Allah Keep Our Secrets: Language, Sexuality & Space in Islamic Northern Nigeria

In contemporary Nigeria cultural and religious taboos and homophobic legal codes make it nearly impossible for gay men, lesbians and other sexual minorities to assemble openly in public. Yet sexual-minority communities do function in various parts of the country. This talk explores the material and ideological conditions and social practices that make such communities possible. My focus is on the ways certain Muslim, Hausa-speaking men in northern Nigeria use language, the built environment, and other technologies to construct social spaces in which they can meet and communicate about their shared same-sex desires without exposing themselves to hostility, persecution or violence. In private these men often call themselves masu harka ‘ones who do the deed’ or homos. When a group of masu harka come together, they perform a particular kind of talk: they flirt and gossip about homo-social affairs, and they use a secret code, known as the ‘harka dialect’, ostensibly to prevent outsiders from understanding them. The risk of exposure varies according to the architectural venue—a private room is more protected than a storefront or the shade of a tree—and became more acute after 2000, when twelve northern Nigerian states adopted Islamic law (Shari’a). Since then, many masu harka have sought to limit their socializing to behind closed doors, though poverty and social norms make access to private space a rare commodity. Homo-social practices have also been reshaped by the spread of new technologies such as cellphones and the internet, which afford greater privacy while expanding the geographical reach of social networks.

While new media technologies have made many masu harka more aware of the LGBT communities that exist throughout the world, their identification with such communities is, in my experience, almost always kept private and usually articulated solely in terms of shared erotic interests; the notion of a northern Nigerian LGBT political movement akin to the queer Muslim movements that have emerged in North America and Great Britain is generally considered both impossible and undesirable. Language ideologies are central to this discrepancy. Politicized queer Muslims (like their Jewish and Christian counterparts) typically use a rationalist form of scriptural exegesis to publicly affirm that there is no contradiction between being gay and being a ‘good’ Muslim. By contrast, the masu harka I have met generally acknowledge such a contradiction, while hoping that their sexual discretion and faith in God will attract His ultimate mercy and forgiveness. As indexed by the oft-repeated prayer, "Allah ya rufe asiri" (‘May God cover/keep a secret’), this emphasis on discretion is an integral part of the Hausa Muslim cultural habitus, though its hegemonic force has been challenged in recent years by the rhetorical explicitness that characterizes the discourses of Islamism and secular-liberal modernity alike.