

# Religious Leadership and the Re-Politicisation of Gender and Sexuality in Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

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This article examines the role of religious actors in the emergence of sexual politics in Cameroon. Apart from arguing that the Catholic Archbishop Victor T. Mbakot, Cardinal Christian W. Tumi, and the private media were the key actors in the public debate of homosexuality, the article argues that their actions created the *moral sexual panic* that led to the contestation of sexual rights in Cameroon. It employs the theory of 'opposing movements' between the two religious actors and the civil society dedicated to same-sex human rights. But it calls for a contextualised analysis of 'religious homophobia' by taking into account the opposition between the religious actors and the State.

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## Introduction

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, African nations have been facing a wave of homophobia unprecedented in their history. In southern Africa, however, this phenomenon began in the late 1990s. In Zimbabwe, for instance, President Robert Mugabe combined homosexuals and political opponents in his attempts to win popular support.<sup>1</sup> The former Namibian President Sam Nujoma attacked homosexuality in a similar manner.<sup>2</sup> Whereas this politically-defined homophobia could have been a reaction to the constitutional protection and legalisation of same-sex marriages in South Africa, in reality, they were also influenced by local political realities. In the social sciences this opposition is described as 'political homophobia', an idea that explains actions of political personalities against persons presumed to be homosexual as being part of the larger strategy of establishing power or distracting from socio-economic issues such as massive unemployment,

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1 M. Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, (Montréal & Kingston: McGill University Press, 2004); E. Oinas, "Introduction: Sex and Politics in Africa—Case Africa", *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, no. 17 (2009), 149-157.

2 E. Oinas, "Introduction: Sex and Politics in Africa", 149-157.

dictatorship, embezzlement of public funds etc.<sup>3</sup>

In other regions, however, public opposition against homosexuals arose later in the mid-2000s, often promoted by members of religious institutions (primarily Christianity and Islam). Such opposition courts political leadership for legal action against sexual minorities. For example, Ugandan Member of Parliament David Bahati, worked with Evangelical pastors in the drafting of the infamous Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2009 (passed into law in 2014 but struck down by courts on technical grounds the same year). This homophobic environment was largely created by Ugandan pastors in partnership with the US Christian Right. In 2009, Scott Lively and his America colleagues travelled to Uganda to alert local people to what they called the ‘gay international agenda’<sup>4</sup> which led to the drafting of Anti-Homosexuality Bill.

The Ugandan example demonstrates one example of how religious leaders construct homophobia in African contexts. But it also illustrates the international connections between anti-homosexual groups, African politicians and the US Christian Right in its quest for new followers in the global South and Africa in particular.<sup>5</sup> This extremely complex construction of international homophobia has been termed ‘modular homophobia’.<sup>6</sup> The concept of ‘modular homophobia’ allows us to consider the flow/traffic/circulation of models of homophobia and their multidimensionality, while acknowledging their different reconfigurations from one context to the other.

## Homophobia in Cameroon

In the Cameroonian context, homosexuality remains punishable by imprisonment from 6 months to 5 years, and a fine ranging from 15,000-200,000 African francs (roughly 15-315 euros). Until early 2005, when homosexuality became a public problem, sponsored primarily by religious actors from the Roman Catholic Church

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- 3 A. Currier, *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2012). M. Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance*, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2013).
  - 4 J. Sadgrove et al., 2012, “Morality Plays and Money Matters: Politics of Homosexuality in Uganda”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 50, no. 1 (2012), 103-129.
  - 5 P. Awondo, P. Geshiere, R. Graeme, “Homophobic Africa? Towards a More Nuanced View”, *African Studies Review* 55, no 3 (2012), 145-168; Kopya Kaoma, *Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia*. (Somerville, MA: Political Research Associates, 2009).
  - 6 M. Bosia, M. Weiss “Political Homophobia in Comparative Perspective” in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements and the Politics of Oppression*, edited by M. Weiss and M. Bosia, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

and the private press,<sup>7</sup> the law remained dormant since its introduction in 1962.<sup>8</sup>

This article is based in four years of ethnography in Cameroon, throughout which we have analysed a series of publications in local media outlets, including more than 500 pages of articles published largely by the private media between 2006 and 2011, a period when the media controversy was at its highest. Our analysis prioritises the role played by the Roman Catholic leadership during the emergence of homosexuality as a public and political issue.

In Cameroon, the majority of the population is Christian (40% of Catholic and Protestant Christians living in the south of the country), 30% is Muslims (living primarily in the north Sahel), and the rest comprised of traditional religions.<sup>9</sup>

Two actors, Victor Tonyé Mbakot, the Archbishop of Yaoundé and Cardinal Christian Wiyghan Tumi of Douala, gained notoriety for their unmatched opposition to same-gender relations in the span of 3 years. In 2005, Archbishop Mbakot delivered a homily denouncing homosexuality, which was widely covered by the press. In 2009, Cardinal Tumi organised a march 'against abortion and homosexuality'. These two events constitute decisive elements in the re-politicisation of gender and sexuality in Cameroon. We use the term re-politicisation of gender and sexuality to express the idea that gender as a political category, with an objective of reducing inequalities between men and women, has already been integrated into political discourse for many years. What is new, however, is the shift of the significance of gender and sexuality, where gender no longer expresses solely the 'feminine' condition, as was the case for many years, but also sexual orientation, and the end of the separation of masculine and feminine identity. That separation had come about from an inherited patriarchy that espoused a 'traditional' order that was reinforced by colonisation.

This transformation of discourse on gender, as well as the analysis of Van Klinken,<sup>10</sup> is an interesting way to study the actions of Cameroonian Catholics. Two principal actors illustrate a shift in the debate from a critique of 'deviant' sexuality and of moral decline (Archbishop Mbakot) towards a debate of gender

7 Guéboguo, C., *La Question homosexuelle en Afrique: Le cas du Cameroun*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 110-132; P. Awondo, 2012, "Médias, politique et homosexualité au Cameroun: Retour sur la construction d'une controverse", *Politique Africaine* 126, (2012), 69-85; P. Awondo, "The Politicisation of Sexuality and the Rise of Homosexual Mobilisation in Postcolonial Cameroon", *Review of African Political Economy* 37, no. 125 (2010), 315-328.

8 N. Ndjio, "Sexuality and Nationalist Ideologies in Post-colonial Africa" in *The Sexual History in the Global South*, edited by S. Wieringa, and H. Sirori, (London: Zed Books, 2012), 120-143.

9 M. Lasseur, "Cameroun: les nouveaux territoires de Dieu", *Afrique Contemporaine* 215, (2005), 93-116.

10 A. Van Klinken, "Theology, Gender Ideology and Masculinity Politics. A discussion on the transformation of masculinities as envisioned by African theologians and a local Pentecostal church", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 138, (2010), 2-18.

norms, coupling together Cardinal Tumi's issues of sexual minorities' and women's rights (the 'march against abortion and homosexuality') for the first time.

We begin by retracing the process that led to this coupling and show the ambivalence of such a discourse. To do so, I rely on the concept of 'opposing movements', which suggests not only analysing these calls to arms in an isolated fashion, but rather considering the counter movements which nourish them and with which they maintain a relationship of co-production and of quasi-collaboration insofar as these strategies mutually inspire each other. Notably, this concept was made famous by Kimberly Dugan in her 1997 analysis of a controversy among gays and Christian counter-activists in Cincinnati, in the United States.<sup>11</sup> It was also taken up again in 2008 in order to understand the long-term anti-abortion mobilisation strategies in the United States.<sup>12</sup> These analyses added a theoretical innovation to the field, since they focused on the chain of events as they were reported by the press.

Whereas these studies were in the American context, they are helpful in understanding what was happening in Cameroon around the 'anti-homosexual and anti-abortion' march. Nonetheless, it is also critical to consider the post-colonial tension in a socio-political context influenced by anti-imperialism and cultural nationalism as means to legitimise certain discourses in the public sphere generated by democratisation and diverse actors in sexual politics.<sup>13</sup>

## Returning to the Politicisation of Sexuality in Cameroon: Moral Actors and Homophobia as Political Critique

On 11 January 2006, in a collection entitled 'The Galaxy of Cameroon', the newspaper *La Météo* published a list of 'homosexuals in Cameroon' under the heading, "Mores: Homosexuality at the Head of the State" on its front page.<sup>14</sup> The article included eleven names of mostly former governmental ministers, internationally renowned artists, professional athletes, and members of the clergy

11 K.B. Dugan, "'Strategy and Spin': Opposing Movement Frames in an Anti-gay Voter Initiative", *Sociological Focus* 37 (2004), 213-235. Other authors, such as Mary Bernstein, had already analysed the strategies and counter strategies of gay and lesbian mobilisation in the US in a similar fashion: See M. Bernstein, "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement", *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 3, (1997), 531-65.

12 S. Meyer, and S. Staggenborg, "Opposing Movements Strategies in U.S. Abortion Politics", *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 28, (2008), 207-238.

13 S. Wieringa, "Postcolonial Amnesia: Sexual Moral Panics, Memory, and Imperial Power", in *Moral Panics, Sex Panics. Fear and the Fight over Sexual Rights*, edited by G. Herdt (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 205-233.

14 See *La Météo* No. 99 of 11 January 2006.

allegedly engaging in homosexual acts.

On 24 January 2006, a second list was published by another weekly publication, *L'Anecdote*, whose article was entitled: "Deviance: The complete list of homosexuals in Cameroon". The commentary, which cleverly used the concept of 'presumed homosexuals', listed roughly fifty names of individuals in a four-page list. It included four sections: 1) Government and Business (for para-governmental businesses), 2) Civil Society, 3) Economic Actors, and 4) Culture and Sports. Thus, this publication employed a more precise targeting and a more robust classification that included photographs of each person and descriptive accounts of each of their alleged 'homosexual' exploits.

A third list appeared just days thereafter, published by the biweekly publication *Nouvelle Afrique* on 26 January 2006. Entitled: "Homosexuality: Here are the fags among us", this article attached a small description of each of the noted figures. This description served as a data sheet of the incriminated individuals, indicating their first and last names and their political or societal roles, among other things. While the three lists were released by different newspapers, some names found themselves on all three lists; notably some important political figures such as the first President of the Republic and a former General Secretary of the Organisation of African Unity, now African Union. It also included current political figures such



Fig. 1 : The Front Page of *Nouvelle Afrique*



Fig. 2 : The Front Page of *L'Anecdote*

as the Minister of Communication at the time of the publication of these lists, the Minister of the Interior still serving at the time of this article's publication, as well as the minister charged with assembly relations.

Beyond specific comments on the individuals, the articles and the reactions that they generated highlighted certain general features, which invite reflections on the entire media coverage of homosexuality in the nation. The commentary on these lists share three principal grievances: first, a fine line is drawn between homosexual perversion/vice and political power. Second, the relationship between prostitution/*droit du seigneur*/corruption and homosexuality at the heart of the political system. Finally, the link between homosexuality and the 'occult'; the idea that homosexuality is symbol of the 'invisible forces'. The belief is that same-sex relations is critical to rite of passage for esoteric circles (The Red Cross of Constantine, the Freemasons, etc.).

This last category implies a close connection among power circles, the 'occult', and plots of the mighty against the weakest, casting scorn upon the homosexual orientation. Such beliefs seek to explain the origin of homosexuality in the political machinery. It brings us back to the period of de-colonialisation, which presented homosexuality as a symbol of servile compromise among the former colonists and the indigenous de-colonialised successors. There is, thus, a sort of judicial questioning of political power personified by the listed politicians. It also serves as a commentary on the 'current affairs' of the country, interweaving contemporary themes in public life: the visibility of homosexuals, corruption, nepotism, cultural imperialism, pedophilia in the Roman Catholic church and the *droit du seigneur*, none of which were problematic for those whose sexual engagements were exclusively with women. Finally, there was the face of 'post-colonial tensions' carried out by the attribution of homosexuality to figures of the colonial era, which also contributed to the 'classic' denial of homosexuality on the continent. This pronouncement on homosexuality borrowed largely from an approach of moral and sexual panic orchestrated by the private press, which spread rumours of homosexuality among these public figures as a way of discrediting and shaming them.

## **The Catholic Archbishop of Yaoundé, the '(Homo)Sexual Anxiety,' and the Fabrication of Anger/Indignation**

Scholars of homosexuality in Cameroon squarely attribute the origin of the anti-gay controversy<sup>15</sup> to the Catholic Archbishop of Yaoundé, Archbishop Mbakot.<sup>16</sup>

15 N. Ndjio, "Sexuality and Nationalist Ideologies in Post-colonial Africa", 120-143.

16 International press coverage consistently affirms that it is this figure who launched the public attack

This article, however, adds a nuanced perspective on this assertion. First, in June of 2005, six months before the Archbishop delivered his homily on 25 December 2005, seventeen young people were already detained at Yaoundé-Kodengui Central Prison for homosexual-related crimes.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the press had already been reporting on homosexuality for many years. One example was the November 2004 interview of a 'lesbian' (with her face fully covered) in the popular newspaper *Aurore Plus*. In this regard, the archbishop simply popularised the negative claims of the 'journalists of lists'. Thus, it is important to acknowledge and contextualise the history of the anti-homosexual crusade which is now attributed to Archbishop Mbakot. This is not to underestimate his influence in the anti-homosexual campaign, since it is substantial, as are the actions of several other religious actors in Cameroon.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Archbishop Mbakot gave a strong moral endorsement to the anti-homosexual crusade and reinforced and sacralised the public's discourse of hatred against homosexuals.

During the 'traditional' Christmas service, usually attended by leading public and political figures, the archbishop remained faithful to the Roman Catholic Church's denunciation of homosexuality. While he criticised moral failures and blamed the administration for downward economic problems and poverty, he also denounced homosexuality as a threat weighing against the nation's security, and the future of the family. In this regard, his homily combined elements of the public debate with those of a more private notion. To that effect, he adopted a troubled and worried tone—mixing denunciation of homosexuality with appeals to 'public authorities' to act against certain youth-corrupting acts such as homosexuality and drug abuse. Using the plight of the youth, he invoked two overlapping issues: on the one hand delinquency and drug use, and on the other hand, homosexuality as something imposed on the youth to gain certain favours. In his words,

What degeneration! In the name of obtaining a job, in the name of a so-called promotion, in the name of admission to university, we want to impose homosexuality on young people as a path to success, or as a precondition of passing certain exams. And in certain scholarly establishments, courses given to children so that they accept and tolerate homosexuality!<sup>19</sup>

Archbishop Mbakot stigmatised this 'intergenerational' homosexuality with precision, claiming that it constituted a violation of the rights of the youth. He also clearly genders his remarks, 'young folks (masc.)' referencing the young men—his comments conflated homosexuality with masculine sodomy. In another

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against homosexuality. See, for example, *Têtu* of 27 November 2006, and *Têtu* of 30 June 2006.

17 See G. A. Azébazé, 'Mœurs: des présumés homosexuels à Kodengui', *Le Messager*, 21 February, 2006.

18 We will return to the case of Cardinal Tumi in the second portion of this article.

19 An excerpt from the published homily in its entirety that appeared in the daily newspaper *La Nouvelle Expression*, 4 January, 2006.

excerpt, he attacks drug abuse:

We can only shudder, on this Christmas Day, at the presence of drugs in certain high schools in the city of Yaoundé, though they be international vocation schools. This concerns parents, educators, and our authorities. Even our children in lower secondary school smoke cannabis!<sup>20</sup>

This passage sought to address the widely discussed events of drug trafficking and the murder of a diplomat's son on the campus of the American school in Yaoundé, in early 2005. The press presented the story as a 'murder/crime of passion'. While some argued that the son of a former Cameroonian football star had homosexual relations with the foreign diplomat's son, a small number of newspapers put forth the theory that the football star's son faced '(homo)sexual harassment', which forced him to kill his friend.<sup>21</sup> The investigation commissioned by public officials yielded nothing—thus increasing the speculations.

From this perspective, one can appreciate the Archbishop's reprisal as he sought to address the theory of the victimisation of the 'youth'. In this context, young people are made the 'ideal victims', thus freeing them from any moral responsibility, while blaming foreigners and some senior politicians for the youths' drifting morals. In addition, international vacation or study abroad opportunities given to middle school, high school and university students were equally associated with homosexuality. It was rumoured, for example, that young men were forced into homosexuality in order to obtain such opportunities.

It is critical to appreciate moral panic as a mechanism in which all victimisation implies an accusation and a designated executioner/persecutor. The 'lists of homosexuals' claimed this victimisation-accusation model most notably in an article in *L'Anecdote*, which accompanied the first published list:

Homosexuality is making its way to Cameroon thanks to those who would control rather than combat it. Must one wallow in it by remaining silent in the face of constant incestuous invasions that pollute society? [...] *L'Anecdote* refuses to be an accomplice of the civic and moral decay of the youth.<sup>22</sup>

In this commentary, too, one can see the growing visibility of homosexuality and the desire of the publication to serve as a 'moral actor' responsible for the 'youth'. In Cameroonian politics, the youth have always been a major political target. In retrospect, like religious groups, journalists took advantage of this social group to position themselves on a social playing field shaped by widespread disaccord.

The constant invocation of the youth relates to what one might call the 'fabrication of anger/indignation'. Generally, the youth are perceived as a fragile

20 An excerpt from the published homily in *La Nouvelle Expression*, 4 January, 2006.

21 See L. Olinga, "Cameroun: Sexe, mensonges et politique", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 March, 2006

22 See *La Météo*, no. 99 11 January, 2006.



group, and in sexual politics, they are considered 'easy' and 'passive' victims of homosexuals. To attack them, for example, is to participate in the 'violation/rape' of the weak. The intermeshing of the youth and violation/rape justifies socio-political outrage and lead to collective revolt. To claim that homosexuality of the 'elite' puts the 'youth' in danger is to say that the future itself, and by analogy and extension that of the nation, is put in jeopardy by homosexuality.

Cameroon is used to such 'myths' that exploit the youth as a pretext for certain actions, particularly around 11 February, which is the national holiday for the youth. It seems no accident, therefore, that the publication on homosexuality relied heavily on a discourse of the youth, and took place on the day before this national youth-day celebrations. That the 'List of Homosexuals Affair' relied, at least in part, on the protection of youth and that it was released on the day before the national youth holiday is reminiscent of similar messages that have used this sort of strategic timing in the past. For many decades, Cameroon has known a recurring rumour involving young women being seduced and allured by men in luxury vehicles, only to be found dead shortly thereafter. This rumour insists that young women were murdered by these 'serpent-men' who had made a pact with 'occult forces' in order to enrich themselves. In short, the assumed morality of the time evokes the peril of the youth trapped by the lure of quick and easy profit.

In the early 2000s, however, a significant change appeared in this rumour. Stories that once involved young women and girls were now substituted with young men, who were said to be 'trapped' or 'ensnared' by older, affluent men. At the heart of the University of Yaoundé campus where I stayed from 2003 to 2005, I regularly heard rumours of young men accused of living beyond their means and getting dropped off at home each night by older men. In this new version, however, a moral commentary on masculine homosexuality had gained visibility in urban spaces, particularly at the university, against a backdrop of judicial trials against 'social elders'.

Looking again at the 'List Affair' in January-February 2006, one can return to the hypothesis of 'rumour epidemiology' with specific 'spatio-temporal' elements and 'cultural' factors explaining, at least in part, its rampant spread. Nonetheless, many issues surround the publications of the lists. First and foremost, the idea is based on the premise of 'calling the future into question' and 'safeguarding the youth', thus serving as metaphorical counterparts. Second, it is associated with the issue of sexual virility, which leads to the 'state of anxiety'. Without falling into the realm of psychoanalysis, one must note that the question of sexual virility is central here. Achille Mbembe has already noted that in the face of social upheaval the 'postcolony' has morphed itself into a society of 'anxious virility'.<sup>23</sup> This form of 'modern anxiety' invades all social spaces while exerting bodily

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23 Mbembé, "Provisional Notes", 62.

violence. Joseph Tonda describes this violence as ‘imaginary violence’.<sup>24</sup> It is imaginary rather than material because it is utilised in a context of rapid socio-economic deregulation unique to contemporary African societies.<sup>25</sup> Séverin-Cécile Abéga thought that homosexuality was a problem because it was perceived in an essentially ‘phantasmatic’ way in which the idea of rape did not only border on possession, but also dispossession of self. To truly understand the positioning of Archbishop Mbakot, one must take into account the appropriation of the discourse on the social anxieties regarding perceived changes in sexuality, virility and gender.

## Opposing Movements: LGBTI Associations, the Catholic Authorities, and the State

Another point of entry for understanding the decisive role of the Roman Catholic Church is the 11 July, 2009 march against abortion and homosexuality organised by Cardinal Tumi, the highest serving Catholic authority. This march came three years after Archbishop Mbakot delivered his sermon. This first-of-its-kind event can be analysed through the concept of ‘opposing movements’, as highlighted in the introduction of this article. It is important to note that despite certain repressive actions of the Catholic Church since 2005, the State was passive in policing homosexuality and allowed the operation of sexual and gender rights groups in the nation. By organising an event that directly implicated the State, as we will see, the Cardinal puts the State on trial. From then on, movements and counter-movements would confront each other, involving three main protagonists: the Catholic Church, sexual minorities’ human rights groups, and the State.

## The March Against Abortion and Homosexuality

On 11 July, 2009, one public event made a lasting impression on the state of affairs in Cameroon. Cardinal Christian Tumi, retired leader of the Catholic Church in Douala, initiated a march against ‘abortion and homosexuality’. The march, according to various sources, brought together between fifteen and twenty five thousand people in the streets of the city and ended with a mass in front of the Cathedral of Saint Paul and Peter. At the end of the mass, a delegation led by the prelate submitted a petition to the governor of the littoral region (of which Douala is the administrative centre) against the promulgation of the Maputo Protocol as well as a letter addressed to the Head of State.

24 Tonda, *Le Souverain moderne*, 2005.

25 S-C. Abéga, “La presse et l’Etat, l’exemple des procès sur l’homosexualité au Cameroun”, *Terroirs*, 1-2, (2007), 95-112.

In order to understand this event, which eventually precipitated a veritable counter-movement against homosexuality, one must return to its foundation; that is, to the famous text known as the Maputo Protocol, and then to the way in which local political actors would monopolise the text.

The controversial text that led to the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion and homosexuality originates from the Second Ordinary Session of the conference of the African Union in Maputo, Mozambique on 11 July, 2003. In its broadest sense, the Maputo Protocol attempts to combat discrimination against women by ordering African governments to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women, including through provision of safe abortions. The implementation of equality between women and men was henceforth elevated to a level of principled ethics. The Protocol called on governments that had not already done so to introduce these fundamental principles into their legislative bodies, and to ensure that they were enacted effectively.

Concomitantly, it insists that countries integrate the notion of 'discrimination based on sex' into their political decisions and official actions. This Protocol came as a counterpart to the African Charter, and its application was conditional upon the ratification of the text by roughly fifteen countries. It was implemented under the watch of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), the body the African Union put in place to monitor the agreements of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, while awaiting the establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights.<sup>26</sup>

26 This text contains thirty-two articles. Article 14, which proclaims the right to abortion and sets the stage for reproductive rights, is at the heart of the controversy in most countries. Below is this very excerpt of the Maputo Protocol, found online at, <<http://www.au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa>>.

**Article 14 / Health and Reproductive Rights**

1. States Parties shall ensure that the right to health of women, including sexual and reproductive health is respected and promoted. This includes:
  - a. the right to control their fertility;
  - b. the right to decide whether to have children, the number of children and the spacing of children;
  - c. the right to choose any method of contraception;
  - d. the right to self-protection and to be protected against sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS;
  - e. the right to be informed on one's health status and on the health status of one's partner, particularly if affected with sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, in accordance with internationally recognized standards and best practices;
  - f. the right to have family planning education.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to:
  - a. provide adequate, affordable and accessible health services, including information, education and communication programs to women especially those in rural areas;
  - b. establish and strengthen existing pre-natal, delivery and post-natal health and nutritional services for women during pregnancy and while they are breast-feeding;

The debate against the proclaimed implementation of the Maputo Protocol was manifest in Cameroon in regards to the Protocol's acceptance of women's reproductive health and rights, including the right to safe abortion. The Cardinal notably affirmed that abortion was 'contrary to Cameroonian law'. The polemic grew, and two camps began to progressively occupy the media to confront the Protocol. The Cardinal increased the frequency of his interviews, notably on the private television channel 'Equinoxe TV', a very popular channel in the economic capital.

Paradoxically, during these interviews, the prelate rarely mentioned the link between the Maputo Protocol and the question of homosexuality outside of the law's prohibition of homosexuality. In an interview given to the daily newspaper *Mutations* on 13 July, 2009, he returned to the motives of the march:

This march is solely for the respect of life against an immoral principle. The State must do everything to rectify this attack. This article even contradicts some of our laws that ban abortion and homosexuality. We call on the faithful to remain vigilant, abortion is murder. This is why abortion leads to excommunication of the Church. Absolution can be given only by the bishop or a priest whom he has delegated. To show that it is grave to end an innocent life.<sup>27</sup>

He would rarely go on to mention homosexuality directly as he did in this excerpt, but media coverage repeatedly mentioned it. In radio and television programmes throughout the country, information making the link between forbidden sexuality and the Maputo Protocol began to gain ground.

## Counter-Movements by Sexual Minorities' Human Rights Organisations at the March

A number of figures among gay rights activists and supporters took their turn in occupying the public political space. The first is a lawyer named Alice Nkom from the Association of Defence of Homosexuals (ADEFHO), who would eventually be replaced by her group's vice president, Sébastien Mandeng. In addition to these two, Steave Nemande, the leader of Alternatives-Cameroon must be added to the list. Alternatives-Cameroon is primarily noted for one of its public announcements denouncing the Catholic Church of Douala's 'conflation' of abortion and homosexuality.<sup>28</sup>

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- c. protect the reproductive rights of women by authorizing medical abortion in cases of sexual assault, rape, incest, and where the continued pregnancy endangers the mental and physical health of the mother or the life of the mother or the fetus.

27 Monique Ngo Mayah, Interview on 11 July 2009, *Mutations*, 13 July, 2009.

28 P. Awondo, *Homosexualité, sida et constructions politiques. Ethnographie des trajectoires entre le Cameroun et la France*, Ph. D Dissertation (Paris: EHESS, 2012).

On her end, Nkom was contacted by the media for her reaction to this news; she remained faithful to her traditional line of defence and spoke on media platforms using the Maputo Protocol text. However, she launched a novel line of defence in this debate by linking homophobic violence to sexist violence. She did so during a TV programme on the private channel STV2 on 23 June, 2009 (see Fig. 3). The debate was entitled, “Controversy around the Maputo Protocol: Does it concern women’s reproductive rights or the legalisation of homosexuality in Cameroon?”

The debate brought together a doctoral student in anthropology working on the issue of homosexuality in Cameroon from the University of Douala (a member of ADEFHO), a French documentary filmmaker of *‘sortir du nkuta’*, a priest from the Catholic diocese of Douala; and Alice Nkom. Throughout the course of the discussion, the different parties remained firm to their positions. Although the priest brought up biblical arguments against the Protocol, he also linked abortion to homosexuality. “The Maputo Protocol”, he argued, “which claims to be about women is the Trojan horse of homosexuals”. Nkom consistently advocated the human rights and the respect of human dignity for all people regardless of gender or sexual orientation. The moderator pressured Nkom by reminding her that homosexuality was banned by law. But he also rightly recognised, in the Maputo text, particularly Article 14 (which Nkom read during the debate), there was no direct link to homosexuality.

The young anthropologist had a difficult time standing his ground during the debate, but he did have the opportunity to highlight the “media’s manipulation, which amalgamated homosexuality and abortion”. The French filmmaker returned to this idea of opinion manipulation among other things. She joined Nkom in her argument about sexism and homosexuality, while noting that both exist in France just as they do in Cameroon. The latter two points, which constituted the defensive framework of Nkom and Mandeng (who replaced her on future debates), allowed the discussion of the intermeshing of homophobic and sexist violence, which was absent from the homosexuality debate in the nation.

If the 2006 list of homosexuals was a grievance against abominations, against sexual deviance and bodily perversion, this counter-offensive from the two moral entities that are the Catholic Church of Douala and the private press launched an attack of the ‘policing of gender’. The policing of gender, as Elsa Dorlin explains, is the idea of calling upon a social category in a heterosexist, sexist or homophobic manner to remain in its place, reified by a subordinate. Dorlin clarifies that this ‘sexual policing’ intervenes as soon as the subordinates, after having interiorised their state of being dominated, finish by rebelling out of necessity.



Fig 3. : The debate participants ‘cards on the table’ on the private television channel ST2. In the centre is the programme host, on the left of the image (from left to right) sit the anthropology doctoral student, Nkom and the French filmmaker; facing them are the priest and another journalist.<sup>29</sup>

This condition is reminiscent of analyses conducted in other African contexts. In the case of Senegal, for example, Cheick Niang<sup>30</sup> showed that violence against homosexuals, notably effeminate homosexuals known by the term *goor-gigen* (man-woman), was violence against the feminine gender. In a similar manner, in Mali, a critique of the Maputo Protocol was put forth around the rejection of the ‘family code’ reform, with its principal point of disagreement being Article 14, where the Islamic high council judged that the text contradicts Malian ‘tradition’ and ‘values’.<sup>31</sup> Stated otherwise, homosexuality here served as a megaphone for the critique of conferring on women the right to exercise their reproductive capacity according to their own choices. This suggests that the real problem is the new status that women would acquire—thanks to their right to control their own bodies—calling into question traditional hegemonic masculinities. Homosexuality here is a catalyst of anger, mobilising the masses against this new ‘ethic of sexual liberty’, which allows individuals to exercise bodily self-determination.

In the daily commentaries before and after the march, the media systematically enlisted Nkom’s response. When she was not able to respond to the media, her vice-president Sébastien Mandeng stepped in. Mandeng’s presence (which, was

29 The Archives of ADEFHO, visited in July 2010.

30 C. Niang, “Understanding Sex between Men in Senegal: Beyond Current Linguistic and Discursive Categories”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Sexuality, Health and Right*, edited by P. Aggleton and P. Richards (London: Routledge, 2010).

31 R. Dassié, “Code de la famille: les femmes maliennes montent au créneau”, <[www.afrik.com](http://www.afrik.com)> from 24 August, 2009.

similar to that of the Alternative's president), however, led to many unintended results. First, it meant that the local media recognised, to a certain extent, the existence of sexual minorities and sexual rights civil societies. Second, whereas in the events surrounding the list of homosexuals, Nkom had been the only person to truly defend the accused homosexuals, now the face of the defenders had diversified. Both Steave and Sébastien publically announced their sexual orientation as gays—leading to a new paradigm in sexual politics in Cameroon. No longer was it only the militant heterosexual allies speaking publicly, but also young 'homosexuals' who set about defending themselves publicly. In retrospect, the Cardinal's stigmatization of, and the mobilisation against homosexuality opened a public discourse and a public debate surrounding the question of homosexuality in Cameroon. This gives us a glimpse of the ambiguity and ambivalence of the media's coverage of homosexuality, which also constitutes another element discussed below.

## **Homophobia and Rivalry Among Religious Leaders**

The Cardinal's march against abortion and homosexuality carries a political dimension. The reason the Cardinal mobilised so many people to participate in the march can be linked to his own personal needs of demonstrating his power over the government to which he was opposed for many decades. But he was also challenging Archbishop Mbakot, who was his rival, even though it was the Archbishop who first denounced the 'homosexual invasion' in 2005.<sup>32</sup> Cardinal Tumi took his shot again at this debate and remained faithful to the Catholic Church's position against abortion. He caught his Yaoundéan rival, who gained popularity in 2006, off guard. In doing so, the Cardinal repositioned the city of Douala in its historic role as 'contested city', and its population's lost tradition of angry demonstrations.

From these observations, one can readily see this local political game at play, and the positions of different actors who denounce homosexuality on a political chessboard. Significantly, when Cardinal Tumi launched the petition against homosexuality and abortion, the Cameroonian National Assembly was voting on a law demanding the end of government funding of Church projects. While the media had uncovered this link, Cardinal Tumi reportedly claimed "knowing nothing on the matter".<sup>33</sup> However, a potential key to understanding this event exists in Archbishop Mbakot's appeal to his members to ignore the Cardinal's actions just days before Cardinal Tumi's march:

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32 An excerpt from the published homily in *La Nouvelle Expression*, 4 January, 2006.

33 See Monique Ngo Mayah, Interview on 11 July, 2009, *Mutations*, 13 July, 2009.

One should not engage Christians while no decision has yet been made. The Episcopal Conference of Cameroon will meet in the coming days to decide on the ratification of the Maputo treaty [...] the signatures that are being collected in Douala do not commit the Catholic Church, and no protest march is planned for July 11.<sup>34</sup>

From this context, there is need to consider the complexity of the local actors in the spiritual and moral powers arena in matters of sexuality.

## Conclusion

This article explores modular homophobia promoted by Roman Catholic religious leaders in a discourse that is a political critique as much as it is a rejection of the international moral order that promotes gender and sexual equality. The anti-homosexual cabal leads to a reconfiguration of the local political space by creating the rivalry between the State and religious leaders on one hand, while exacerbating post-colonial tensions on the other hand. But it also leads to religious opposition to international order, thereby reactivating gender policing, while relying paradoxically on inherited colonial religion.

This situation invites two related reflections. On the one hand, sexual politics is playing a critical role in local politics. In Cameroon, politics refers not only to the State, but also to interactions among religious leaders, as was the case with two Catholic leaders. On the other hand, these 'sexual moral strategies' lead to a reconfiguration of the moral and spiritual marketplace. In contemporary Cameroon, for example, there are certain new American-inspired churches that position themselves as tolerant vis-à-vis of homosexuality. Pastor Kenmogné, for example, regularly takes the position of calling for more tolerance in the media and the nation.

Consequently, Weiss and Bosia's discussion around 'modular homophobia' finds its relevance in understanding the sexual politics in Cameroon. The arenas of politics at play, the reconfigurations of the moral marketplace, the race among different moral actors at the heart of the Church including the desire to jeopardise the State, and homosexual and women rights reveal the complexity of Cameroonian homophobia. The question one must now ask is to what extent religious homophobia, which is fortified with anti-feminism, and anti-imperialist political critique, can be contested by State-level intervention or international activism.

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34 An excerpt from a communication by Monsignor Victor Tonyé Mbakot, published by the website <[www.kajwalai.com](http://www.kajwalai.com)> on 20 June 2009.