



DANGEROUS
SPEECH PROJECT

2024 Case Study

GLOBAL RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Co-Opting of Language as a Tool for Homophobia in Kenya

**Kendi Gikunda
Njoki Kariuki**

Language is powerful. The languages we use not only shape our interactions with other people but also shape our thoughts, opinions, attitudes and perception of the world and people around us. Recent events in Kenya have seen increasing instances of language being co-opted and used maliciously as a weapon of discrimination and oppression against the queer community. Words that originally held neutral or positive meanings have been twisted to convey negative connotations against the queer community and continuously feed into harmful stereotypes.

The ruling by the Supreme Court on 24th February 2023, which allowed the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) to be registered as an NGO, and reiterated their right of association, set the Kenyan public discourse ablaze. All over social media, traditional media, in churches, schools and public places, the topic of how the queer community was contributing to the death of religious and traditional values took center stage.

"We the people of Kenya are greater than any Court in the world, if the people of Kenya decide to take signatures and take petitions, we can be able to tell them we say NO!"

- Reverend Canon Dr. Sammy Wainaina (ACK Church)

With this public outcry came the usual co-opting of language. Direct insults and jeers aimed at the queer community and their supporters have long been a staple of homophobia, but co-opted language tends to reach even neutral people and those who have no strong feelings about the idea of homosexuality.

Family Values

One of the most common phrases used in the defense of anti-queer views is the protection of "family values". Africans pride themselves as a particularly family-oriented culture, and anything that threatens the family make-up or the value it represents faces extreme opposition.

Many Africans hold a strong belief in the conventional family structure, which typically comprises a husband, wife (or wives), and children, viewing it as the only legitimate family set-up. Any alternative family arrangements are often considered unnatural and are viewed as a threat to the African way of life. In April 2023, Homa Bay Town MP Peter Kaluma submitted The Family Protection Act of 2023 to Parliament. This act aims to protect and promote the "natural" family and heterosexual marriages by introducing stricter anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, upholding parents' rights to choose the type of sexual education provided to their children and criminalizing gender reassignment surgeries, among other measures.

The popular YouTube channel "The Lynn Ngugi Show" hosted a debate that brought together proponents and opponents of queer rights, and it was clear that the anti-gay camp equated queer rights with the end of the family as they knew it.

"My approach is to vehemently resist it and to call anyone who cares for children, anyone who believes in family values and virtues. I call on all African people to say this system is an enemy and anyone who is oiling it, anyone who is funding it, anyone who is advocating it, they need to be called out and be dealt with and confronted as much as possible."

- Antonina Achieng on the Lynn Ngugi Show

Just as there are ultra-conservative efforts in America to impose "traditional" and patriarchal interpretations of the family through the "Protect the Family" campaign, the anti-gay voices in Kenya are pushing the idea that acceptance of the LGBTQ community will lead to a degradation of traditional family values that will result in societal breakdown. The family values are no longer those of love, acceptance, and support but rather maintaining the heteronormative family structure.

"LGBTQIA+ is Un-African."

The issue of African identity and the questions surrounding what it means to be African have always been a hot-button topic. African culture has been affected by foreign influence, especially the transatlantic slave trade and western colonialism, both of which worked to show African culture in a negative light. To counter that, there has been a strong push by Africans to define what it means to be African and to reclaim African cultures and traditions away from foreign influence.

Opponents of the queer community use this desire by people to reclaim African pride and traditions to claim that being queer is un-African. The opposition to legalizing homosexuality in Africa is mostly based on culture and religion and the belief that it is an imported immoral custom brought to Africa by the European colonists. They point out the absence of African words to describe homosexuality as proof that LGBTQIA+ people did not exist in Africa pre-colonialism and therefore justify denying queer people the most basic of rights.

Senior Counsel Harrison Kinyanjui, while in court for the 2019 *Repeal 162* challenging the constitutionality of Section 162 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes consensual same-sex relations said, *"Among the Kenyan cultures, we do not have acceptance of, embrace, or practice homosexuality seen as a valid expression of love, as homosexuals want to call it. It was an anathema; it remains an anathema."* It is interesting that the irony of using colonial laws brought by Europeans to protect "African culture" is lost on the anti-queer crowd, who see queer rights as outside interference by white people but not the

homophobia drafted into law by the colonialists.

Contrary to the anti-queer sentiments, it's important to note that same-sex attraction and various queer identities have existed independently of linguistic markers, psychological theories, and cultural marginalization. Examples of queer identity acceptance within African culture and folklore include women-women marriages in many African countries, where childless women could marry other women to continue their matrilineal line. These include the Nuer of South Sudan, the Nandi, Kikuyu, Luo and Kamba of Kenya, the Kuria of Kenya and Tanzania, the Fanti of Ghana, the Tonga of Zimbabwe, the Konso and Amhara of Ethiopia, the Wolof of Senegal, and the Venda of South Africa, to name just a few. Additionally, there is a popular folklore among the Agikuyu in Kenya suggesting that going around a "mugumo" (fig) tree seven times could change a person's gender, indicating that gender fluidity was a part of their culture. In her book "Decolonization and Afro Feminism," Sylvia Tamale quotes Nelson Maldonado-Torres from his book "On the Coloniality of Being," who noted that the coloniality of "being" becomes most visible and concrete when we encounter liminal persons; these are people who are culturally ambiguous and cannot be classified into "naturalized" social categories that coloniality has constructed for us. She also quotes Elizabeth Reis in "Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex" who refers to liminal persons as, "bodies in doubt." These have been well documented in African traditions, such as amongst the Langi in northern Uganda, where there is an alternative gender known as Mudoko dako (effeminate males) who are allowed to marry men. Several well-known pre-colonial leaders also openly expressed their alternative identities, which their societies accepted. For instance, Kabaka Mwanga of Uganda was openly bisexual, and Woman King Nzingha Mbande of Angola wore men's clothing and maintained a harem of female wives and male lovers who dressed as women.

Furthermore, it's essential to recognise that the assertion that "LGBTQIA+ is Un-African" doesn't align with reality, as there are African individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+. African identity is not defined by sexuality but by descent, and the existence of LGBTQIA+ African people should dispel the notion that it is "Un-African."

Woke

With more people worldwide becoming politically conscious and aware, language evolves to reflect this change. The term "woke," which originates in African American Vernacular, signifies being well-informed about social injustices, particularly racism. It is a slang term that suggests someone has "awakened" from ignorance and can identify and combat systemic discrimination.

Recently, "woke" has gained widespread popularity across various social movements,

including queer rights, feminism, and climate change activism. These groups have adopted it as a rallying cry to promote action and raise awareness for their causes.

Opponents of queer rights in Kenya often use the term "woke" to group all activists and queer individuals together, suggesting they are tools of foreign ideas meant to disrupt African families and societies. They use this term negatively to encourage other Africans to reject any efforts to legalize or accept queer rights. They view "wokeism" as an attack on their core values and the imposition of foreign values on African culture. They argue that African culture has already experienced significant outside influences, including Western education, Christianity, and Islam.

Those who oppose "woke culture" label activists as "Social Justice Warriors," who are focused on influencing children and impressionable individuals to embrace a radical queer lifestyle that they believe will lead to moral and societal decay. They blame wokeness for what they describe as a deliberate glorification of the queer lifestyle that is part of a wider agenda to recruit all of society into immorality.

Misgendering and misuse of pronouns

Gender identity holds significant importance for everyone, but it becomes particularly crucial and sensitive for members of the queer community whose gender identities are frequently questioned and exploited for political purposes. Some individuals who oppose queer rights purposefully use the wrong gender pronouns and terms to show their disapproval.

People in the queer community, whether they're well-known on social media or not, deal with this challenge regularly. For example, a recent social media post featuring Kelvin Kinuthia, a popular TikToker who openly shares his preferred pronouns, received this comment: "*He, she, we, him, her is giving men sleepless nights.*" This kind of intentional misgendering hurts and tries to make queer people feel less accepted, leading to discrimination and bullying.

Many times, these hurtful comments are passed off as jokes, with people trying to gain attention and likes on social media by making fun of the queer community, even going as far as referring to them as the "*alphabet community.*" This is meant to make fun of the LGBTQIA+ acronym, aiming at dismissing, ridiculing, and disparaging the queer community. Such comments only make homophobia worse, affecting queer individuals online and offline.

Dangerous speech hallmark: Threat to group integrity or purity

The Dangerous Speech Project identifies "threat to group integrity or purity" as one of five hallmarks of dangerous speech, asserting that members of another group can cause irreparable damage to the integrity or purity of one's own group. In the context of Kenya, homosexuality is often viewed as a "western influence" and an "unnatural way of life" that poses a threat to the African/Kenyan way of life.

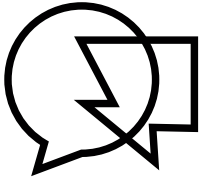
Given the country's deep religious roots, the presence of LGBTQI+ individuals is perceived as challenging the established beliefs about how the community should operate. Some Kenyans hold the belief that queer individuals are financially supported by foreign governments and organizations, alleging that this support aims to indoctrinate people and impose foreign views and values in a society that deems it immoral.

Additionally, there is a claim that advocates for LGBTQ rights are indoctrinating children into immorality and deviant behaviour, leading to a call for the protection of children from such influences.

This co-opting of language to promote homophobia is a concerning trend that not only undermines the dignity and rights of the queer community but also raises questions about our ability to be inclusive and accepting as a society. When words are weaponized to discriminate and belittle, it hampers the progress we should be making. Instead, it provides an environment where violence against the queer community is not just tolerated but also encouraged. Challenging the stereotypes and prejudices that lead to such misuse of language would be the first positive step. We need to acknowledge the power of language and its impact on individuals' lives and stop the cycle of discrimination and bullying. However, it's important to acknowledge that combating homophobia in Kenya and beyond necessitates more than just a shift in language. It demands substantial legal and policy changes and a shift in our collective mindset.

References

- Applegate, J. (2023) The importance of language Equitas Health Institute for LGBTQ Health Equity <https://www.ncsddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/The-Importance-of-Language-Julia-Applegate.pdf> , Accessed on 30.08.2023
- Citizen TV Kenya (2019). Activists want homosexuality decriminalized. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svSgRfTNTts> Accessed on September 29, 2023
- Chimtom, N. K. (2022) Catholic activists in Africa join anti-Disney push over 'pro-LGBTQ+' agenda Crux Now. <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2022/12/catholic-activists-in-africa-join-anti-disney-push-over-pro-lgbtq-agenda> , Accessed on August 30, 2023
- Fingerprint for success (2023) Family values: why they matter and 16 examples <https://www.fingerprintforsuccess.com/blog/family-values>, Accessed on September 4, 2023
- L.N.N. (2023). LGBTQ+ opposers and supporters debate LGBTQ+ rights in Kenya and what they think about Uganda | YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7AfPo3RW6o> Accessed on September 30, 2023
- Martinez, K. (2019) Pronouns101: Why they matter and what to do (and not do) if you misgender someone. <https://medium.com/awaken-blog/pronouns-101-why-they-matter-and-what-to-do-and-not-do-if-you-misgender-someone-cfd747c762d1>, Accessed on September 7, 2023
- Mumero, M. (2021). Why the Mugumo is sacred. People Daily <https://www.pd.co.ke/lifestyle/why-the-mugumo-is-sacred-96788/>, Accessed on September 7, 2023,
- Njambi, W. N. & O'Brien, W. E. (2010) Revisiting "Woman-Woman Marriage": Notes on Gikuyu Women https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-137-09009-6_9, Accessed on September 9, 2023
- Parke, C. (2014) Whose Family? Religious Right's "Family Values" Agenda Advances Internationally <https://politicalresearch.org/2014/07/16/whose-family-religious-rights-family-values-agenda-advances-internationally>, Accessed on September 11, 2023
- Tamale Sylvia, Decolonization and Afro-Feminism at p. 58.
- Tawe, R. (2020) Six LGBTQ+ figures from African history <https://africasacountry.com/2020/07/six-lgbtq-figures-from-african-history>, Accessed on September 25, 2023
- The conversation. (2015) New push to protect 'family values' is a brazen attack on human rights <https://theconversation.com/new-push-to-protect-family-values-is-a-brazen-attack-on-human-rights-43815>, Accessed on September 25, 2023
- Dangerous Speech Project (2020) A Practical Guide – Dangerous Speech Project <https://dangerousspeech.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Dangerous-Speech-A-Practical-Guide.pdf>, Accessed on December 17, 2023



About the authors

Kendi Gikunda is a practitioner in conflict mitigation and peacebuilding with experience working with refugees, internally displaced people, marginalized people, and local communities. She is currently the architect of the Social Media Hate Speech Mitigation Field Guide at the #defyhatenow initiative, where she has worked with programs in South Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Kenya, and Germany. She is also currently studying Public Policy and Management at Strathmore University, Nairobi.

Njoki Kariuki is a research and communications professional. Her work is focused on conflict mitigation, migration, and advocacy for marginalized persons. As a researcher, she focuses on ways through which women are impacted economically by projects and businesses they interact with. She holds a degree in International Business Management and is currently the social media coordinator for r0g_agency, where she works with programs in Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, South Sudan, Ghana, and The Gambia.

About this report

This case study was commissioned by the Dangerous Speech Project (DSP) as part of its Global Research Initiative. The content and analysis within are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Dangerous Speech Project. To learn more about the DSP's fellowship programs, visit dangerousspeech.org/fellows.

Suggested citation

Gikunda, Kendi; Kariuki, Njoki. Co-Opting of Language as a Tool for Homophobia in Kenya. (2024). Dangerous Speech Project. <https://dangerousspeech.org/publications>