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The Long Shadow of Colonial Violence Against LGBTIQ+ Kenyans

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Abstract:

The spread of norms across time and space produced a troubling irony: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) Kenyans – once victims of colonial violence – are now framed as colonizers themselves. Kenyan LGBTIQ+ individuals are often labeled “un-African,” framed as “imports from the West,” their identities and bodies alleged not to be African. This narrative fuels discrimination and violence, legitimizing harm against LGBTIQ+ persons. We argue that such violence is rooted in norms and legislation introduced by British colonialism that prevail to this day, though the context, actors, and forms of harm have changed. The narrative of “un-Africanness” remains central, profoundly impacting the lives and livelihoods of those targeted. We reveal the long shadow of colonial violence in these dynamics, showing how they continue to unfold even today. To this end, we utilize the concepts of norm diffusion and unpack the underlying forces at work in Kenya, which are deeply embedded in global anti-LGBTIQ+ movements.

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Mariel Reiss & Āryā Jeipea Karijo

1. Introduction

The “Pan-African Conference on Family Values,” held in Nairobi, Kenya, in May 2025, sparked significant debate, both on- and offline. What at first sight might have seemed like an uncontroversial event – shining a spotlight on family values from a Pan-African perspective – quickly became the site of protests, press statements, and intense social media debate (Osoro 2025). The reasons for the contestation are rooted in three interrelated issues: the speakers, their institutional and ideological backgrounds, and the conference’s (hidden) agenda.

CNN journalist Larry Madowo was one of the first to call out the keynote speaker lineup with a comment on LinkedIn: “look who’s speaking about African ‘family values’” (Madowo 2025), referring to a promotional poster featuring seven *white* male keynote speakers based in the US and Europe (see Figure 1). Subsequently there was a barrage of comments across different social media platforms on the selection of the speakers, drawing attention to their positionality and drawing parallels with colonialist practices of imposing certain “moral” norms – among them heterosexuality, cisgender normativity, and monogamy. The focus of the criticism was the backgrounds of the speakers and the organizations they represented. These included the Center for Family Life and Human Rights (C-Fam), Family Watch International, and Family Research Council from the USA, as well as Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture from Poland, and Christian Council International from the Netherlands. This “Pan-African Conference on Family Values” was organized with the support of international anti-LGBTIQ+ groups (McEwen 2021, 2023) together with groups positioning themselves as African, such as the Kenyan registered Africa Christian Professionals Forum (ACPF) and the Nigerian registered Foundation for African Cultural Heritage (FACH), in cooperation with the Kenyan Ministry of Labour and Social Protection as well as church bodies such as the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) and Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB).

Criticizing the agenda of the participating groups, Kenyan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Feminists in Africa and Akina Mama wa Afrika contextualize the conference in Nairobi as a continuity of colonial practices:



Figure 1: Screenshot of the LinkedIn post by Larry Madowo, commenting on a provisional poster of the “Pan-African Conference on Family Values” (Madowo 2025).

When was the last time imperialists draped in the cloak of morality set foot on the African continent? Wasn't it just before they forcefully took our land, our resources, and our lives? Today, their spiritual descendants gather once more – this time cloaked in Pan-Africanism – to teach us how to be “moral.” But we know the script. We recognize the costumes. And this time, we refuse to play the role they've written for us. (Akina Mama wa Afrika 2025: n.p.)

The conference takes place at a time when spaces for civil society globally – especially for sexual and gender minorities/LGBTIQ+ individuals and NGOs advocating for their rights – are increasingly shrinking (Amnesty International

2024; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). Geographically, Kenya (more specifically Nairobi) is a deliberate choice and seen as an important battleground for the “anti-gender”/“anti-rights”/anti-LGBTIQ+ movement on the African continent – along with other states such as Uganda and Ghana (CIVICUS 2023). We argue that the Kenyan context, which is at the center of our analysis, is distinct, while at the same time, the processes unfolding there are embedded in broader global dynamics – and have been since the institutionalized violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals began to take shape as a result of British colonization. These colonial legacies do indeed cast a long shadow.

In this working paper, we analyze the more recent rise in hostility and violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals and organizations in Kenya and the underlying normative development. We contextualize these developments spatially and temporally and make a direct connection with colonial practices of *othering*, *natal alienation*, and *moral panic*, as well as colonial era anti-homosexuality laws.

The acronym LGBTIQ+ is largely a Western concept, used to denominate sexual orientations and gender identities (Tamale 2011). The acronym and terms behind it render invisible non-Western descriptions and designations, such as *Kuchu* (a Kiswahili term used in Uganda to denote women loving women). Colonial continuities need to be critically examined here too, as the reproduction of the “common” abbreviation and the ongoing invisibility of other terms is in itself highly problematic and represents a perpetuation of power dynamics. Furthermore, the acronym is an oversimplification of the different identities, lived realities, and the intersections of identities of the people it seeks to describe. Throughout the article, we use the abbreviation of LGBTIQ+ and/or non-cisgender/non-heterosexual interchangeably.

This piece is written from the perspective of differently situated yet complementary knowledges and privileges. It is a scholar-activist coproduction embracing the *both/and* rather than the *either/or* of scholarly and activist knowledge (Reiss and Sogunro 2026). The practice of bringing academic, activist, and artistic knowledge together has long been practiced in queer/LGBTIQ+ studies, especially in decolonial and feminist works (Chilisa 2012; Ekine and Abbas 2013; Morgan and Wieringa 2005b; Tamale 2011). Reiss brings a predominantly scholarly perspective and Karijo a storyteller, activist, and situated perspective – together with both using research as a form of sensemaking. Both are part of a global LGBTIQ+ movement, situated as internationalists with an insider-outsider relationship with their communities, and thus complement each other’s way of knowing and the use of this knowledge. However, there is a fundamental difference in the privileges each author has, as well as in the ways in which they are affected by the harm and violence against the Kenyan LGBTIQ+

community – something that is discussed further in the methodology section.

We begin with an overview of the theorization of political violence against LGBTIQ+ persons and the entanglement of British colonial legacies, specifically delineating the practices of *natal alienation*, *othering*, and *moral panic*. We then illustrate the methodology used and further discuss our positionalities and how they impact the knowledge coproduction in this scholar-activist piece. In the main part of the working paper, we discuss in three steps how political violence unfolded against LGBTIQ+ Kenyans: in precolonial, colonial, and neocolonial settings. Lastly, we unpack how international anti-LGBTIQ+ actors are exerting their influence in the Kenyan context and link this to current developments, such as the “Pan-African Conference on Family Values.”

2. Conceptualizing Political Violence Against LGBTIQ+ Persons and Understanding Colonial Legacies

In the following section, we outline the relevant scholarly discourse to develop our argument on how violence against LGBTIQ+ Kenyans became the norm and how the framing of this group as colonizers based on their *un-Africanness* prevails. Research on diffusion is a well-established (and contested) field spanning across different disciplines, including political science and sociology (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Strang and Meyer 1993). In these contexts, diffusion is defined as the spread of norms, policies, and aspects of institutional design across time and space. Here, the conceptualizations assume a “providing” and a “receiving” entity. In both cases, these can be states, institutions, organizations, or other configurations of actors. In the research, the ways in which actors (on the receiving end) adopt and adapt norms, policies, and aspects of institutional design (of providing actors) to their respective contexts are seen as diffusion mechanisms. We follow the widely accepted definition of norms, established by Finnemore and Sikkink, as “standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 891). The diverse dynamics of norm diffusion processes have been understood as localization (Acharya 2004), translation (Draude 2017), and vernacularization (Levitt and Merry 2009; Zwengel 2012). The relevant literatures provide analytical tools to understand the ways in which (global or international) norms travel, and, beyond that, how they are integrated in specific contexts: “Norms do not appear out of nowhere; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 896). In his seminal piece, Acharya argues that localization “may start with a reinterpretation and re-representation of the outside norm, including framing and grafting, but may extend into more complex processes of reconstitution to make an outside norm congruent

with a preexisting local normative order” (Acharya 2004: 244). We use these literatures to map out how the norm of violence against LGBTIQ+ persons traveled, was manifested and localized in Kenya over time. In this piece, we are less interested in the specific diffusion mechanisms, instead aiming to shed light on the historical and political interconnections. We focus on the framing of LGBTIQ+ Kenyans today and the violence perpetrated against them.

Namwase, Jjuuko, and Nyarango (2017) debunk the narrative around *un-Africanness*, presenting sexuality as part of being human and not as a cultural practice originated or located in a particular geographical region of the world: “As sexuality is a human and not a geographical condition, one cannot purport to say that homosexuality is ‘un-African’ without the absurd implication that there were no human beings in pre-colonial Africa” (Namwase et al. 2017: 9). In their edited volume, Namwase and Jjuuko (2017) further contend that precolonial societies in Africa did not subject sexual minorities “to the level of violence they are subjected to today in the form of seclusion, rejection, corrective rape, imprisonment, even death” (Namwase et al. 2017: 9). Historically, the *othering* of LGBTIQ+ persons in the African context is deeply interwoven with colonialism and questions of statehood and state-building: “[t]he homophobia in many post-colonial African states also results in same-sex identified women feeling alienated from the project of nation building in their countries” (Morgan and Wieringa 2005a: 17). The point of departure for the narrative of the *un-Africanness* disseminated by LGBTIQ+/non-cisgender/non-heterosexual persons has been traced to the influence of missionaries, Christianity, colonialization, and subsequent internalization (Han and O’Mahoney 2018; Morgan and Wieringa 2005b; Tamale 2011).

The ahistorical and false narrative that non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual persons are an import from “the West” was analyzed and exposed by African feminist scholars decades ago. Focusing on female same-sex relationships and practices, in *Tommy Boys and Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives* Morgan and Wieringa (Morgan and Wieringa 2005b), together with their contributors to the collection of essays, debunk the *un-Africanness* myth, an approach also taken by other African feminist scholars, activists, and artists. In two more recent publications, contributions from across the continent illustrate multifaceted aspects of the discussions and discourses around the lived realities of LGBTIQ+ Africans. These are Tamale’s *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Tamale 2011) and the *Queer African Reader*, edited by Ekine and Abbas (Ekine and Abbas 2013). The contributions in these three collections refute the narrative that non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities are *un-African* through stories, histories, analyses, and narrations of the

lived realities stemming from precolonial as well as post-colonial contexts. We take these publications as a starting point for our specific focus on the Kenyan context in the empirical section of the paper.

In his seminal book *What is Africanness?*, Ngwena (2018) draws a connection between colonial framings of the racialized other and the construction of deviant subjects based on sexual orientation and gender identity. He theorizes the underlying logic of the narrative conveying the *un-Africanness* of LGBTIQ+ persons, showing how colonial legal and moral regimes continue to shape these framings. As Ngwena (2018: 181) writes, “[f]or whites who were inclined to become ‘deviant’ or ‘disoriented’ as to become racially ‘queer’ by going astray and crossing the sexual colour bar, the laws were ‘straightening devices’ to assist with aligning white bodies with white spaces in a racial oligarchy.” Building on Rubin (1984) and Ngwena (2018), we employ the concept of *moral panic* as an analytical lens. This concept helps to explain how the “construction of a ‘political moment of sex’ galvanizing political action to serve sectional political, cultural and religious ends in the maintenance of heterosexual patriarchal dominance is meant. Typically ‘moral panic’ aims for/at vulnerable communities that lack political power” (Ngwena 2018: 203).

Related to *othering* and excluding (certain) people(s) from statehood and belonging, colonization more generally aims to disenfranchise peoples from their cultures, heritages, communities, and memories – what Patterson (Patterson 1982) calls *natal alienation* in his seminal book *Slavery and Social Death*:

Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he was also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (Patterson 1982: 5)

Patterson’s analysis, while primarily concerned with slavery and the concept of social death, illuminates how societies that considered themselves “civilized” or “religious” managed the dissonance of slavery by means of specific

legal, religious, and social mechanisms. He describes how the law facilitated a *liminal incorporation* of the enslaved, how religious systems sustained extreme dualities to justify domination, and how societies constructed either extrusive or intrusive relationships to reconcile the moral contradictions of enslavement. However, Patterson's framework does not explicitly address colonization, as it assumes that *natal alienation* – the separation of a person from their kinship and cultural origins – was difficult or even impossible to achieve among people living in their homeland. Colonization, much like slavery, resulted in a profound dislocation of cultural identity, fostering the internalization and adoption of the colonizer's culture and faith. This cyclical process of *natal alienation* is still evident today in the treatment of queer Kenyans, whose marginalization reflects a continuation of the same logic of cultural domination and exclusion.

We contend that colonial practices, such as the *othering*, *natal alienation*, and *moral panic* discussed above, help to explain why what could be described as *Victorian* cultural norms are now seen as *African* culture, particularly with respect to sexual orientation and gender identity. This historical transformation underpins the contemporary narrative of the alleged *un-Africanness* of non-heteronormative identities. We argue that *othering*, *natal alienation*, and *moral panic* is currently being reproduced by Kenyan political and religious leaders who, in so doing, mirror the mechanisms once employed by colonial powers against colonized populations – especially those marked as (racially) “deviant,” “other,” or “queer.” The diffusion and localization of norms legitimizing violence against LGBTIQ+ persons in Kenya must therefore be understood as part of a broader historical and transnational process. Both gendered and sexual norms, along with the associated legal frameworks, were originally disseminated by colonial authorities and have, more recently, been reinforced and reinterpreted through the transnational activities of “anti-gender” and anti-LGBTIQ+ actors operating across the African continent, as the following analysis demonstrates.

3. Methodology and Positionality

The database used for the analysis consists of newspaper articles, documents, and NGO reports as well as video material, including Kenyan parliamentary debates. Additionally, interviews and group discussions were conducted in Kenya between October and December 2023. We triangulated these different sources of information to provide a (more) complete picture that transcends the literature and “mainstream” NGO perspectives. The activists and scholars to be interviewed were selected both from within and outside the Kenyan LGBTIQ+ community based on their in-depth knowledge of the legal and/or societal situation of LGBTIQ+ persons in the country and their experience in advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights. They drew on their

activism and/or lived experience. The individual interviews were recorded and consent forms completed. Our interview partners were informed about the research project and that their insights might be used in academic publications. The interviews, conducted by Mariel Reiss, were semi-structured to allow for some flexibility regarding the development of the conversation and are mainly used to contextualize the current debates and for background.

Together, the two authors also carried out two group discussions. The first, based on oral transmission between two people of different generations from the *Kikuyu* community, explored different perspectives on queerness, LGBTIQ+, and lived experiences. Here, Āryā Jeipea Karijo provided a framework for the discussion using prompt cards on topics such as colonialism, patriarchy, culture, spirituality, bodies and minds, and freedom. The exchange took place in a rural part of Kenya and the discussion was recorded with the consent of the participants. The second group discussion took place in Nairobi with six participants who were selected on the basis of their membership of the LGBTIQ+ community, their activism in NGOs, and their work for safe houses. The insights shared by the participants in this format were largely from their perspective as members of the Kenyan LGBTIQ+ community or as LGBTIQ+ people from other countries currently living in Kenya. Here, all participants chose to remain anonymous.

The following description of the authors' respective situatedness at the intersection of our identities are important factors in the knowledge bases and approaches we bring to this piece. We met in 2023 in Nairobi through a mutual acquaintance and, since then, have been discussing and writing this piece together during virtual exchanges and Āryā Jeipea Karijo's visit to Marburg University. Reiss is a white, cisgender lesbian in her late thirties who studied political science at universities in Germany and Sweden. She cannot and does not claim to fully understand the lived realities of LBQ+ Kenyan women – her allyship of course notwithstanding, including with trans persons. Karijo is a Kenyan transgender woman and a lesbian. In the past, she conducted ethnographic research for social enterprises using technology. She acknowledges her bias as a queer Kenyan and the contribution of her lived experience. She also acknowledges that this lived experience is different and potentially more privileged than those of younger queer people in Kenya. As authors, we situate ourselves in time, space, and memory as implicated subjects in this context. In the past, Reiss would have belonged to a state that perpetrated violence against its LGBTIQ+ citizens, as well as colonial violence, but today largely seeks to uphold LGBTIQ+ rights. In the colonial past, Karijo would have been a member of a colonized people who were on the receiving end of colonial anti-LGBTIQ+ laws, but today finds herself in an

independent African nation-state where both colonial and neocolonial anti-LGBTIQ+ violence is being carried out by other Africans (formerly colonized people). We are both part of a global LGBTIQ+ community of solidarity and while this term (inology) does not exactly correspond with the precolonial realities of queerness for Karijo or her people, it is in keeping with the current paradigm and situates both authors as internationalists who have an insider-outsider relationship with their communities. We complement each other's way of knowledge production, with Reiss taking a predominantly scholarly perspective and, as a storyteller and activist, Karijo adopting a situated perspective. We both use research as a method of sense-making. Our perspectives and knowledge bases informed this piece equally as we developed the theoretical concepts, methodology, and empirical research.

4. Political Violence Against the LGBTIQ+ Community: Turning Victims into Perpetrators

In the following subsections, we unpack how, over time, LGBTIQ+ Kenyans, once victims of colonization, have been turned into perpetrators. First, we discuss how, in precolonial times, non-heterosexual/non-cisgender Kenyans existed in various contexts across different ethnic groups. Here, heterosexual and cisgender norm (ativity) was perpetuated in various ways in the respective communities. Second, we illustrate how ostracizing certain Kenyans because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity served as a strategy of *othering*, *natal alienation*, and incitement of *moral panic* originally used by colonizers. The norms and legislation discriminating against non-hetero and non-cisgender persons were diffused by the colonial power to the occupied territories through coercion. Third, the more recent and current rise in violence is embedded in a rhetoric perpetuated by a global anti-gender/anti-LGBTIQ+ movement, localized within the "African"/Kenyan context (inter alia) through the framing of *un-Africanness*. It is built on *moral panic* and *othering* and serves to reframe belonging and question citizenship. We contend that these dynamics are connected to the introduction of (even more) harmful legislation. Once again, in this more recent development, we can see the diffusion of certain norms, originating in a global movement and localized within the "African" context.

4.1 LGBTIQ+ Kenyans in Precolonial Settings

Often it is either the single story of an (idealized) precolonial era with no violence against non-heterosexual/non-cisgender persons or that of the nonexistence of same-sex relationships and/or trans, non-gender binary persons that is told. In order to avoid reproducing these monolithic framings, we examine the ways in which non-heterosexual/non-cisgender Kenyans existed in various precolonial contexts across different ethnic groups – subsequently being forced together under British

settler colonial rule. One problem, however, is that there is very little literature to draw on for this period. In keeping with the overall aim of this paper, we briefly discuss the multilayered existence of people who would count as members of the LGBTIQ+ community today, being mindful that designation and categorization is a highly contentious area, even now. In order to paint a nuanced picture, albeit within the constraints of this short paper, we briefly discuss the different ethnic communities living in the geographical area that later became the Republic of Kenya. We show how LGBTIQ+ persons within these communities were part of regular communal life and *not* subjected to systematic violence. In precolonial contexts, what we now call LGBTIQ+ was important when it came to family continuity and spirituality. It also reflected a different understanding of gender to that which emerged in the postcolonial period.

In the following, we outline the practices of the *Akamba*, the *Abakuria*, the *Luo*, the *Kikuyu*, and the *Meru* within what is known today as Kenya – practices that would now be seen as deviating from heterosexual/cisgender norms. At the time, however, these practices were not considered deviant but in fact were embedded in and embraced by Kenya's diverse cultures.

The *Akamba* people of Kenya believed that their ancestors would be lost in limbo if there was no son to continue their lineage. In some cases, if a son died before marriage, a woman would be married to him posthumously to ensure that she bore a son. It is important to distinguish between the "ghost wife" or *Kiveti kya Imu* and the phenomenon of two women being married to each other that was also known as *Iweto* (with the younger woman often already having a son, who was then also considered the older woman's). "In Kamba culture, a barren woman is allowed to marry a fellow woman in an arrangement referred to as *Iweto* or *Kaweto*. The marrying woman would then go ahead and perform all traditional rights such as paying bride price" (Muasya 2018: n.p.). This practice reflects two major differences to postcolonial Kenya. First, the fact that a relationship between two women was considered lifesaving and a means of continuing a lineage; second, the community's understanding of what it meant to be a family starkly differs from what is currently often framed as "family." The *Iweto* marriage is still practiced by the *Akamba* today: Mukethe Wanza, the female husband of Alice Wanza, was able to bury her as her legal spouse by order of the court – albeit following a ten-year legal battle (Daily Nation 2020; Hoble 1967; Muasya 2018).

Similarly, the *Abakuria*, who are found in both Kenya and Tanzania and split along colonial borders, had *Mokamöna*, who were also women married to one other (Kjerland 1997). Like the *Iweto* of the *Akamba*, the *Mokamöna* were

a cultural institution for the purposes of continuity. There were similar phenomena in other parts of Africa, where having a wife or wives was not based on gender but on the economic ability of the person marrying them. While the *Akamba* and the *Abakuria* are bantu, a similar culture is observed among the Nilotic *Luo* where *Chi Mwandu* involved a widow marrying a younger woman for continuity. In their book, Njambi and O'Brien (Njambi and O'Brien 2000) talk to *Kikuyu* women who insist that they are both women and neither of them is a female husband. They write about Nduta who has told her children that she is not a *baba* (father) like in male-led households. Nduta affirms: "I brought this family together not to destroy it but to care for it" – countering the narrative that non-heterosexual families are a threat to heterosexual ones and normalizing their arrangement (Njambi and O'Brien 2000: 18). Njambi and O'Brien (Njambi and O'Brien 2000) note that *Kikuyu* culture differs from what Oboler (1985) describes as the "*Kitum Chi Tolah*" among the *Nandi* where one of the women seemed to take on roles that were typically thought of as male, further noting that the word "husband" was not automatically associated with a man, even in Oboler's writing on the *Nandi*. They draw on Oyèwùmí's (Oyèwùmí 1997) writings about the *Yorùbá* (in Nigeria), concluding that "husband" as a construct might have involved a set of roles, meaning that the person carrying out the role could be of any gender.

The Kenyan *Meru* had feminine men who were either apprentice witchmen (*arogi*, *iroria*, and *aga*) or, in some cases, held the symbolic position of the *Mugwe*, an ancient diviner who was believed to have brought the entire *Meru* community from Mbwa to Mount Kenya. Among the known practices was the dancing of the *Kiama kia Mwaa* and *Kiama kia Kagita* groups, which blurred gender lines, projected nudity, and included sexual dances. For the *Meru*, the dancing *Kiama*s were used by society to distract from the food scarcity some families experienced during drought, to provide unmarried women who had children with a communal support system, and for effeminate boys who could not become warriors to be apprentice witchmen (Fadiman 1993).

Most of these diverse cultural practices among Kenya's ethnic groups came to an end with the enactment of the so-called "sodomy laws" – known today as anti-homosexuality laws – and laws that governed marriage and succession, such as the native Christian ordinance of 1904 (modeled after the Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1892), and their coming into force (Ambani 2017). Kirby

(Kirby 2013: 66) observes "[t]he local populations were not consulted concerning the imposition of such laws," underscoring the aspect of coercion. This is of course no surprise, as colonization and the execution of dominance in the occupied territories was largely coercive in nature. Kirby further states that the violence imposed on non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people was diffused and imposed through British colonization, while precolonial systems of punishment for deviant behavior were either not explicit or nonexistent.¹

In many of the territories in Asia, Africa and elsewhere where the laws were imposed and enforced, there was no (or no clear) pre-existing culture or tradition that required the punishment of such offences. They were simply imposed to stamp out the 'vice' and 'viciousness' amongst native peoples which the British rulers found, or assumed, was intolerable to a properly governed society. (Kirby 2013: 66)

Colonization brought a more restrictive "moral" code based on the Victorian understanding of gender and sexuality.

4.2 LGBTIQ+ Kenyans in Colonial Settings

There were different forms of violence against LGBTIQ+ people during the settler colonial period, including direct and extreme violence against those considered to deviate from the cis-heterosexual norm and their criminalization through legislation. We illustrate how excluding certain Kenyans because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity was a strategy of *othering*, *natal alienation*, and incitement of *moral panic* used by colonizers that continues to pervade to this day. As discussed above, Kenya's ethnic groups engaged in diverse sexual and family-building practices. Most of these came to an end – or continued in a more hidden form – with the enactment of colonial laws in the early 1900s, including anti-homosexuality clauses in penal codes and laws governing marriage and succession which imposed hetero/cisgender norms on non-cisgender and non-heterosexual persons (Han and O'Mahoney 2018). We contend that the violence against LGBTIQ+ persons displayed in Kenya stemmed from the violent treatment of LGBTIQ+ individuals in Great Britain at the time, which was evident in different mechanisms. One of these was the enactment of legislation known today as "sodomy laws" or "anti-homosexuality laws," which were framed as "carnal knowledge against the order of nature." These were enshrined in the

¹ We are very cautious when it comes to such definitive assumptions, since, as stated above, the literature and available information on this topic is rather scarce. To the best of our knowledge and research, there is no evidence of systemic and institutionalized punishments of LGBTIQ+ persons in Kenya prior to the British colonization of the country.

Kenyan penal code in 1930. Concerning the diffusion of legal practices, “Britain was by far the most committed to spreading criminalization of homosexual acts” (Kirby 2013). Kirby shows that British diffusion practices included the implementation overseas of what could not be implemented at home: “[W]hat could not be enacted in England, however, became an idea and a model that could much more readily be exported to the British colonies, provinces and settlements overseas” (Kirby 2013: 65). Laws criminalizing same-sex sexual relationships or so-called “anti-homosexuality laws” were passed under British colonial rule, being codified in penal codes that are still used in 35 of the Commonwealth’s 54 member nations – 14 of which are in Africa. In Kenya, these laws have been part of the penal code since 1930. The historical entanglements surrounding European countries’ interference in the legislation on and treatment of LGBTIQ+ individuals in African countries thus continue to complicate the situation to this day (CIVICUS 2022). What can still be observed today goes beyond coercion and replication of the laws, now also including the localization of legislation, such as retaining sections 162,² 163,³ and 165⁴ in the Kenyan Penal Code; the adaptation of practices such as *natal alienation*, *othering*, and *moral panic*; and ultimately the framing of LGBTIQ+ Kenyans as *un-African*. As outlined above, these practices are colonial practices originally used by the colonizers against colonized Africans/Kenyans.

Even without the introduction of laws to suppress local culture, such as in the case of the *Ameru* people in Kenya, a slow dying out of practices that accommodated deviance could be witnessed. These include the *Meru* dancing groups described above. The dancing practices were considered repugnant by the colonial administrators and missionaries due to their blurring of gender lines and the nudity and sexuality they involved (Fadiman 1993).

4.3 LGBTIQ+ Kenyans in Neocolonial Settings

We take 2023 as the starting point for the following discussion of the neocolonial context and the framing of LGBTIQ+ Kenyans as *un-African*. In January 2023, the death of the Kenyan gay fashion designer Edwin Chiloba as a result of intimate partner violence sparked strong anti-homosexual sentiment, especially in social media. This was followed by what should have been a technicality but was in fact a milestone for the (organized) LGBTIQ+

community: one of the most important and prominent NGOs advocating for the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons in Kenya, the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC), was able to officially register. After years of legal struggle, the Supreme Court of Kenya upheld a ruling from 2019 which allowed the official registration of NGLHRC. The original ruling had been contested by member of parliament Peter Kaluma. Following this last ruling, an immediate backlash was seen, orchestrated by international groups such as CitizenGo (Kahiu 2023) and Family Watch International (Jackson et al. 2022), as well as local actors such as the Kenya Christian Professionals Forum, relying heavily on the dissemination of fake news about the ruling itself (Njuguna 2023). This was the very same group of actors who organized the “Pan-African Family Values” Conference held in Nairobi in May 2025. The backlash involved violent protests against the basic human rights and existence of LGBTIQ+/non-heterosexual/non-cisgender persons and was propagated by religious leaders and politicians. It was used to (further) incite violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals, including both those believed to belong to the LGBTIQ+ community and allies. In Mombasa’s main mosque and in Nairobi’s Jamia Mosque, an alliance of politicians and leaders of different religious groups incited hate speech, called for violent protests, and demanded the death of Kenyans belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community (Muyanga 2024). Member of parliament Mohamed Ali, for example, called on his supporters to “kill people with different sexual orientations, audaciously invoking religious texts to justify this indefensible stance” (Kenya Human Rights Commission 2023: n.p.).

At the same time, the anti-LGBTIQ+ “Family Protection Bill”⁵ was drafted by another parliamentarian Peter Kaluma and circulated on social media. This bill, if passed, would have a significant impact on the LGBTIQ+ community, strengthening the already harsh colonial legacy laws which criminalize same-sex relations (Mugo 2023). The bill questions rights which are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Bill of Rights of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution. It limits rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed under Chapter Four of the Constitution, including the right to privacy (Article 31), right to freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and opinion (Article 32), freedom of expression (Article 33), freedom of the media (Article 34), access to information (Article 35), freedom of association (Article 36), and the right to assemble,

² Section 162, Kenyan Penal Code: “Any person who has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature” is guilty of a felony and may face up to 14 years in prison. If the offense involves force or non-consent, or if consent is obtained through intimidation, the penalty increases to up to 21 years.

³ Section 163, Kenyan Penal Code: “Attempt to commit unnatural offences.” This section criminalizes attempts to commit the acts covered by Section 162, punishable by up to 7 years in prison.

⁴ Section 165, Kenyan Penal Code: “Indecent practices between males.” This targets “gross indecency” between men (public or private), with a maximum punishment of 5 years in prison.

⁵ In the following, we refer to the draft from June 2023. To date, the bill has still not been formally tabled in the parliament.

demonstrate, and present petitions (Article 37). It prescribes the death penalty for certain same-sex acts, which it refers to as “aggravated homosexuality” (Part V, 35). In addition, it drastically restricts freedom of assembly and expression (Part V, 40; Part VII, 59), sanctions the work of NGOs (Part VII, 58, 59), criminalizes the provision of medical services and support, especially for trans persons (Part III, 19; Part V, 45), significantly influences the curricula of educational institutions (Part III and Part IV), and imposes fines and prison sentences for leasing residential or commercial spaces to persons (believed to) belong to the LGBTIQ+ community (Part V, 39, 41) (Family Protection Bill, 2023. Draft 2023). In a heated parliamentary debate “Regarding Impact of LGBTIQ on Youth and Vulnerable Persons in Society” in early March 2023, several parliamentarians incited hate speech, calling for the death of LGBTIQ+ persons and their severe punishment. Member of parliament Patrick Makau King’ola stated that queer people do not deserve to be given space in Kenya: “That is not African, it is un-African” (National Assembly Proceedings. Adjournment – Pursuant to Standing Order 33(1): Regarding Impact of LGBTQ on Youth and Vulnerable Persons in Society 2023: ‘15:30).

As pointed out above, the historical entanglements surrounding European countries’ interference in the legislation regarding and treatment of LGBTIQ+ persons in African countries are complicated and structural discrimination and prosecution began with the British colonization. It is thus even more troubling and somewhat absurd that laws such as the Kenyan “Family Protection Bill” are (re)-framed as truly African and based on “African values.” As Morgan and Wieringa (Morgan and Wieringa 2005a: 13) already pointed out two decades ago in reference to this narrative, it is a “perverse distortion of African history to label same-sex relations as a ‘western import’” when “homophobic post-colonial governments perpetuated colonial policies in denouncing same-sex relations.”

The framing of LGBTIQ+ Kenyans as *un-African* serves to redefine belonging, citizenship, and heritage. Indeed, it goes even further by striving to erase the memories of non-heterosexual/non-cisgender persons in Kenya and justifies violence against non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender Kenyans (or those living in Kenya). The more recent surge in violence, which, as outlined above, began

in early 2023, is embedded in this very rhetoric. Considering the profound impact of colonization on all aspects of the lives of the colonized,⁶ it is a gross oversimplification to speak of “African culture.” As shown above, the term is used for certain political arguments and (mis)appropriated for the purpose of othering non-heterosexual and non-cisgender persons. We argue that its current use is *natal alienation*, meaning that other than the “master’s culture” the “slave” has no culture and heritage of his own. What is now framed as “African culture” is in fact the imposition of Victorian culture on Kenyans by Kenyans – its existence is built on oppression, and it requires an “out-group” to other and dominate.

These narratives are closely related to the use of Christian belief systems. Shortly after his election, Kenya’s current president, William Ruto, claimed he had been “prayed into power” (Musambi 2022). Groups such as CitizenGo Africa and Africa/Kenya Christian Professionals have used tactics like writing to parliament, and mass petitioning⁷ to foster their cause and to link Christian religious (values) to policymaking initiatives. It is likely that Kenya will follow the same trend as that witnessed in Uganda; where the groups that are part of a global “anti-gender” and anti-LGBTIQ+ movement have access to the president and have signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) to run certain social services such as healthcare and more specifically sexual and reproductive services (Kane 2025). One of the driving forces behind these MoUs is Valerie Huber, senior official in the health sector during Donald Trump’s first presidential term and contributor to Project 2025. Huber, now president of Protego,⁸ played an instrumental role in the Ugandan MoU and the Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD), a statement signed by 40 countries claiming that there is no international right to abortion and emphasizing a strict, traditional gender binary (Hoffmann and Musvanhiri 2024; Schraer 2024; Schwebel, Bayerlein, and Villarreal 2024).

In sum, the localization of these global dynamics within the African/Kenyan context manifests itself in the narrative of the *un-Africanness* of Kenyan LGBTIQ+ persons. Kaoma (2018) argues that international dynamics have created a paradoxical space in which Kenyan actors – including parliamentarians and religious leaders – can position themselves as victims. He conceptualizes this as “protective homophobia,” a discourse that frames LGBTIQ+

⁶ This also applies to the lives of the colonizers, but of course from a very different (privileged) perspective.

⁷ In early 2025, CitizenGo organized a petition to influence the African Union presidency, claiming that a pro-life presidency would protect African family values. When the results of the election were published, ACPF sent a congratulatory message to Mahmoud Ali Youssouf (Isenjia 2025). Youssouf then claimed, just as Kenya’s President Ruto had, that God was the reason for his election success. “They had more money, more power and more big friends but we defeated them because of God” (Prime Media News 2025).

⁸ Protego is an initiative launched by the *International Women’s Health* organization, led by Valerie Huber, a senior official in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services during the first Trump administration. Through Protego, Huber has entered into a series of agreements with several African states under the “Protego Health: The Women’s Optimal Health Framework” framework. While the initiative ostensibly seeks to provide “interventions to support the health and well-being of women and their families,” its broader and more significant objective appears to be the advancement of the principles and policy goals articulated in the Geneva Consensus Declaration (Kane 2024).

individuals as agents of Western interests and portrays the defense of so-called “traditional values” as a struggle against renewed forms of colonization. LGBTIQ+ Kenyans thus find themselves in a peculiar predicament a century after they were first criminalized, in a repeat cycle of violence while being used for populist politics as “the other.” They are accused of being members of a community that is created and funded by the West, while at the same time being on the receiving end of attacks by US and European-based “anti-gender”/anti-LGBTIQ+ groups, whose tactics and legislation is diffused to the African continent.

4.4 International Influences Unfolding in Kenya

The current situation in Kenya is embedded in a broader dynamic that has led to a shrinking of the spaces for LGBTIQ+ persons worldwide. On the African continent, this has culminated in a series of “anti-homosexuality bills,” which are partially sponsored, scripted, and advanced by globally active radical religious and “anti-rights” groups. Eastern African countries, including Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, have all experienced campaigns for the introduction of laws that further criminalize same-sex sexual relations and/or more specifically target LGBTIQ+ people (Jjuuko and Tabengwa 2026).

Both the Ugandan Anti Homosexuality Bill and the Kenyan Family Protection Bill are supported by Family Watch International and have very similar wording – especially if we look at the first version of the Kenyan bill (Parliament of Kenya 2023). They also closely resemble anti-transgender legislation in various American states (2025 Anti-Trans Bills Tracker 2025; Reed 2023). The role of international actors and dynamics can be understood, inter alia, in their connection of neoconservatism and Christian fundamentalism (Davidson 2007) as well as their support for anti-rights legislation across different national contexts. They seek to instrumentalize legislative action and prosecution to criminalize various aspects of everyday life – as pointed out in section 4.3 of this working paper: right to privacy; right to freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and opinion; freedom of expression and of the media; access to information; freedom of association; and the right to assemble, demonstrate, and present petitions. It also sanctions the work of NGOs, criminalizes the provision of medical services and support (especially for trans people), influences the curricula of educational institutions, and imposes fines and prison sentences for leasing residential or commercial spaces to persons (believed to) belong to the LGBTIQ+ community.

Just a week before the 2025 “Pan-African Conference on Family Values” in Nairobi, another similar meeting took place in Entebbe, Uganda: the “Interparliamentary Conference on Family Values and Sovereignty” – the third of its

kind since 2023. At the first meeting between policymakers and religious leaders from various African countries along with radical religious leaders from the US and Europe, Kenyan parliamentarian Kaluma stated: “Across the continent we want to have these laws” (Mersie and Hlatshwayo 2023: n.p.), thus suggesting deliberate diffusion of the bills across countries. Kaluma referred to a group of states including Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda who all have evidence of British colonial law in their penal codes and constitutions. On the official website of Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, Kaluma is quoted as stating, during a meeting with Museveni: “A person proposing that there should be same sex marriages or same sex relationships is a person seeking to wipe out the entire humanity out of the face of this earth. [...] So many African States are now coming up with similar Laws – Kenya is drafting the family protection Law, Ghana and Malawi and many others” (PPU Reporter n.d.).

The 2025 “Interparliamentary Conference on Family Values and Sovereignty” in Entebbe had a broad range of attendees, including speakers of the parliaments in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Eswatini, Malawi, Morocco, South Sudan, and Uganda. The conference was hosted by the State House and the office of the First Lady of Uganda and sponsored by the chargé d'affaires of the Hungarian Embassy (Parliament of the Republic of Uganda 2025a). Many of these countries are signatories to the GCD – including Kenya (Musho 2024). The Ugandan conference ended with an agreement to campaign for an African Charter, at the regional governance level of the African Union, to uphold traditional family values, protect sovereignty, and resist ideological influence from abroad (Parliament of the Republic of Uganda 2025b). This framing is in line with what we refer to here as *othering* and incitement of *moral panic*; practices through which LGBTIQ+ Africans are ostracized from the African family, are excluded from the nation-building project, and are framed as agents of “the West” who propagate a non-heterosexual/non-cisgender way of existing. This political maneuver at the African Union level was also discussed at the Nairobi conference in 2025 and is likely to be the next objective for Africa pursued by a conglomerate of national and international “anti-gender”/anti-LGBTIQ+ actors.

5. Conclusion

In this working paper, we unpack the more recent rise in hostility and violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals and organizations in Kenya since 2023 and the underlying normative development. We contextualize these developments spatially and temporally and make a direct connection with colonial practices of *othering*, *natal alienation*, and *moral panic*, as well as legal discrimination of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual Kenyans. We argue that the violence against LGBTIQ+ people in Kenya is now being used by African/Kenyan politicians and religious



Figure 2: Screenshot of an Instagram post from May 9, 2025 by UBUNTU Law and Justice Centre. Caption: “Let’s Redefine Family Together: Support #RealAfricanFamilyValues – Because True Values Bring Us Together, Not Tear Us Apart.” Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJdqWD9NPq/>.

leaders in collaboration with international anti-LGBTIQ+ groups to perpetuate a pseudo-Africanness and manufacture an enemy introduced by “the West” to erode the African moral fabric. Ironically, this supposed African identity is purely Christian Victorian, rooted in its distinct, historically situated understanding of “family values.” We therefore argue that the norm of violence that is now being enacted by African actors against LGBTIQ+ Kenyans was in fact established by British colonial rulers.

LGBTIQ+ Kenyans thus find themselves in a peculiar predicament a century after they were first criminalized – a predicament that has wide-reaching implications for the individuals themselves, LGBTIQ+ activists and allies. They are accused of being members of a community that was created and is being funded by the West, while at the same time being on the receiving end of attacks by American and European Christian anti-rights groups. This is manifested, *inter alia*, in the diffusion of legislation such as anti-homosexuality bills that go well beyond the criminalization of same-sex relations. This new wave of neocolonial anti-LGBTIQ+ laws, introduced or passed in Uganda, Ghana, and Nigeria (Jjuuko and Tabengwa 2026) is a tool of political violence. Although this rather new development is still understudied, initial analyses show that unlike the colonial legislation, which was limited to the colonies’ penal codes, the new laws aim to strip LGBTIQ+ people of all their basic human rights (see section 4.3). As Jjuuko and Tabengwa (2026) argue, these laws are “old wine in new calabashes,” showing striking similarity across a diverse range of African countries, including Uganda,

Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. Agreements between Protego and other similar actors to take over health services in African countries and push for specific policies, as in the case of the GCD, underline this neocolonial development of LGBTIQ+ discrimination. The recent conferences on “family values” in different African countries brought together local and international anti-LGBTIQ+ actors, providing an avenue for the diffusion of legislation, policies, and norms.

LGBTIQ+ Kenyans find themselves in a repeat cycle of violence while being used for populist politics as “the other.” The current framing of LGBTIQ+ Kenyans as *un-African* and as a “Western colonial creation” aims at erecting more hurdles for queer rights activists in Kenya and across the continent. When LGBTIQ+ activists (or individuals) win important cases, such as that of the NGLHRC on freedom of association in 2023, or mourn the murder of victims like Edwin Chiloba, they are met with death threats and protest marches. Many of these are spurred by misinformation campaigns led by “anti-gender”/anti-LGBTIQ+ actors who position themselves as defenders of “African culture.”

Despite these trends, Kenyan LGBTIQ+ activists are not only keenly aware of the contestation and weaponization of African culture and belonging, they are responding accordingly. As highlighted in the introduction, feminist groups such as Akina Mama wa Africa exposed the long shadow of colonial violence at the “Pan-African Conference on Family Values.” In opposition to the 2025 Nairobi conference, its speakers, their ideology, and agenda, organized civil society and activists petitioned the Red Cross in Kenya calling for them not

to host the conference guests in their hotel. Further, the Women's Health Consortium put up billboards along the road from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport to the various venues of the conference in Nairobi depicting different types of families (single and/or same-sex parents and families without children) (Women's Health Consortium 2025). In so doing, they reclaimed space in the(ir) city and reiterated the diversity of African identities by portraying the lived reality of Kenyan families. On the final day of the "Pan-African Conference on Family Values," the Women's Health Consortium also held a traditional ceremony burying the "evil that had occupied the space" at the conference venue (Kimani 2025). By performing this ritual, they articulated the position that non-cisgender/non-heterosexual individuals have always belonged in Kenya and Africa, and sought to reclaim their space. National and transnational resistance in contemporary political contexts, rooted in African histories of belonging (for one example, see Figure 2, p. 13), continues to be an important counterweight to the norm of violence against LGBTIQ+ persons.

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The cover photo was taken during the *Out Film Fest* in Nairobi in November 2023 by Mariel and shows the hands of Āryā.

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ABOUT TRACE

What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMFTR-funded research center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

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