the receptive role. The person who occupies the top position is never identified as a Goor-Jigeen, but as a Goor or man. The most usual way of referring to such a person to call him a *Faru Goor-Jigeen* (the male lover of a man woman), a description that refers explicitly to the relationship, not to an identity. Etymologically, the Goor-Jigeen is defined as both a man and a woman, but socially, he belongs to the women’s world. Sometimes, the expression *gooru jigeen yi* may be employed, meaning ‘the women’s man’ or a man who has become very attached to women. Words used to specify different categories of Goor-Jigeen often refer to the age of the person. As an adult, a Goor-Jigeen can be called *Jeeg*. Generally speaking, a Jeeg is a woman who is conscious of her sexual maturity.⁴⁴

From a cultural point of view, the figure of the Goor-Jigeen is accused of violating the *Sutura*, a Wolof term which defines the code of honor in Senegalese society and reflects the cultural boundaries between femininity and masculinity.⁴⁵ These boundaries that encourage the submission of the woman to the man, and of the wife to her husband, are defined by clothing, heterosexuality, behavior, discretion, and other gendered codes.⁴⁶ *Sutura* frames the moral and the social order around life and death, inclusion and exclusion. A heteronormative society deprives the Goor-Jigeen of all social honor and becomes marginal.⁴⁷

This changing attitude towards the Goor-Jigeen figure also has legal and penal consequences. Although the Senegalese criminal law does not explicitly refer to male homosexuality, same-sex sexual practices are today repressed under the Article 319 of the Penal Code which states that “[s]hall be punished by one to five years and a fine of 100,000 to 1,500,000 francs, whoever has committed a indecency or unnatural act with an individual of his sex.”⁴⁸ Homosexuality as sexual practice and social identity has consequently undergone a process of delegitimization and criminalization in Senegal. These processes have in turn provided a facilitating environment for the dissemination of political homophobia in recent years.

Political Homophobia as Postcolonial Resistance to Western Influence

On 25 October 2015, Senegalese President Macky Sall answered the questions of the journalist Audrey Pulval for the program “18h politique” broadcast on the French TV channel *I-Télé*. Asked about homosexuality in Senegal, he explained that:

We have our family code, we have our culture, we have our civilization. People also need to learn to respect our beliefs. In the name of what do we have to think that, because homosexuality is decriminalized elsewhere, decriminalization must be a universal law? In the name of what should it be a universal law? We must also respect the right of every people to define their own legislation. I do not see why we must impose this vision on ourselves. People must have the modesty to understand that not all countries are the same, not all countries have the same stories or evolutions. Each country has its own metabolism. These are problems of society [...] Personally,

I think people should have the freedom to do what they want, but they do not have the freedom to impose on others what they are. It is their own problem if they are homosexuals, but not mine.⁴⁹

While for a longtime President Macky Sall seemed favorable to the depenalization of homosexuality in Senegal, the Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides (OFPRA) reported in 2014 that his position had radically changed since his accession to power.⁵⁰ Thomas Ayissi, secretary of the PAC-DH platform in charge of the defense of homosexuals' rights in Senegal, explained this change of position during one of our interviews:

At one point [Macky Sall] gave a first interview saying that we will handle the issue of homosexuality in a civilized way because the truth is that he also received funding (...) He was such between the hammer and the anvil. He had people who financed him, people he knew were LGBT, but on the other hand there was also the need to satisfy people's expectations. So, he was elected by saying that he will handle these issues responsibly. The problem is that [his promises] have become a perpetual target.⁵¹

To understand Macky Sall's change of position towards homosexuality, it is necessary to examine how same-sex sexual practices are today framed in political and social rhetoric. Despite early evidences of same-sex sexual practices in Africa, political discourses in Senegal regularly refer to the Western origins of homosexuality. Homosexuality is perceived both as a dysfunctional "un-African" practice and a new vector of neocolonialism.⁵² Like state homophobia, this belief is the result of various discursive practices that can be traced back to the colonial period and that have constructed the myth of an exclusively heterosexual Africa.⁵³ The qualification of same-sex sexual practices as "primitive" or "unnatural" in Western travelers' writings, and the persecution faced by individuals engaging in non-heterosexual practices under the colonial regime, have played in this regard an important role in the re-writing of African sexuality.⁵⁴ Sensitized by racialized and moralistic views on homosexuality which have been promoted by colonial regimes, many postcolonial African authors developed the vision of a single—heterosexual—African sexuality to claim high moral ground. Wieringa refers to this process as "postcolonial amnesia," a selective and strategic memorizing of certain aspects of the past that allows communities to reimagine and reconstruct their history.⁵⁵

Macky Sall's case in this regard is not an isolated instance. Many African leaders have re-appropriated the myth of African heterosexuality, portraying homosexuality as a colonial and neocolonial form of corruption of African societies. Such postcolonial rhetoric has in turn served to mask the failure of political leaders' governance by linking Africa's internal problems with the enforcement of decadent Western mores.⁵⁶ Such forms of "cultural decolonization" have enabled them to consolidate their power through the construction of a national identity based on heteronormativity and articulated around notions of "us" and "the West." As Bhana et al. note, the politicization of sexuality indeed functions as a unifying force in a context of increasing social fragmentation: deflecting attention away from more pressing issues, and uniting the divisions among people of different class and ethnic groups by drawing moral boundaries that function as cultural markers.⁵⁷ They deemphasize differences through the essentialization of culture, and unite citizens that may not share the same language, traditions or historical experiences.⁵⁸ Heteronormativity consequently becomes the cultural stuff around which national identity is built; homosexuality becomes the boundary around which definitions of "Africans" and "Westerners," "insiders" and "outsiders" are constructed; and homophobia an instrument of resistance to Western influence. At the same time, the repeated interventions of Western leaders and human

rights organizations in the management of homosexuality in Africa have reinforced the belief that homosexuality is a new imperial project.⁵⁹ The 2008 case of “the homosexuals of Sicap Mbao” in Senegal illustrates this unintended effect.

In December 2008, nine members of an association for the defense of homosexual rights were arrested in the suburb of Dakar for “acts against nature and criminal conspiracy” after an anonymous source called the police to report their sexual behavior. Police officers raided the home of Diadji Diouf, secretary general of AIDES Senegal, an organization working on the prevention of HIV among homosexuals. The court considered the organization to be a cover for “recruiting” individuals for same-sex sexual activities under the pretext of conducting HIV awareness and prevention programs. On 7 January 2009 the defendants were sentenced to eight years in prison and a FCFA 500,000 fine. Following the court decision, international human rights organizations, the embassies of the Netherlands and Sweden, and the representative of the European Union in Dakar, requested the release of the defendants. The case reached a state level when the French President Nicolas Sarkozy expressed his “emotion and concerns” for the defendants. The Health Minister of France, Roselyne Bachelot, additionally asked her Foreign Affairs colleague Bernard Kouchner, to “secure the release of the nine homosexuals imprisoned in Senegal.” On 20 April 2009 a judge of the Court of Appeal of Dakar, Bara Niang, ordered the release of the nine defendants.⁶⁰

In public opinion, this decision reflected Western pressure, and more particularly French leaders’ interventions, on the Senegalese justice system. The headline of the daily newspaper *L’Office* for instance stated on 21 April 2009: “The nine homosexuals recover freedom: Sarkozy and Delanoë bend the authorities.”⁶¹ In a similar vein, *Le Quotidien* observed “in addition to the reaction of Nicolas Sarkozy, all the French press and human rights organizations have invested in the fight for the release of these homosexuals.”⁶² The press editorial *L’As* further reported “the homosexuals of Mbao [were] saved by pressure from Nicolas Sarkozy, [and] human rights organizations such as Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme, Human Rights Watch, [and] Amnesty International.”⁶³

Social reactions to the release of the nine activists reflect the current attitude of the Senegalese population towards the French state. As a former colonial power, France remains perceived in Senegal as a foreign influence that continues to exercise its power through Senegalese political leaders and African human rights organizations. Informal conversations with locals in Dakar moreover reveal that many Senegalese believe that LGBT activists are involved in homosexual rights because they receive financial benefits from the West. Given Senegalese’s attitude towards France, it comes as no surprise that international pressure to release the defendants has reinforced the belief that Western influences promote, if not encourage, homosexuality in Senegal. In this context, opposing homosexuality emerges as an act of cultural nationalism.

National political actors also understand the necessity to display their opposition to Western pressures to decriminalize homosexuality in Senegal for it allows them to position themselves as cultural nationalists against homonationalism. Jasbir Puar developed the concept of homonationalism to illustrate the introduction of sexual politics into the United States’ global strategy of constructing and asserting its hegemony worldwide.⁶⁴ In this so-called American exceptionalism, homosexuals in the United States—marginalized in the past—have not only achieved complete recognition, they have also integrated the ideological apparatus for the expansion of neoliberalism, making them full actors in the promotion of capitalism.⁶⁵ This American exceptionalism reflects in the foreign policy of the United States that evaluates the process of democratization of a state based on the granting of homosexual rights.

An illustrative example of American exceptionalism is the visit of President Barack Obama in Senegal in 2013. In 2013, Macky Sall faced severe criticisms for his alleged intentions to

decriminalize homosexuality. Those accusations arose after a meeting with Jack Lang, a French Minister and MP supporting same-sex marriage and adoption for homosexual couples.⁶⁶ Due to this situation, the issue of decriminalization was discussed during a ministers council which was chaired by the President on April 2013, and which was followed by a governmental statement: “[T]he state has never considered such an option [decriminalizing homosexuality] and totally excludes it under its magisterium.”⁶⁷ The visit of the President Barack Obama in Dakar on June 2013 revived discussions on homosexuality. During a press conference, an American journalist asked Obama about a recent Supreme Court decision to validate same-sex marriage. He answered that the Supreme Court decision was “a victory for American democracy,” before adding that although other countries and religions might have “different visions,” the state nevertheless held the duty to “treat everyone equally.”⁶⁸ Macky Sall reacted in these terms:

Senegal, for its part, is a tolerant country which does not discriminate when it comes to the inalienable rights of individuals. We do not tell someone that he will not be employed because he is a homosexual (...) but we are not ready neither to decriminalize homosexuality. For the moment we are not prepared to lift this provision of the law. This does not mean that Senegal is a homophobic country, but society must absorb these questions, take the time to reflect on them and treat them without any pressure or force (...) Be reassured, Senegal is a country of freedoms, and homosexuals are not persecuted.⁶⁹

Macky Sall’s statement mobilizes three main arguments. The first concerns the government’s compliance with Senegalese law, which must be applied and respected regardless personal beliefs. The second reasserts heteronormativity as a cultural marker of national identity while portraying Senegal as a tolerant and democratic country in compliance with human rights. The third argument finally reaffirms the sovereignty of the state by excluding external interventions in the process of decriminalizing homosexuality. This later point is emphasized by the Senegalese rapper Rhuman:

Homosexuality became a problem when the West wanted to make it a problem. It has never been a problem before. But when the West started to push [African] leaders to adopt policies to decriminalize homosexuality, that is when leaders started to oppose to [same-sex sexual relations]. It seems that in some cases it was because of Western pressure to decriminalize homosexuality and I think [Western intervention] is blackmail.⁷⁰

We can see that the question of homosexuality in Senegal is not simply rooted in sexual normativity but is intertwined with broader political processes that touch upon state sovereignty, cultural decolonization, and national identity-building. Homophobia reflects an opposition to what Eric Fassin calls sexual democracy.⁷¹ According to Fassin, sexuality has today become a marker to maintain the cleavage between the West and its former colonies. It extends from a symbolic point of view the process of differentiation between the West and others.⁷² While the rights granted to homosexuals illustrate Western societies’ progress, the criminalization of homosexuality in Africa is conversely interpreted as a clear sign of underdevelopment, backwardness and conservatism. In a context of asymmetrical relations between the North and the Global South, the politicization of sexuality then emerges as a way of reasserting moral authority and national autonomy over foreign influences.⁷³

The Role of Religious Leaders in the Institutionalization of Political Homophobia

The politicization of homophobia in Senegal is not only based on the instrumentalization of sexuality in political discourse but is also supported by religious leaders who encourage the rejection of homosexuality in a logic of affirmation of national sovereignty. Following the arrest of the nine individuals suspected of engaging in same-sex sexual practices in Sicap Mbao, the Islamic organization “Jamra” for instance published a communiqué on ferloo.com to denounce the role played by the French government in the release of the defendants:

Supported by long, faceless arms, the homosexual men of Mbao have just taunted our justice, because of the unfortunate, sloppy, busting of a file... [While the case] was a perfect opportunity to show to the activists of the metropolis that Senegal [would not give up its exercise] of sovereign justice... it is unfortunate that the obscure denouement of this no less gloomy affair may give the impression that it is the inadmissible interference of France that will influence the final court decision, especially the influence of a famous French homosexual mayor [Bertrand Delanoë].⁷⁴

Several scholars have stressed the role of Christianity and Islam in the rise of homophobic sentiments, arguing that both religions promote heteronormativity and the repression of same-sex practices.⁷⁵ According to Murray and Roscoe, no traditional African beliefs systems have singled out same-sex relations as sinful or as mental illness, except where Christianity and Islam have been adopted.⁷⁶ Yet, explicit references to homosexuality in religious scriptures are scarce. The absence of clear guidance on such practices consequently allows for a variety of interpretations and punishments which diverge according to religious doctrines.⁷⁷ While some hardline interpretations of Christianity and Islam dictate that homosexuality is a capital offense, others adopt a more flexible approach and condemn violence against homosexuals.⁷⁸ Because of the ambivalence of religious texts towards homosexuality, religion can become a strategic instrument for the dissemination of political homophobia in countries where Christianity and Islam occupy an important position.

In Senegal, the Islamic prohibition of same-sex sexual practices is a recurrent feature of political homophobia. Although a secular country, Senegal comprises ninety-five percent Muslims, four percent Christians, and one percent animists.⁷⁹ The majority of Senegalese Muslims adhere to Sufism, a branch of Islam carried in the country by *turuq* or religious orders.⁸⁰ Unlike Sunni Islam which does not recognize religious orders, Sufism admits the authority of grand masters over disciples or *wali*. Due to this specificity, marabouts occupy a relatively important place in the Senegalese society. They play the role of mediators between the faithful and God, and of spiritual guides in the Senegalese society.⁸¹

Over recent years, reforming powers deemed more rigorous in the application of the Sharia have gained increasing popularity among young people in Senegal, reflecting their growing investment in religion.⁸² This situation can partly be explained by the economic situation. According to the Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie (ANSD), half of the Senegalese population is under seventeen years old and the average age is twenty-two.⁸³ The population under fifteen years old presents forty-three percent of the total population while the population under twenty-five years old represents sixty-four percent.⁸⁴ So Senegal is a predominantly young country, and the ANSD states in a 2017 report that young people are the most affected by unemployment and poverty. In fact, sixty-three percent of the unemployed population is between fifteen and thirty-four years old, compared to 10 percent among individuals between thirty-five and sixty-four years old.⁸⁵ In this configuration, the economic crisis has taken the form of a political and moral crisis. Widespread corruption and misappropriation of public funds have crystallized the anger of a young population that lacks social perspectives.⁸⁶ As a

result, many Senegalese have become disaffected with the political system and have turned towards religion, which has become the primary avenue for political expression.⁸⁷

Many religious leaders have taken advantage of the current situation to strengthen their influence in politics by attributing social and economic problems to the moral debauchery of the Senegalese elite.⁸⁸ The latter has been criticized for adopting behaviors that are at odds with moral values promoted by Islam and disrupt the moral equilibrium of society. In particular, the alleged relation in religious discourses between homosexuality, Freemasonry, and corruption, has reinforced the belief that Western neocolonial powers continue to exercise their influence through the Senegalese elite.⁸⁹ Such a belief does not only resonate among young people, but also among some political actors and civil servants. Mamadou Sidibe, former minister of planning and sustainable development under the presidency of Adboulaye Wade, for example claimed during an interview “there are many homosexuals in the high spheres of the state. I heard that there is a link between these homosexuals and the Freemasons who hold the world. Those who want to succeed here in Senegal embrace [homosexuality].”⁹⁰

The issue of homosexuality thus entangles with the broader crisis that today affects a large segment of the Senegalese population. A stricter definition of social normality reaffirms social unity and the exclusion of groups considered responsible for disorder and moral drift.⁹¹ Religious authorities play a central role in redefining social boundaries by enforcing sexual morality derived from their interpretation of religious sources. Whether they favor a congregational or reformist form of Islam, they all agree on the proscription of same-sex sexual practices. During sermons and in public speeches, they deliver stigmatizing discourses on homosexuality and encourage violence against homosexuals. In 2009, for instance, the Front Islamique pour la Défense des Valeurs Ethiques released a public statement claiming that “the prophet said: If you find people practicing the practices of the people of Lot, kill them. His words are the words of Allah and the Prophet told us to react against all attacks on Islam, wherever they come from.”⁹² The imam of Guediawaye (a suburb of Dakar) similarly argued “Goor-Jigeen are people who deserve to be banned from society, to join the silence of cemeteries, to be simply eliminated from this life.”¹² In this context, the figure of the homosexual becomes a moral “Other” who disrupts the economic, cultural and moral equilibrium of society, and who must therefore be eliminated.

Because of religious leaders’ growing influence in Senegal, political actors have become more reticent to position themselves in favor of the depenalization of homosexuality. Complying with religious discourses conversely allows them to retain some legitimacy in a society which tends to perceive homosexuals as agents of imperialism and as responsible for the economic collapse of the country. This point is implicitly emphasized in the statement given by MP Amadou Mberrry in May 2016, following the submission of a bill of law on the criminalization of homosexuality:

Criminalizing homosexuality in Senegal is completely normal (...) We represent the voice of the people, and the majority of the people does not want [homosexuality] (...) I will continue to defend [their voice]. I am in line with the President of the Republic. One hundred and ten deputies have already signed [the bill]. There are even lobbies [who signed it], I am personally with the Muslim lobby and we, Muslims, are very strong.⁹³

Political homophobia is then a major instrument for political actors because it enables them to maintain a certain closeness to religious authorities and to youth. Since the introduction of *ndigel* (or voting instructions) in Senegal, marabouts have become key actors in the political sphere.⁹⁴ During elections, they regularly make political statements, give their disciples voting instructions, and political parties approach them to garner their support.⁹⁵ Moreover, many marabouts today

occupy a political position. This dual status of preacher and politician strengthens the role they play in regulating political behaviors and extend their sphere influence beyond the religious. Because of their relative importance, it is not rare to see politicians visiting marabouts, or governmental representatives attending major religious events such as the Magal of Touba. This “clientelist relation” between religious authorities and the state is also reflected in debates on homosexuality.⁹⁶

In 2014, for instance, the Art Centre Raw Material Company organized a series of events, including several exhibitions and workshops on homosexuality in Africa. The exhibitions were described in media as “an event promoting homosexuality.” Several young people threatened to burn the center, and the Islamic organization Jamra asked the government to ban the exhibition. The director of the center, Mrs. Koyo Kouoh, was summoned by the Minister of Culture to close the exhibition on the ground that, although the government could not officially ban an art exhibition –Senegal being a country of freedom– religious values had to be respected.⁹⁷ This case illustrates the complexity of the management of homosexuality in a society in which religious authorities have gained increasing influence, and in which the central power struggles to maintain its legitimacy. Political homophobia then extends in two main directions. On the one hand, the expansion of religious authorities’ sphere of influence enables them to intervene in the repression of homosexuality by putting pressure on political actors and taking part to legislative debates. On the other hand, political figures increasingly adopt homophobic rhetoric based on religious morality to mobilize support from religious leaders and strengthen their electoral basis. Political homophobia is thus also inscribed in the power dynamics that exist between social actors in society.

Political Homophobia and Strategic Calculations

The use of homophobic rhetoric against political opponents further reflects the relation between political homophobia and power dynamics. As Tamale and Currier show, political homophobia is increasingly deployed in some African countries as a silencing tool against political figures accused of endorsing Western governments or violating moral laws.⁹⁸ In Senegal, however, homophobia has been used to weaken or eliminate political opponents.

An illustrative example is the institutional reform undertaken by Macky Sall in 2016 that required adoption by referendum. Among the points contested by the opposition was an article concerning “the recognition of new rights for citizens: rights to a healthy environment on their lands and their natural resources.” The lack of definition and specification on the notion of “new rights” revived controversies over the President’s intention to decriminalize homosexuality. Although Sall had announced three years before that he did not intend to change the current legislation on same-sex sexuality, political opponents accused the President of trying to legalize homosexuality in Senegal. In Touba, religious authorities organized meetings against the reform project. Political opponents gathered under the ‘Front du Non’ (No Front) and used the concept of “new rights” proposed in the reform project to portray the Senegalese President as a proponent of the homosexual cause. Bamar Gueye, MP of the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS), rationalized his decision to join Front du Non by the fact that “[The reform project] was going to favor homosexuals. It was the president Macky Sall that proposed [this reform] and his wife frequents homosexuals. She participated in gay meetings. It’s known. The photos are there, the videos are there.”⁹⁹ Faced with political backlashes, President Sall met with religious leaders in Dakar on 4 March 2016 to clarify his intentions. During the meeting, he explained “as long as I am President of the Republic in Senegal, homosexuality will never be legalized (...) These accusations are unfounded. They are not based on anything at all. They simply aim to sow confusion in the mind

of the Senegalese people.”¹⁰⁰ For President Sall, it was clear that controversies surrounding the decriminalization of homosexuality aimed to weaken his initiative for institutional reforms.

As this case shows, homophobia can discredit political figures, either to oppose to new legislation and reform projects, or to eliminate candidates during electoral campaigns. Ndeye Kebe, president of the association ‘Sourire de Femmes’ (the only association in charge of the defense of lesbian rights in Senegal), stresses the role of mass-media, politicians, and religious authorities in the instrumentalization of homophobia during political campaigns:

Follow the electoral campaign a bit. You cannot watch the news without hearing a party talking about homosexuality. And during the campaign, there is not a single Friday during which an imam does not preach against homosexuality. [They say] do whatever you want but do not bring homosexuals. And this happens because Senegalese are in general not educated. Less than 50 percent are educated. And they say [politicians] are right and immediately they will vote for them. [Homosexuality] is one of the biggest campaign themes.¹⁰¹

As this quote suggests, the issue of homosexuality does not only serve to reassert moral and cultural values but can also be a political resource among groups engaged in political competitions. This strategy can be traced back in Senegal to the period of 2010-2012, during which homosexuality emerged as a main theme in political campaigns. During this period, President Abdoulaye Wade proposed a constitutional reform to extend his term, generating political and civil society opposition. In 2011, following the failure of his constitutional reform project, Wade attempted to stage his son Karim as potential successor. Referred as the “minister of heaven, earth and sea,” Karim Wade had already occupied several ministerial positions. Political opposition, as well as several members of his father’s party, denounced what they perceived as an attempt to establish a “dynastic succession.” Karim Wade consequently became the target of the ruling party’s opponents, including Macky Sall. Among opponents’ criticisms was the rumor that Karim Wade was a homosexual, a rumor that was later relayed in several media reports. Several people seen with him were further accused of engaging in same-sex sexual relations, thus reinforcing the allegations made against Karim Wade. Allegations of homosexuality consequently became a political weapon to destabilize political opponents.

In this context, the debate on the decriminalization of homosexuality is paralyzed. On the one hand, politicians fear elimination from the political game for expressing their opinion on the depenalization of homosexuality. On the other hand, it generates fear of harsher repression against homosexuals among human rights organizations. This was the case after the deposit of the new bill by Mberry Sylla at the National Assembly in 2016. As François Patuel of Amnesty International explains:

We were quite concerned about the introduction of the bill in 2016. I do not really know where this bill stands, the advantage sometimes is that the bills are not prioritized by the National Assembly. It can stay on the president’s desk for some time. The risk is obviously that it comes at a time when it will be interesting for the power to play the card of homosexuality to have more political support.¹⁰²

This suggests that homophobia is not only a resource deployed by the opposition in political struggles, but also by political actors in power. The cross-cutting nature of the use of homophobia in political struggles makes it possible to perceive a political consensus around the rejection of homosexuality, which transgresses political or ideological battles. Homophobia generates a sense of unity in a deeply divided society.

Conclusion

The deployment of homophobia in political rhetoric in Senegal remains a recent, modular phenomenon embedded in power relations between Senegalese society and the West, religious authorities and political leaders, and between political leaders and their opponents. In this power configuration, political homophobia serves multiple purposes. First, it functions as a cultural marker to build national identity and reassert national integrity in the face of Western influences. Second, it functions as a tool for redefining social and moral boundaries in time of social and political instability it functions as an instrument of political mobilization to gain electoral support. Lastly, it functions as a political strategy to either promote one's political project or discredit political opponents.

A striking aspect of the Senegalese case is the instrumentalization of Islam in the politicization of homophobia. As argued in this contribution, religious authorities play a central role in society. Social instability, distrust towards politicians, and religious authorities' growing influence in politics, have given rise to clientelist relations which have conferred significant powers to the religious sphere in the fight against same-sex sexuality. Today, religious authorities influence political agendas on homosexuality by disseminating homophobic rhetoric based on religious interpretations and putting pressure on political leaders and the government.

Another striking aspect is the unintended effect of Western interventions in the sphere of homosexual rights. Pressure by international human rights organizations and Western governments to decriminalize homosexuality have accentuated homophobic sentiments in Senegal and given rise to a cultural nationalism that centers on heteronormativity. Political leaders have taken advantages of this situation to divert public attention from domestic problems, invoking the "neocolonial" character of homosexuality. In this regard, political homophobia in Senegal follows two trajectories: that of a national power struggle across social groups, and that of a fight against former colonial powers.

Notes

1 Itaborahy and Zhu 2013. McKay and Angotti 2016, pp. 397-420.

2 Awondo et al. 2012, pp. 145-68.

3 Ambrosino 2014.

4 McKay and Angotti 2016, pp. 397-420.

5 Lingiardi et al. 2005, pp. 81-94. M'Baye 2013, pp. 109-28.

6 Weinberg 1972.

7 Herek 1988, pp. 451-77. Herek et al. 1998, pp. 17-25.

8 Birken 1997, pp. 1-16. Adam 1998, pp. 387-404. Bernstein 2004, pp. 41-55. Stein 2005, pp. 601-20.

Frohlich 2011, pp. 349-52

9 M'Baye 2013, pp. 109-28.

10 Carroll and Mendos 2017.

11 Lingiardi et al. 2005, pp. 81-94.

12 Weiss and Bosia 2013, p. 14.

13 Ibid.

14 Sleptcov 2017, p. 156.

15 Phillips 1997, pp. 43-56.

16 Ibid.

- 17 Weiss and Bosia 2013. McKay and Angoti 2016, pp. 397-420.
- 18 McKay and Angotti 2016, pp. 397-420.
- 19 Awondo et al. 2012, pp. 145-68.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 M'Baye 2013, pp. 109-28.
- 22 Ireland 2013, pp. 47-66.
- 23 Appadurai 2006.
- 24 Week 2012, pp. 523-39.
- 25 McIntosh 1968, p. 84.
- 26 Evans-Pritchard 1970, pp. 1428-34. Murray and Roscoe 2001, pp. 1-20.
- 27 Evans-Pritchard 1970, pp. 1428-34. Kendall 2001, pp. 223-42. Murray and Roscoe 2001, pp. 1-20.
Morgan and Wieringa 2005, pp. 11-24.
- 28 Epprecht 2008.
- 29 M'Baye 2013, pp. 109-28.
- 30 The terms *pederast* referred during this period to homosexuals in France.
- 31 Corre 1894, p. 80.
- 32 Hayes 2016.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Leiris 1988, p. 33.
- 35 Corre 1984.
- 36 Ibid., p. 34.
- 37 Gorer in Hayes 2016, p. 89.
- 38 Davidson 1998, p. 111.
- 39 Béart in M'Baye 2013, p. 127.
- 40 Broqua 2017, pp. 163-83.
- 41 Niang 2010, pp. 116-24.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Broqua 2017, pp. 163-83.
- 44 Niang 2010, p. 117.
- 45 Mills 2011.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Article 319(3) of the Senegalese Penal Code. Retrieved from:
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1324655/1504_1241442742_49f5d8262.pdf.
- 49 Interview with Macky Sall by I-Tele, October 25, 2015. Retrieved from
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nPkWqlhZJ8>.
- 50 OFPRA 2014, p. 2.
- 51 Personal conversation with Thomas Ayissi, Dakar, December 13, 2017.
- 52 Migraine-George 2003, pp. 45-56. M'Baye 2013, pp. 109-28.
- 53 Epprecht 2008.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Wieringa 2008, p. 208.
- 56 Hoad 2007. Bhana et al. 2007, pp. 131-9.
- 57 Bhana et al. 2007, pp. 131-9. Aarmo 1999, pp. 255-80.
- 58 Ibid.

- 59 Massad in Éwanjé-Épée and Magliani-Belkacem, March 5, 2013. Retrieved from http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10461/the-empire-ofsexuality_an-interview-with-joseph-m.
- 60 For a summary of this case, see for instance <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/11/30/fear-life/violence-against-gay-men-and-men-perceived-gay-senegal#>.
- 61 Gning 2013, p. 148.
- 62 Gning 2013, p. 148.
- 63 Gning 2013, p. 148.
- 64 Puar 2013, pp. 336-39.
- 65 Puar and Mikdashi 2012.
- 66 Following Jack Lang's visit, the newspaper *Dakaractu* for instance published an article entitled "Can Macky Sall explain what he is doing with the homosexual Jack Lang by his side?" on March 19, 2012 (https://www.dakaractu.com/Que-Macky-Sall-nous-dise-que-vient-faire-l-homosexuel-Jack-Lang-a-ses-cotes_a16546.html). The magazine *SeneNews* similarly asked "Is Macky Sall hostage of a homosexual lobby?" in an article published on March 20, 2012.
- 67 Retrieved from <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130413-senegal-president-macky-sall-dit-non-depenalisation-homosexualite>.
- 68 Retrieved from <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/169948/politique/homosexualit-dakar-obama-tente-le-panier-mais-se-fait-contrer/>.
- 69 Retrieved from http://www.seneweb.com/news/Diplomatie/retombees-de-la-visite-du-president-obama-les-etats-unis-vont-financer-l-rsquo-agriculture-et-les-infrastructures_n_99202.html.
- 70 Personal conversation with Rhuman, Dakar, January 15, 2018
- 71 Fassin 2006, pp. 123-31.
- 72 Said 1978.
- 73 Awondo et al. 2012, pp. 145-68.
- 74 Gning 2013, p. 148.
- 75 Avery 1997, pp. 109-18. Murray and Roscoe 2001. Ireland 2013, pp. 47-66.
- 76 Murray and Roscoe 2001, p. 270.
- 77 Avery 1997, pp. 109-18.
- 78 Ward 2002, pp. 81-111.
- 79 For a detailed report of religions in Senegal, see for instance <http://religion-freedom-report.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/country-reports/senegal.pdf>.
- 80 Religious orders are represented in Senegal by the Qâdiriyya, the Tijâniyya, the Murîdiyya and the Layèniyya.
- 81 Diagne 2009. Seck 2010.
- 82 Seck 2010. Ba 2012, pp. 575-602.
- 83 ANSD 2014.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 For more details, see for instance http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r6_policypaperno24_trust_in_political_institutions.pdf
- 87 Coulon 2000, pp. 67-92.
- 88 Awondo et al. 2012, pp. 145-68.
- 89 Geschiere 2017, pp. 7-35.
- 90 Personal conversation with Mamadou Sidibe, Dakar, January 7, 2018.
- 91 Durkheim 1893.

- 92 Retrieve from <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/160403/societe/cr-ation-d-un-front-islamique-pour-la-d-fense-des-valeurs-thiques/>.
- 93 *L'Observateur*, February 2, 2016.
- 94 Camara 2014, pp. 105-16.
- 95 Osei 2012.
- 96 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 97 For more details on this case, see for instance https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/06/03/le-senegal-suspend-les-expositions-sur-l-homosexualite-a-la-biennale-de-dakar_4431305_3246.html.
- 98 Currier 2010, pp. 110-29. Tamale 2013, pp. 31-45.
- 99 Personal conversation with Bamar Gueye, Dakar, December 17, 2017.
- 100 Retrieved from https://www.pressafrik.com/Le-President-Macky-Sall-L-homosexualite-ne-sera-jamais-legalisee-au-Senegal-tant-que_a147035.html.
- 101 Personal conversation with Ndeye Kebe, Dakar, December 12, 2017.
- 102 Personal conversation with François Patuel, Dakar, January 22, 2018.

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