

REPORTAGE

House of Rainbow

LGBT rights balanced on the pink line

Mark Gevisser

TO GET TO House of Rainbow you turn off the Apata Road from Ibadan at the Moco petrol station and then make your way down a rutted track through a cluttered market. Ibadan is Yoruba heartland, the region's commercial hub and the home of what was once Africa's most illustrious university. The university has lost its sheen today, and now a few tawdry skyscrapers rise over the mounds of rusting zinc and bustling activity that characterise Nigeria's third-largest city. Here, on Ibadan's western fringes, shanty commerce rubs against gated residential compounds, and at the end of the track you enter one and find three buildings, in various stages of distress, around a car park.

You knock through the locked gate on the door of a ground-floor corner unit. When you are appraised through the keyhole, the gate will be unlocked and you will enter a living room with white plastic chairs set in makeshift pews around an altar, beneath a rainbow banner with the word PEACE painted on it. Pastor Jude Onwambor – a furniture salesman by day – will remind you that while you are to 'comport yourselves decently' on arrival in the compound, you are now free to take your feminine attire out of your bags and become your true selves, the 'daughters' or 'darlings' (*dar-liiiiiiiiiiiiiings!*) you really are.

Pastor Jude, in his thirties, is genial and taciturn; his deputy Ayo, a decade younger, is a motor-mouthed rap poet, wiry and explosive: 'Peace! Do not be afraid! You are not going to die!' he exclaims during his sermon

the day I visit in October 2014. He is citing Judges 6:23: ‘As we listen to these words today, we feel the peace that has been lacking in our minds,’ he says in his sermon. It is a few months after Nigeria’s Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act has been signed into law by the country’s president, Goodluck Jonathan. This is the world’s harshest anti-gay law outside of Islamic sharia: there are mandatory sentences of fourteen years for any kind of ‘homosexual behaviour’, and you can be prosecuted for not turning in a gay neighbour, friend or family member.

‘If ever anyone is telling you you’re not perfect, tell them that God made you,’ Ayo continues, ‘and God does not make mistakes. He says, “I’ve selected you to be a prophet, to be different, to be unique.” Tell your neighbour, “I’m unique!”’

‘I’m unique!’ the congregants – young men and ‘TVs’, as transgender women call themselves – murmur to one another, a quiet ripple of self-affirmation across the room. Most have been recruited to the Church through Ayo’s tireless activism on 2go, the Nigerian phone app. After the service, Ayo tells me how he hangs out in chatrooms such as ‘Naija Gay’: ‘Homophobes will enter the room too, and when they say, “This is against the God’s dictates”, I start putting my views in.’ When Ayo notices someone else from Ibadan, he sends a private message about House of Rainbow: he has reached about two-hundred and fifty people this way, he says, although there are never more than twenty present at the monthly prayer meetings.

‘We are not the only ones passing through this,’ Ayo concludes his sermon. ‘In Uganda they’re facing the same thing. In Russia they’re facing the same thing. So I encourage us to be calm, to be focused on our education, our work, our health status, to value whatever we’re doing very well. God will grant us our peace.’

HOUSE OF RAINBOW has been going since 2005, when the legendary activist Jide Macaulay started the first chapter in Lagos, Nigeria’s megacity 130 kilometres to the south of Ibadan. Two years later he was forced to leave his native land after he came out in the local media, the first Nigerian to do so; House of Rainbow now has a presence in ten African countries and he runs it from the UK, where he is an ordained Anglican deacon. With funding raised in the UK, Macaulay rented the Ibadan flat in 2014: Ibadan was, he tells me, the most active of the five House of Rainbow groups in Nigeria at the time ‘because of its strong leadership’. Ayo lived in the flat and ran some

social services: these included providing safer-sex education to visitors and shelter to runaways.

The men I met the day I visited told horror stories, from even before the passage of the new law. Charles, a young physiotherapy aide dressed in tight lemon slacks and a frilly vest, used male pronouns but understood himself to be a 'TV', and dreamed of gender transition somewhere, somehow. He was discovered having sex with a friend, he told me, and subjected to a forty-day deliverance process in the family church that involved being beaten repeatedly with a broom. 'If you try to kill the gay in me you will have to kill me,' he eventually told his mother.

Charles's friend Desmond, lithe and handsome, affected an area-boy (street-thug) style and boasted of his conquests. He had been arrested twice, he told me – frame-ups that were resolved through the paying of a bribe. A few months after I met him Desmond would be arrested for a third time, one of twenty-one young men attending a birthday party. Following a neighbour's complaint there was a police raid. When they found 122 condoms in a bag belonging to a HIV peer-educator and no women present, they arrested the men on suspicion of being part of a 'gay cult'. Faced with the prospect of fourteen years' imprisonment, the men or their families found the funds needed to bribe their captors, between 10,000 and 25,000 naira each (between US\$60 and US\$150), and were released.

Although there have been almost no prosecutions under the new law, 'it has broken into the very homes of LGBT people', Macaulay tells me, because of the way 'it permits family to snitch on each other' and 'makes things impossible in health, in the workplace, in housing. Anyone has an excuse to deny you housing, or treatment, or a roof over your head. In Nigeria you have to put down a year's deposit on a place – the landlord finds out you're gay, he chucks you out and keeps the money. What are you going to do?'

A 2016 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report found that the law's impact was 'far-reaching and severe': it had become 'a tool used by some police officers and members of the public to legitimise multiple human rights violations perpetrated against LGBT people', including 'torture, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, violations of due process rights, and extortion'. HRW was particularly concerned about 'rising incidents of mob violence' against suspected homosexuals.

In December 2014, a mob invaded the Ibadan home of a friend of Desmond's and dragged him and two others to the local government office,

where they were locked up overnight in a shipping container. The following morning, Desmond told HRW, ‘the [local government] chairman brought us to the middle of the street and his men beat us mercilessly. They tied our hands and legs to a wooden pole outside... They had made us take our clothes off that morning. We were in our underwear when they beat us...the whole street was full of people gathered to watch. There were dozens of people watching and shouting, “Beat them! Beat them! Beat the homosexuals!” They were flogging us, beating us mercilessly... Six guys were beating us. They were ordered by the chairman of the community... They used rope, canes, wood to beat us. Each of them had a different weapon... As they beat us, they said, “Say you are gays! Say it!” After the beating my friend fell sick. A week later he died.’

The first time Desmond was arrested he had been thrown out of home and had fled to Lagos, surviving there through sex work. His father, a pastor, disowned him, but his mother had managed to smooth things over, and she remained in touch with him. Now she paid the local chairman 15,000 naira (about US\$75), and he released her son and his friends.

TWO WEEKS AFTER Goodluck Jonathan signed the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act into law, Queen Elizabeth II gave her royal assent to the ruling Conservative Party’s legislation on same-sex marriage in the UK. The country was now the fourteenth in the world to permit same-sex couples to wed, and the third in the Commonwealth after Canada and South Africa. And yet in thirty-six of the fifty-two states of the Commonwealth, the association of former British colonies once ruled over by the British, homosexuality remains illegal.

In the twenty-first century, there are two parts of the world where male homosexual sex is generally criminalised: Muslim countries and former colonies of the British Empire. And in some of these latter countries, such as Nigeria and Uganda, the original legal proscriptions inherited from Britain have been strengthened by harsh new legislation. In colonial times, Cecil John Rhodes vowed to paint a line in pink – the colour of British dominions on the world map – from the Cape to Cairo. Now, a century later, a new pink line is being drawn across the globe, a new human-rights frontier around sexuality and gender identity that has come to divide – and describe – the world in an entirely new way. A troubling new global equation seems to have come into

play: the more rights gained by sexual and gender minorities in some parts of the world, the stronger the backlash against them in others.

In October 2012, the upper house of the British Parliament, the House of Lords, debated this new global dynamic: the Lords agreed unanimously that the UK should advance and protect the rights of homosexuals globally. The Labour Party's Lord Chris Smith – who had been the first openly gay British Cabinet minister under Tony Blair – spoke of the 'huge progress' made in the UK over the previous fifteen years: 'We have recognised, thank goodness, that the love of one man for another or one woman for another does not make them any less valid or human.' Smith described as 'particularly shaming' the 'continued existence of discrimination, violence and criminalisation in so many Commonwealth countries', and found 'bitter irony' in the fact that the discriminatory laws in these countries were 'inherited from us. I believe that that gives us a special responsibility to do whatever we can to help to change things.'

The Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May repeated the phrase at a June 2017 Pride reception at 10 Downing Street: it was Britain's 'special responsibility to help change hearts and minds' in the Commonwealth, she said, and she would ensure the issue was raised at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) she and Queen Elizabeth would be hosting at Windsor in April 2018.

The original colonial penal code persecuting homosexuality was drafted by Thomas Babington Macaulay for India, and was passed into law in 1860. Section 377 criminalised 'voluntary...carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal': this was understood to be any sexual union involving 'penetration' that was not procreative. Sir Samuel Griffith's Queensland Criminal Code, passed in 1899, criminalised both the passive and the active participants in such acts and widened the reach beyond 'penetration' to any 'attempt to commit unnatural offences'. Between them, the Indian and Queensland laws provided the template for most of Britain's colonies: the Queensland law was particularly influential in British Africa.

In Africa and Asia, the British were preoccupied with what the legal scholar Alok Gupta has termed 'fears of moral infection' from the natives, and with the mission of 'moral reform' among these new subjects. In Australia, 'same-sex relationships among convicts were considered the most serious

threat to lawful authority’ the marriage-equality activist Rodney Croome said in *The Guardian* in October 2017. This legacy of ‘convictism’, Croome believes, is the best way to understand Australia’s resistance to LGBT equality well into the twenty-first century. Homosexual acts were only fully decriminalised in South Australia in 1975, and Queensland itself only followed suit fifteen years later, in 1990. Tasmania was forced to repeal its sodomy law in 1997, after a landmark case taken to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

The same modernising impulse, grounded in a postwar understanding of human rights, led Britain to grant independence to its remaining colonies. But because the shedding of empire preceded Britain’s decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, the newly independent countries of the Commonwealth maintained the laws that criminalised homosexuality, although they were seldom enforced before LGBT rights began to be asserted in the twenty-first century. Lord Smith was right about the irony of this: many of these countries were using colonial legislation to back-up their claims that homosexuality was unacceptable, and that the demand for its decriminalisation was a neo-colonial slight on their sovereignty.

STILL, THE NOTION that Britain has a ‘special responsibility’ to advocate for the decriminalisation of laws it introduced to the world suggests a new civilising mission – or at least a new ideological project for the liberal West. In fact, at the Perth CHOGM in October 2011, the then British Prime Minister David Cameron set a brushfire by suggesting that British aid to countries be conditional on their decriminalisation of homosexuality. African governments and commentators responded with fury. A Ugandan presidential spokesman described Cameron’s remarks as ‘patronising, colonial rhetoric’, and Robert Mugabe, the former president of Zimbabwe and Africa’s perennial homophobe, called them ‘satanic’, ‘demonic’ and ‘some kind of insanity’. African LGBT activists reported a significant uptick in public homophobia in their home countries as a consequence of the backlash against Cameron’s statement. For this reason, ‘every effort is being made to get other leaders to raise the issue [at the Windsor CHOGM of April 2018] rather than just Theresa May and Justin Trudeau’, Paul Dillane, the executive director of the British Kaleidoscope Trust, told me. ‘We need to break the cycle of this being seen as a “northern” preoccupation.’

Kaleidoscope convenes the Commonwealth Equality Network, comprising LGBTI organisations from forty-one countries, to lobby for legal reform. At Windsor, the network is pinning its hopes on Malta's Joseph Muscat, whose country has become a global leader on the issue (it was the first European country to protect LGBT rights explicitly in its constitution). At the 2015 CHOGM he hosted, Muscat used the platform to argue strongly for decriminalisation. The new Commonwealth Secretary-General, Baroness Patricia Scotland – a British woman of West Indian descent – has also vowed to take up the issue. In a 2017 interview she said: 'We are working alongside countries, making an economic case for inclusion [of LGBT people and rights].'

The 'economic argument', Dillane believes, is proving to be 'increasingly powerful': the costs of policing and jailing otherwise law-abiding citizens versus the benefits of tourism, reputation, the ability to attract foreign talent and to develop local human resources fully. In part because of these arguments, three Commonwealth countries have voluntarily decriminalised homosexuality since 2015: Mozambique, the Seychelles and Nauru. A fourth, Belize, was compelled to do so following a successful Supreme Court appeal; in late 2017 a similar appeal was being prepared in Trinidad and Tobago. There are continuing legal appeals and policy reforms in several African Commonwealth countries, most notably Kenya, Malawi, Namibia and Botswana – not around decriminalisation per se, but rather the rights to equality and protection from discrimination.

IN NIGERIA, THERE are no such prospects for reform. No activist in the country has so much as mentioned wanting same-sex marriage: the fledgling LGBT movement has focused rather on access to public health information and protection from violence and discrimination. But Christian evangelist lawmakers, led by the Senate leader David Mark, invoked the 'marriage' bogeyman to claim that they were inoculating society against any future infection from the godless West. 'There are many good values we can copy from other societies but certainly not this one,' Mark said when he introduced the bill. The Nigerian anti-homosexuality act would 'prove to the rest of the world, who are advocates of this unnatural way, that we Nigerians promote and respect sanity, morality and humanity.'

Uganda was the other African Commonwealth country to augment the old colonial laws with extreme new anti-homosexuality legislation in

2014 – although it was struck down on procedural grounds shortly after it was promulgated. ‘We’re sorry to see that you [the West] live the way you live, but we keep quiet about it,’ Yoweri Museveni, the country’s president, told the BBC when he signed it into law. It was a subtler differentiation than that of other African leaders, such as David Mark and Robert Mugabe, who insist against all evidence that homosexuality itself is a foreign import. Museveni was acknowledging that the behaviour exists in African cultures but was drawing a line, rather, between the ‘Western’ way, where sexuality becomes part of a public identity deserving of recognition and rights, and the ‘African’ way, where it remains private.

Museveni’s basic premise is right. While homosexuality is an inherent component of human behaviour across time and cultures, the notion of banding together in a common identity, and claiming rights on this basis, is indeed a product of twentieth-century Western liberal democracy. And – as a harbinger of civil-society activism – it is one that African patriarchs particularly fear. It is no coincidence that the Nigerian bill was first introduced in 2006, shortly after the country hosted an African AIDS conference at which local gay activists ‘embarrassed’ the government by holding a press conference about ‘men who sleep with men’ – a key high-risk population in the epidemic.

In his memoir *Lives of Great Men* (Team Angelica Publishing, 2017), the US-based author Chike Edozien writes about a Nigerian childhood in the 1970s and ’80s, populated with people he recognised immediately as his kin: the swishy Ghanaian hairdressers on his street; a popular music star called Area Scatter; an older lover who was part of a broad and discreet network of ‘TBs’ (‘Tops and Bottoms’ as they called themselves), most of whom would go on to marry women. He also describes a pulsing gay scene in Accra, Ghana’s capital, where he lived at the turn of the twenty-first century. But this world evaporated, he writes, in both these countries, as a result of the anti-gay backlash driven by political and religious ideology in recent years.

Still, he cites his Lagos friend, a lesbian named Kainene, about life in Lagos today:

I’m sure to the outside world it seems like, ‘Oh my god, gays are in danger here,’ but in Lagos we will carry on as we always have. People will get over themselves. I am not going to be tar-and-feathered and driven out of Lagos. That’s not going to happen. Nobody

cares, but that would be so long as I don't go on TV and say, 'I'm gay'. But that applies to everything here. You just don't wear your heart on your sleeve here, and you don't fly your rainbow colours out in public. I don't feel the need to hide, but I don't feel the need to make a big statement either.

IN THAT BBC interview after signing the Ugandan anti-gay bill into law, president Yoweri Museveni accused the West of 'social imperialism'. There are certainly examples of a Western high-handedness on the issue, or a confusion of human-rights agendas with more imperial intentions. But these claims are usually a stand-in for the more abstract anxieties of patri-archs and priests about a loss of control in the age of globalisation over one's subjects and territories. Or they are used to set up a populist straw man: the scapegoating of an unpopular new group to distract an electorate's attention, or win its support. It is no coincidence that President Goodluck Jonathan signed the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act just before contesting a close election in 2014 – which he lost anyway. But much of what we have come to term 'homophobia', and more recently 'transphobia', is first and foremost a reaction against space being claimed by a new category of people demanding their rights.

In Nigeria, as in so many places where the pink line has been drawn, topics that were originally hidden from view – particularly around sexual-ity – are now being ventilated openly, largely due to the digital revolution. This conversation has opened up one of the deepest and most unanticipated ideological clefts of the twenty-first century. Precisely because the conversa-tion is new, it is vibrant and often violent as conservative forces react against the inevitable consequences of this newly globalised world and the loss of control it threatens. It is a conversation sparked by Google and *Modern Family*, by Facebook and Twitter, as much as it is by the policymakers in the US State Department, the technocrats at the UN High Commission on Human Rights and the activists on the frontline.

The LGBT rights movement is itself a vector of this globalising process. India, another Commonwealth member, provides a fascinating test case. When activists campaigned to decriminalise homosexuality there in the first years of the twenty-first century, they attracted large numbers of liber-als and professionals to the cause, and in 2009 the Delhi High Court ruled

Section 377 of the Indian penal code to be unconstitutional. By shucking off the legacy of laws introduced under the British Empire, India was declaring its entry into the modern, globalised world.

The decision was reversed in 2015 by the Indian Supreme Court. All the same, the 2009 judgement – and the inspired years-long campaign leading up to it – changed Indian attitudes to homosexuality irrevocably, at least in its huge media-consuming middle class. By 2015 there were at least twelve Pride marches across India; Bollywood started to include gay characters in its movies, and newspaper columnists joked about the day that Indian parents would start placing matrimonial ads to find grooms for their gay sons. At Pride in Mumbai or Bangalore, phalanxes of marchers participate under the bunting of their employers: Google, Hewlett-Packard, Goldman Sachs, Barclays and other multinationals have made ‘diversity and inclusivity’ part of their branding. The vast majority of these marchers are not queer themselves: rather, they seek to associate themselves with the ‘global’ values of their employers. Supporting ‘LGBT rights’ has become nothing less than a fetish of modernity.

ONE EVENING, DURING my visit to Nigeria, I went to the hip Lagos offices of a boutique advertising agency owned by a man I will call ‘Dennis’ who had started a gay Facebook group. Dennis was in his late thirties, worldly and well-travelled, with the kind of gym body and knowing look you could find in Chelsea or Soho but also, increasingly, in the shopping malls and fancy clubs of Lagos’s Victoria Island. Sitting around Dennis’s boardroom table over pizza and wine were about fifteen members of the Facebook group: men and women; lawyers, entrepreneurs, actuaries, senior managers. Many had the resources to enable them to slip easily in and out of their double lives. Some were married with kids in Nigeria, but had long-term same-sex lovers abroad, and the way they described the plane ride between Lagos and London was an analogue of that walk through the door at the House of Rainbow, from ‘good comport’ to *darlingness*: ‘Wheels up, hair down!’, as one put it to me.

The presence of these young queer professionals in a Lagos boardroom was indicative of a global trend. All over the world, there is an unprecedented growth in urban queer populations as millions of young people flock to the rapidly industrialising developing world’s booming megacities. From Istanbul to Beijing, from Mexico City to Mumbai, what is happening in these

cities mirrors a process that the historian John D’Emilio first described in ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’, his path-breaking 1983 essay. D’Emilio argued that modern ‘gay identity’ was a product of the European industrial revolution: as people moved out of the countryside and into the city to find work, they began to practice ‘personal autonomy’. They were no longer tethered, in the traditional way, to family and fealty. They were now individual workers, valued as much for their productivity as their reproductivity. And they were away from home. They earned the space to assert their rights to privacy and to choice, and were freer than in any previous generation, geographically and economically, culturally and sexually. And their public presence played a role, too – in Shanghai or São Paulo today as in London or New York in the past – in fostering the tolerance and diversity that are the hallmarks of modern urban life. Their visibility was even seen as a predictor of economic growth.

And yet not one of the people sitting around Dennis’s boardroom table was out of the closet. Lagos is one of the world’s megacities, with a huge middle-class population that is literate, worldly and wired. Why, I asked my fellow diners, did they think that their city was not following the globalising, urbanising trend when it came to sexual mores?

One of the women present – I will call her ‘Ife’ – was a consultant with an international corporation that trumpeted its ‘LGBT diversity’ credentials. Had she come out at work, I wanted to know? She snorted: ‘Are you crazy? My boss is in my church!’ Without exception, every person at the pizza evening went to church, mainly to one or other of the Pentecostal congregations mushrooming across Africa: ‘It’s not just about religion,’ Ife said. ‘It’s about society, and culture. You have to go to church to belong. I just shut my ears when I need to.’

LORD CHRIS SMITH could add another element of irony to the fact that Africans are using the hangover of a Victorian penal code to justify homophobic nativism: if it was British missionaries who brought the first wave of morality politics to the region in the 1800s, it was American evangelical ones who provided the script for the wave of political homophobia that would sweep the continent a century later.

Conservative American evangelicals gained a foothold in many African countries through George W Bush’s President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which prioritised ‘faith-based’ HIV-programs – including the

preaching of abstinence over the distribution of condoms. This helped establish American evangelicals in countries such as Uganda and Nigeria, and empowered an entire generation of conservative Christian service-provision organisations on the continent.

In contrast, the international development aid agencies – particularly those from northern Europe – pushed the LGBT rights agenda. This was not only for reasons of equality: it was also due to growing evidence that one of the major vectors of HIV-transmission in African societies was through ‘men who have sex with men’. This empowered gay communities in many African countries, who were able to use the public-health portal to begin organising and mobilising: this was the way gay-rights organisations began in Nigeria as well as everywhere else on the continent, north of South Africa.

Indeed, shortly after I visited Ibadan, the House of Rainbow operation there shut down: Jude Onwambor told me that ‘despite our efforts, we were becoming too known, and it was a security risk’. The legal advice he had sought ‘advised that we would be much safer working under the cover of public health’. And so he had set up a new organisation that did AIDS-awareness work. In 2017, he opened a drop-in centre that functioned as a community-gathering place in the centre of town. As with the Church, the ‘compartment’ rules prevailed: arrive properly, but be yourselves when inside.

Still, the AIDS epidemic only heightened many African countries’ dependence on the West, and in this context a new impetus to fight the ‘neo-colonialism’ of development aid emerged. As Africans became increasingly uncomfortable with their countries’ dependence on the West, some looked to a different way to assert their pride: despite their poverty, at least they had values. In the global indicators of wellbeing, they could at least lead in one: morality. When, in 2012, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged African countries to decriminalise homosexuality, Cardinal Robert Sarah – the ranking African at the Vatican – responded: ‘You cannot impose something stupid like that. Poor countries like Africa [sic] just accept it because it’s imposed upon them through money, through being tied to aid. It’s not possible to impose on the poor this kind of European mentality.’ The battle against gay rights became the surest way of rubbing salt in the colonial wound, of drawing a pink line between the proud Africans – Christian and Muslim – who wished to save their ‘traditional values’ and protect their

‘cultural sovereignty’ against rapacious neo-colonialists who not only had lost their moral compass in the rapidly secularising West, but whose call for ‘rights’ threatened the status quo. The African homophobia of the twenty-first century is thus a toxic admixture of religion and politics, fuelled by the AIDS epidemic and the stigmas associated with it.

Nowhere is this more visible than in Nigeria. On 30 July 2017, forty-two men were arrested at the Vintage Hotel in northern Lagos. They were attending a monthly party; a fight had broken out and the police had been called and detained everyone present, having caught them ‘in the act’, as a news report put it. ‘In the act’, of course, of being gathered together as suspected homosexuals: now that the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act was in force other evidence was unnecessary. After their bails had been posted (and their names and faces splashed all over the media), the national *Sun* newspaper led with the headline: ‘HIV Epidemic Looms’. The author, Chioma Igbokwe, reported that ‘99 per cent’ of the men had tested HIV-positive in jail, ‘and now roam freely in the society’ as a result of the ‘watering down of the bail condition – for an offence that is one of the gravest in the country’s criminal code’. Igbokwe opined that it was ‘not far-fetched’ that they could be ‘infecting new persons by the day’ given the ‘propensity among some of them to suddenly go on an infection-spree mission’.

‘IF YOU STEPPED in here, you would see all of us – gays, lesbians, bisexuals: oppressed people – refusing to mourn the anti-gay laws. We are making a mockery of it; mourning, for us, is not a virtue.’ Thus wrote the Nigerian author Pwaangulongii Dauod, in a 2016 *Granta* piece describing a party in the northern city of Kaduna:

We are reinforcing our passion and existence in this hall, right now, in our own way. Unknown to the world, we are buzzing in here with energy and stamina and dreams. We are laughs. We are smart laughing fires. Our feet are fires; so are our waists, our tongues, our eyes and our passions. You would see us blazing, emitting prophecies. We are fires: smoky hot fires, ready to choke to death the places and imaginations that threaten our survival...

We are buddies, roomies, comrades; breaking loose from our chains and jumping off the ships, sailing to places where our dreams

and our existence would be lynched. We are the holy spirits, and we prefer battling and drowning in fierce oceans and keeping our prophecies safe than to be lynched by foolish black men.

The essay was called ‘Africa’s Future Has No Place For Stupid Black Men’, and immediately following its publication word spread that Daoud – a pseudonym – was the author. A mob attacked him and trashed his home. This mirrored much of the violence described in the piece. The following year another young writer, Chibuihe Obi, was abducted and tortured for several weeks after publishing an essay called ‘We’re Queer, We’re Here’ in *Brittle Paper*, an online literary journal that has become the hub of an astonishing efflorescence of queer Nigerian literature since 2014.

In 2016, a young Nigerian man named Richard Akuson began publishing another online magazine, *A Nasty Boy*, dedicated to ‘otherness in fashion, people and culture’. Akuson styles slick fashion shoots of, as he puts it, ‘Nigerian boys who wear make-up, wigs and paint their nails’. As in many West African societies, there has long been a tradition of gender fluidity in northern Nigeria: *yan daudu* (men-women) are biological men who dress as women, and who often have male partners. Traditionally, they command respect within their communities and play important ritual roles, but the space they occupy has been eroded by the political and the religious ideologies of these times. Now, with a decidedly globalised contemporary gloss, Akuson is reclaiming a Nigerian queerness. He is determined to demonstrate, he says, ‘that there cannot be one singular kind of Nigerian man or woman, there has to be room for other definitions’.

Jide Macaulay, House of Rainbow’s founder, tells me he is both ‘thrilled’ and ‘terrified’ by the advent of such outspoken voices. It is September 2017, and we are sitting in House of Rainbow’s headquarters, a large room in a suite of council offices in east London. He has shorn his trademark dreadlocks and now has the grey-flecked hair of a community elder. Of the ten African countries in which he works, his native land is ‘by far the most challenging,’ he says. ‘But now there’s a new generation that says, “We exist!” Of people being pushed too far and now fed up: “This is who I am! Kill me if you want.”’ It is a powder-keg: ‘They are the fearless generation. There will be consequences.’

Is it coincidence that this efflorescence is occurring in the very years of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act? ‘I certainly do not think of those laws every time I sit down to write,’ *Brittle Paper’s* submissions editor Otosirize Obi-Young tells me. Still, he believes the ‘ferocity’ of his generation’s writing is a product of two things: the state-licensed homophobia they have encountered, and the ability they have to express themselves – and connect – on the newly available broadbands of social media.

Thus do they live on the pink line, these young Nigerians, toggling between their new virtual freedom and the dangers of life offline. Here is Chibuihe Obi:

Before now it had been struggle, swaddles, suffocation. It had been silence, Invisibility. There were days I felt so lost, so out of place, so displaced that I felt lesser than a panting, a gasping organism, damaged and deliberately being pushed into extinction. There were days I walked into this room called Nigerian Literature and looked at the stories, the narratives, the themes and interests without finding the queer body. Once or twice I chanced upon it, but on the back stage, beaten and violated, screaming for attention and inclusion. Asking to be let in.

But, finally, we are here.

Mark Gevisser is a South African author and journalist. His new book, *The Pink Line: The World’s Queer Frontiers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), will be published in 2019. His previous books include *Lost and Found in Johannesburg: A Memoir* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), and the award-winning *A Legacy of Liberation: Thabo Mbeki and the Future of the South African Dream* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009). His work has appeared in *Granta*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Nation*, among many others. He lives outside Cape Town.