



Case Study

The Complex Rwandan Perception of LGBT+: Neither Champion nor Persecutor

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Abstract

Despite the recent expansion of societal recognition of the LGBT+ community within the Global North, many Global South nations, especially in Africa, have typically clamped down on this small community. Social movements promoting LGBT+ acceptance are generally absent in Africa's more conservative and religious countries. African nations such as Uganda and Zimbabwe implemented stronger laws against the LGBT+ community. This study examines how Rwanda, often quoted as a case study for post-conflict economic development, proper utilization of foreign aid and strong governance, neither supports nor persecutes LGBT+ rights. Rwanda perceives queer identity within society as possibly fostering division within the post-genocide construction of a unified ethnic

identity. However, its political leadership, under President Paul Kagame, has refrained from creating homophobic policies. This study examines, by following the case study of Moses Turahirwa's 2022 and 2023 controversies, why Rwanda has no legal code against the LGBT+ community but still finds difficulties in accepting LGBT+ people within society. The research relies on collected data from fieldwork gathered in Kigali between December 2022 and March 2023.

Keywords

Neo-imperialism, LGBT, Rwanda, Paul Kagame, Ndi Umunyarwanda

Introduction

Rwandan fashion designer and influencer Moses Turahirwa appears to be a primary icon for Rwanda's post-genocide economic growth and cultural identity. He founded the fashion company Moshions in 2015. Rather than relying on Global North artistic fashion standards, he introduced a Rwandan uniqueness to his clothing line. He uses traditions to make his clothing products fashionable and functional while representing Rwandan heritage and culture. He promoted the Rwandan government's desire for *agaciro*, best described as a traditional method of economic self-reliance (Beloff, 2021a). Moshions is an example of *agaciro's* application as it was founded to create a new clothing design and textile manufacturing industry that employed dozens of Rwandans. It promoted a unified Rwandan heritage under the *Ndi Umunyarwanda*, 'I am Rwandan,' societal norm. International audiences knew him after being featured in fashion magazines such as *Jeune Afrique* and *Vogue Italia* (Gahigi, 2020). While he initially began with small sales at various vendors, including the Kigali Genocide Memorial (Rwandan A, personal communication, January 2023), his break came during a fortunate period when Rwanda's President Paul Kagame wore one of his shirts (Moshions, 2019). The President, wearing a Moshions shirt, elevated the brand in the eyes of Rwanda's growing middle class, which idealised Kagame. Soon, government officials wore Moshions' clothing. One mid-level bureaucrat commented, "President Kagame wears it [Moshions clothing], so we all started to wear it" (Rwandan official A, interview, January 2023). The success led to

multiple other start-ups in Kigali producing similar clothing. Despite his success, Turahirwa would encounter massive controversy. The controversy, however, inspired conversation about sex, gender, and tolerance.

During the final days of 2022, a video surfaced on Rwandan social media, starting on Snapchat and spreading to other platforms. The video contained a gay sex scene of Turahirwa with two White male Italians (Derrick, 2023). The leaked video originated from a larger film project in which Turahirwa was invited to participate. He apologized on social media platforms for the video (Iriza, 2023). In November 2022, he posted a mostly nude picture of himself, with only a blanket covering his genitals, in front of the Sabyinyo volcano, on the Democratic Republic of Congo/Rwanda border, for an upcoming environmental project titled *Spirit of Kwanda*. Following public backlash, he quickly apologized for the photograph (ByPlugged, 2023; Zhuri, 2023). He was eventually forced to resign from Moshions but still participated in the company's design until the leaked video (Nsabimana, 2022). Many Rwandans knew of his sexual identity, holding little concern about it before these controversies. They were upset about the photo and the later video, as both images illustrated a lack of respect for Rwandan culture and values.

The controversy would not end for Turahirwa. During an upcoming visit to Burundi, he faced protests for his sexual identity. Furthermore, some Burundians felt he made light of the fact that they held seemingly different views from Rwandans about sexuality (ISIMBI, 2023). The events surrounding Turahirwa became a massive conversation within Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, where Rwandans discussed the sequence of events in a series of YouTube videos. Some videos even questioned whether his downfall was part of a larger unknown conspiracy. Nevertheless, the controversy continued and on April 19, 2023, allegations from the Rwandan newspaper, *The Chronicle*, claimed that Kigali City authorities requested Turahirwa to remove his LGBT+ artwork from a public wall (The Chronicle, 2023).

This article examines Rwanda's complex and seemingly contradictory beliefs about the LGBT+ community in light of Turahirwa's controversies and how Rwandans view Global North nations' norms as neo-imperialistic. Akin to Nagel's (2003) description of sexual behavior interconnected to constructive citizenship behavior, Turahirwa's same sex acts were not problematic for Rwandans; instead, his public display of sex was of concern to Rwandans. His depiction of sexual identity undermined the image of the newly constructed post-

genocide ethnic identity of Rwandans. Thus, Rwanda is a case study of an African nation that questions public displays of sexual identities. LGBT+ identities contradict society's social and moral fabric, which is rooted in promoting a singular identity under Ndi Umunyarwanda. In Rwanda, 'homosexuality' can exist as a practice but not as an identity. This acceptance, in order to promote national unity, differs from the political homophobia and political divisions often found within anti-LGBT+ rhetoric and policies. It follows Nagel's (2003) argument about ethnic identity; individual identities are attributed to the self and "the property of others...." (p. 42). The Rwandan power structures led by President Paul Kagame permit different sexual acts as long as they are not public acts.

The leaked video came about during the author's 2022-2023 fieldwork period. Rwandans wished to provide their opinions on Turahirwa's recent troubles. Although much of the desire for these conversations appeared more as social gossip, many wanted to know my opinion. They saw my ethno-religious Jewish identity (Beloff, 2022) and my primary residence in London, UK, as providing some new insights on the issue, which Rwandans perceived as a foreign interpretation, compared to their perceptions. There is relatively little research on Rwanda's interpretation of and engagement with LGBT+ persons, with only Love (2014) and Paszat (2022a; 2022b; 2022c) publishing on the matter. Paszat provides perhaps the most significant insights based on her research on gender, sexual identity, sex work, and international engagements. Turahirwa's troubles illustrate how, despite Rwanda's progressive attitude towards gender equality (Hogg, 2009), these attitudes have not necessarily benefited the LGBT+ community. As Paszat (2022b) writes, Rwanda fits into a rather unusual position of supporting LGBT+ rights internationally but not promoting this community domestically. While Rwanda has not followed the progressive steps of some Global North nations, it nevertheless represents an interesting example of tolerance in an African nation (Cortell & Davis Jr., 2000; Finnemore, 1996).

Rwandan officials' ambivalence about individuals' privately held sexual beliefs, inadvertently leads to the society holding a relatively moderate view on LGBT+ compared to other African nations. Nevertheless, Rwanda has not promoted, supported and protected this community to the same extent as many progressive parts of the world. This lack of support stems from multiple factors. The first reason is that the nation is trying to socially engineer its societal norms to promote a post-ethnic state after the disastrous 1994 genocide against the Tutsi,

also known as the Rwandan Genocide. Most of the Rwandans interviewed discussed post-genocide ethnic identity formation and how the LGBT+ movement seems to contradict Rwanda's promotion of Ndi Umunyarwanda. However, the country has not replicated its neighbors' anti-LGBT+ policies, as President Kagame sees 'homosexuality' as a non-issue. President Kagame's decisions and perspective have influenced many Rwandans (Reyntjens, 2011). So far, Kagame has consistently downplayed the need for outlawing LGBT+ identities and/or relationships, which sharply contrasts with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and former Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe.

Through the case study of Moses Turahirwa, it is possible to understand Rwandan perceptions of LGBT+ and sexual identity. While shunned as an open expression of identity, sexual acts are allowed and often relegated to minor importance within Rwanda's post-genocide development. These factors promote the reasons for Rwanda's rather unusual perspective on the issue of LGBT+ rights.

Additionally, this article builds upon Calvin's (2016), Mhaoileoin's (2019) and Rao's (2014; 2020) criticism of how aspects of the LGBT+ movement from the Global North hold neo-colonial and imperialistic elements. Many of my conversations with Rwandans brought this idea to the foreground as they believed that the Global North's promotion of LGBT+ social norms is a form of quasi-neo-imperialism. This article, then, suggests that if the Global North continues to promote and encourage the LGBT+ community in the Global South, the Global North needs to utilize tactics that appear less neo-imperialistic. These global actors must better engage with African societies, work with local partners, and be careful in using their social norms and beliefs as universally superior principles to appear less neo-imperialism.

This research relies on conversations between Rwandans and the author during a multiple-month period between December 2022 and March 2023. A total of seventy-five Rwandans were interviewed, through either semi-structured questions, conversations, or private discussions. Engagements between interviewees lasted from thirty minutes to three hours as many held strong opinions on the Turahirwa's situation. Conversations and interviews occurred at the Kigali Genocide Memorial; Kimironko Market; downtown Kiyovu; the Muslim quarter in Nyamirambo by Biryogo; and other areas in Kigali. The researcher used interpretivist methods, a qualitative research method that focuses on collecting observable data to develop a theory or explanation, as it provides a

better approach to interpret interviewees' responses (Lamont 2015; McNabb 2004). Despite not asking about sexual orientation, two participants indicated that they were gay, with one claiming to be bi-sexual. As the situation still unfolds and is deemed socially controversial, this research does not include the informant's names, with dates left relatively vague to provide protection. Within this group are five mid-level government officials, with a majority being part of Kigali's growing middle class, and between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. This social grouping is significant as they live in Rwanda's post-genocide era and led by President Kagame and his political party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Kagame and the RPF's desire to construct a unified ethnic identity to prevent future genocides, influenced this age group, compared to past generations. While the author offered a consent form to each participant, many felt uncomfortable about signing it; they felt the form would make their 'friendly conversations' too formal. Nevertheless, the author gained verbal consent that follows McNabb's (2004) interview process. Unlike Thomson's (2010) research experience in Rwanda, the author encountered relatively few constraints in conducting this research.

Exploring LGBT+ Rights and the Debate in Africa

The existing literature and examination of LGBT+ issues are extensive despite the relatively minimal research on LGBT+ issues within Rwanda. This research uses the LGBT+ acronym (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender with the '+' to illustrate other gender and sexual identities) despite the debate around the use of the acronym and how to categorize the LGBT+ community; researchers resort to using terminology gleaned from their interactions with the community. Rao (2014) often uses 'queer' when describing non-heterosexual practices. Paszat (2022a) departs from Rao's 'queer' and uses the more accepted LGBT acronym. However, she differs from Mhaoileoin (2019) by not capitalising it to illustrate a distinction between localized meanings and those of international, more likely Global North, meanings. She also explains how 'lgbti', which the 'i' stands for intersex, is used by Rwandan activists.

As most African nations have some sort of homophobic law(s) or practice, literature is abundant on LGBT+ activism and rights on the continent. Calvin (2016) lists various rights of the LGBT+ community in many African nations. She lists the discriminatory policies in Namibia and Zimbabwe and the criminalization of LGBT+ persons in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Uganda. Based

on her study, only South Africa and Botswana have protected this community. However, others have explored why this is the case. Izugbara et al. (2020) credit the judicial branch in Botswana rather than the Parliament of the President for protecting the LGBT+ community through the court case *Attorney General of Botswana v. Thuto Rammoge*, and 19 other cases. By 2016, the Botswana Court of Appeal had repealed discrimination laws against LGBT+ community. Paszat (2022a) credits Seychelles and Mozambique for creating legal protections. Nevertheless, Rakner and Gloppen (2021) comment that these communities still face discrimination despite these protections.

The most known homophobic states in African are Zimbabwe and Uganda. Youde (2017) provides a detailed account of Zimbabwe's policies. Former President Mugabe utilized 'Patriotic History' and a form of political persecution against the LGBT+ community to continue political dominance, despite the poor national economy, and living conditions. While many researchers, such as Youde, focus on Zimbabwe because Mugabe is credited for starting much of the current African homophobic rhetoric (Rakner & Gloppen, 2021), Uganda has been the center of recent LGBT+ rights and research. The infamous 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill drew significant outrage as it originally proposed the death penalty for Ugandans accused and convicted of 'homosexual' and other sexually 'immoral' practices. While it passed in Uganda's Parliament in 2009 and was signed into law by President Museveni on February 24, 2014, in August 2014, the courts repealed the legislation because of a technical issue (Bompani & Valois, 2017; Nyanzi & Karamagi, 2015; Strand, 2012). However, the law was reintroduced and passed by the legislative branch in March 2023 (Okiror, 2023).

Tamale (2013) suggests that Christian groups' political interest in Uganda's anti-LGBT+ law is rooted in racial tones of the 'civilized' Global North condemning the 'savagery' found in Uganda. Historically, colonial governments and their missionary allies constructed the belief that sexual behaviors, beyond heterosexual sex, was unquestionably barbaric; many contemporary African nations continue to adhere to this narrative, which informs policies for LGBT+ communities. Specifically, it is a political mechanism held by elites to entrench their power base and self-serving agendas. While African political elites might be actively engaging in the political manipulation of African sexual history, they do so with support from Western media and conservative civil society organisations.

Rwanda, however, neither promotes LGBT+ rights nor does it attempt to persecute the LGBT+ community. Paszat (2022b) describes Rwanda's different path towards the issue of LGBT+ rights; Rwandans neither encourage it, as found in Global North countries, nor legislate the protection of LGBT+ persons, as defined by Izugbara et al. (2020) in the case studies of Botswana and South Africa. Nor does Rwanda promote homophobic laws. Paszat (2022b) illustrates, however, how forms of bigotry against the LGBT+ community exist within Rwandan society. During a conversation with a Rwandan legislator, Paszat (2022b) states, "One Rwandan government official told me, in their opinion, if the government held a referendum on criminalizing same-sex sex, it would easily pass" (p. 437).

Nevertheless, the community receives 'broad protections' based on the 2003 Rwandan Constitution (Republic of Rwanda, 2003). However, a writer for Rwanda's constitution commented that this policy does not protect the LGBT+ community nor any particular group within Rwanda. Instead, the broader protection measures were included in the constitution to combat governmental discrimination policies found during past regimes (Rwandan official B, personal communication, February 2022). This categorization of the Rwandan government's attitude towards the LGBT+ fits within the underlying theme of how 'homosexuality' can exist as a practice but face challenges if expressed as an identity. Thus, this complex issue reinforces Nagel's (2003) belief that sexuality is a matter of structure and power; Rwanda's current political system supports an approach, then, that neither supports nor condemns the LGBT+ community.

Beyond the contextualization of Uganda's anti-LGBT+ policies, some researchers focus on the methodological approaches of Global North researchers on this subject. The historical narratives that intentionally ignore the diversity of African sexuality are important, as multiple researchers blame current anti-LGBT+ legislation and discriminatory policies in Africa on European colonization (Rakner & Gloppen, 2021; Rao, 2014). Mhaoileoin (2019) believes blaming colonization as the primary cause for current anti-LGBT+ policies in Africa is overstated and illustrates the current lack of respect for African agency. While Rao (2014) does not excuse the introduction of homophobic laws and practices by British colonial officials, he does contend that finding causation is impossible as many former British colonies have banned discriminatory policies. Thus, there is not a singular explanation for the existence of homophobia in many postcolonial societies. Additionally, despite the seemingly singular mission of European colonial governments in Africa, different colonial powers, such as

the French and Portuguese, held different sodomy laws, for instance. The French banned the laws in the late 18th century (Rakner & Gloppen, 2021; Rao, 2014).

Discussions about the lasting impact of colonization on LGBT+ rights, laws, and advocacy introduces questions concerning the extent to which the Global North's support for LGBT+ rights in Africa is a form of neo-colonization/imperialism. This argument is rooted in how the Global North enforces international norms, whether through the military, or through economic and/or cultural methods. It rests on forming international norms that 'other' nations both help create, as well as incorporate within their own societies. LGBT+ rights are increasingly included in new international norms promoted by the Global North; in doing so, many Rwandans perceive that the Global North is dictating what should be normal in Rwandan society. President Mugabe's condemnation of LGBT+ rights is also response to the imposition of the Global North's norms and values around sexuality (Youde, 2017).

Rao (2014), Mhaileoin (2019), Baisley (2015), Epprecht (2012), Calvin (2016) and other researchers and theorists write about African perceptions of the current rhetoric on, and push of, social norms from the Global North for LGBT+ rights. Africans often perceive these social norms as coming from White actors who formulate either conscious or unconscious bias against them based on racial superiority. This is not too dissimilar from Europeans implementing foreign cultural norms during colonization. The difference between the LGBT+ community in the Global North and the Global South also falls, according to Calvin (2016), into this struggle. Notably, she describes how the Global North uses coercive ploys rooted in underlying racist beliefs, which hinders domestic LGBT+ activism in Africa. Rao (2014) associates this type of underlying racism with economic differences between the two communities and the desire for the Global North to continue its controlling power dynamic over Africa. This response follows Paulat's (2015) comments on how the Global North's pressure to promote LGBT+ rights in Africa is seen as another coercive policy from former colonial powers. During the 2011 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), former United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron suggested applying conditions on British foreign aid for LGBT+ rights. The comment sparked a backlash in Tanzania, Uganda, and Ghana (Rao, 2014). Unlike Calvin and Paulat, Mhaileoin (2019) suggests that Cameron's remarks stemmed, not from wishing to promote LGBT+ norms, but to relieve domestic political pressure. Even African countries, like Rwanda, that have not persecuted

LGBT+ members (Paszat, 2022), are still critical about the Global North's push for new LGBT+ norms in their countries.

Rwandan Contradictory Perceptions of the LGBT+ Community:

Ndi Umunyarwanda

The primary reason why Rwandans discussed their displeasure with Turahirwa's actions stemmed from their perception that Turahirwa promoted an identity that did not fit within Rwanda's post-genocide, socially engineered society. The apparent separate LGBT+ identity is seen as part of an 'other' that is not aligned (Nagel, 2003), with the nation's social engineering of a post-ethnic society. The genocide was an ethnic-based genocide perpetuated by the Hutu, comprising 84% of Rwandans, against the minority Tutsi community, which composed just 15% of the total population. Since the genocide, the Rwandan government has promoted policies to formulate a single ethnic identity that eliminates the ethnic divisions of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa and replaces it with a singular Rwandan ethnic identity. The Ndi Umunyarwanda, loosely translated as 'I am Rwandan,' is the government's attempt to foster a unified Rwandan population, free of ethnic and all types of divisions (Beloff, 2021b). This new ethnic identity follows the political construction of ethnicity within a society (Nagel, 2003). It sees Rwanda's pre-colonial society positively, which the current government wants to recreate. Fundamentally, the Rwandan government wishes to use these historical understandings in creating a unified ethnic, nationalistic identity, one that is disregards the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa identities.

Its success is heavily debated, with Blackie and Hitchcott (2018) analyzing how this social engineering has benefited national unity and reconciliation. Benda (2019) credits the promotion of Ndi Umunyarwanda with reducing associated genocidal guilt for Rwanda's Hutu population. However, Baldwin (2019) would disagree with this notion as the genocide commemorations often reinforce ethnic divisions with the terminology of 'perpetrator' referring to Hutus and 'survivors' glorifying Tutsis. Beyond societal reconstruction, my previous research (Beloff, 2021b) contends that the Ndi Umunyarwanda policies are to foster ontological security in Rwanda. Nevertheless, regarding its intention and outcomes, the social policy illustrates Nagel's (2003) ethnic construction of how the state unifies the population, based not on religion or sexuality but on language, region, and heritage. However, it differs from her notion that this form of ethnic-based nationalism is essentially masculine, as women are included beyond the

stereotypical notions as just 'mothers' and 'wives' who are only situated in the household.

While discussing the Turahirwa controversy, Rwandans considered how it might conflict with the nation's post-genocide social engineering. An example comes from a conversation with five Rwandans who wished to discuss the recent Turahirwa leaked video:

Do you know what upset us Rwandans about Turahirwa [past statements, photo and the leaked video]? It isn't that he's gay; we all know he is and knew for years. Who cares! But that he isn't holding up Ndi Umunyarwanda. It doesn't matter if you're gay, lesbian, straight or anything, as long as you are Rwandan or your singular identity is Rwandan (Rwandan A, personal communication, January 2023).

This comment, which his fellow Rwandan interviewees agreed with, illustrates a somewhat divergent understanding of being a member of the LGBT+ community in Rwanda, compared to other nations. Being LGBT+ is seen as an inconsequential identity, compared to Ndi Umunyarwanda. This notion of LGBT+ as being inconsequential, aligns with Paur's (2006) comments on constructing a singular identity for 'homosexuals' that places them within the framework of 'patriots'. This introduces questions of sexuality and nationalism. On the surface, it appears to follow Nagel's (2003) notion that nationalists see 'homosexuals' as disloyal because their identity makes them the 'other', which is beyond the unification brought by the nation. Ndi Umunyarwanda allows Rwanda's LGBT+ community to become part of the 'us-versus-them' narrative. The 'them,' for Rwandans, are actors wishing to promote ethnic division, and Rwandans often categorise 'them' as genocide deniers, revisionists, or propagandists. However, this simple division limits the LGBT+ community from embracing their identity or connecting with other worldwide LGBT+ groups, as Klappeer and Laskar (2018) mention.

One Rwandan used their perceptions of gay pride in much of the Global North as a threat to Ndi Umunyarwanda. He claimed:

I look at the Gay Pride celebrations in New York, London, and other Western [Global North] cities and what do I see? I see the Pride flag and some other weird flag [referring to the Social Justice Pride flag], but hardly

or no American or British flags. People claim they are proud to be Gay, Lesbian, Trans-whatever, but none say [pride for] their country. They should be proud to be Americans; their identity should be what unites them all and not by their sexual desires (Rwandan E, personal communication, March 2023).

This comment introduces a different perspective than perhaps Klappeer and Laskar (2018) assumed in their description of the pride flag. Rather than see LGBT+ rights and acceptance as a type of colonization to re-control Rwanda as Mugabe did in Zimbabwe (Youde, 2017), it is seen as a mechanism that will divide Rwandan society. The interviewee did not condemn the participants of pride marches for their sexual identities but rather for their lack of nationalistic notions of unity. This reinforces that 'homosexuality,' and other non-heterosexual acts, are permitted in practice, but not as a form of identity. The comment indicates how far-reaching Ndi Umunyarwanda is ingrained within Rwandan society; any outward expression of division is problematic. Above all, this quest for national unity could stem from the Rwandan government's rhetoric of national unity to promote economic growth (Purdeková, 2012). While this holds merit, national reconstruction also must include how the desire of the Rwandan elite to prevent a future genocide greatly influences their decision-making. Promoting Ndi Umunyarwanda will, at least in the hope of the Rwandan government, prevent the opportunity for divisions and genocide ideology from returning to Rwanda (Melvin, 2020). While this benefits the LGBT+ community by having society view them as part of Rwanda's post-ethnic identity formation, it also limits their ability to express themselves.

The LGBT+ community is not the only group denied special minority considerations. Beswick (2011) and Thomson (2009) describe how the government does not protect Rwanda's Twa population. Nevertheless, Rwandans included Ndi Umunyarwanda as the rationale for why they problematize Turahirwa's public display of his sexuality. His expression of his sexual identity thus fosters how he is trying to differentiate and possibly separate himself from Rwandan society, which goes against not only Rwandan social engineering but Nagel's (2003) notion that "an individual's ethnicity is as much the property of others as it is the person's making the ethnic claim" (p. 42).

Rwandan Government and President Kagame's Beliefs on Homosexuality and Society

The Rwandan government has primarily ignored homosexual acts, but it is important to note past attempts to ban 'homosexuality.' Despite the broad general protection for Rwandans, one primary attempt has been to criminalize homosexual acts, specifically Article 217, in 2009. The penal code would have made same sex acts illegal. Those convicted would face prison terms ranging between five to ten years. It would have also fined those convicted between two hundred thousand to one million Rwandan francs (Paszat, 2022c). Akin to much of its regional neighbours, the desire to introduce this new penalty stemmed from the perceived immoral acts of 'homosexual' relations (Paszat, 2022a). Despite receiving support from the Catholic Church and many Rwandan social leaders, most Parliamentarians ultimately rejected it. However, in 2010, Anglican Archbishop, Emmanuel Kolini, suggests that the lack of homophobic laws is a moral genocide (Mutara, 2010). His comment raised eyebrows in the genocide survivor's community, with one privately commenting, "How could he compare the genocide to that of gays [same sex]? We [survivors] were persecuted, and he wants to do the same [against the LGBT+ community]. Has he learned nothing?" (Rwandan survivor, personal communication, March 2023). The former Minister of Justice, Tharcisse Karugarama, and his staff, went to the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Rwanda's Parliament, to discourage the legislation, as they saw it as unnecessary and problematic (Musoni, 1999).

Any push to pass Article 217 ended, but its controversy soon continued as the *Independent* published an article claiming Burundi and Rwanda pursued homophobic public policies. The article received condemnation by the former Rwandan Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Louise Mushikiwabo, in a *Guardian* editorial (Paszat, 2022b). The pushback against Article 217 leads to the question: why has the Rwandan government, which is the institution of power and can dictate social and ethnical norms, taken this path? Additionally, how the government handles the complications from avoiding homophobic or pro-LGBT+ policies, is also of concern for researchers and the LGBT+ community. By choosing neither path, however, LGBT+ rights remain in limbo and Rwandans conclude that for one to claim an LGBT+ identity, one is not adhering to Ndi Umunyarwanda.

The first cause of this third path came from President Kagame himself. He led the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) during the Rwandan Civil War (1990-

1994) and has continued as President since 2000 (Kimonyo, 2019). Multiple authors, such as Reyntjens (2004; 2015), Beswick (2010), Thomson (2018), and Wrong (2021), discuss the authoritarian nature of Kagame's political and military power within the Rwandan state. While some, such as Russell (2012), describe Kagame as more of a 'benevolent dictator,' he also has his supporters. Some of these academic supporters are Ensign and Bertrand (2010), Crisafulli and Redmond (2012), along with global political leaders, such as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and former US President Bill Clinton (Beloff, 2021a). Within Rwanda, he holds uncontested power based on what Rwandans perceived as positive economic performance, domestic security, and his no-nonsense personality. As one interviewee comments, "[President] Kagame is strict, serious and wants what is best for Rwandans. He ended the genocide and works to make Rwanda never want one again" (Rwandan B, personal communication, February 2023). This closely follows Mann and Berry's (2016) description of Rwandan internal politics and the governmental organization controlled by President Kagame. During my multiple Rwandan fieldwork periods, starting in 2008 and up until August 2023, there appears to be this near-universal acceptance and relative approval of Kagame's presidential accomplishments and plans. While this conclusion contradicts Thomson's (2013) research, Rwandans seem to have a generally positive perception towards Kagame's tenure as president. This is significant, as it helps explain Rwandans' LGBT+ attitudes. Kagame leads a Rwandan government that neither relies on homophobia nor political divisions, which has influenced the government's relatively minimal response to Turahirwa's controversies.

During the 2016 Rwanda Day in San Francisco, President Kagame received a question about LGBT+ rights in Rwanda in the context of how regional neighbors, specifically Uganda, promote homophobic legislation. While not directly about Moses Turahirwa, his response would dictate the Rwandan government's response to Turahirwa's later controversies. Kagame responds, "It hasn't been our problem. And we don't intend to make it a problem. We are struggling with all kinds of problems that we have...I don't want to make it a problem" (Cassell, 2016). Again, in 2019, the French press asked Kagame about LGBT+ rights, and he responded similarly to his previous 2016 comments. Paszat (2022a; 2022b) explains Kagame's comments, as both were tied to promoting privacy, which supports the notion that sexuality is a private practice.

Interestingly, Kagame did not say these comments in Kinyarwanda, the local Rwandan language, but instead in English and French, which most Rwandans do not speak. While Paszat (2022a; 2022b) indicates that this might have been done to prevent backlash in Rwanda, one interviewee dismissed this notion, indicating that, “His Excellency [President Kagame] spoke in Kinyarwanda during the anti-gay bill [Article 217] back in 2009. He told us how important it is that we do not interfere with people's private lives and, more importantly, cannot divide ourselves. No divisionism, whether Hutu or Tutsi [ethnic divisions] or gay and straight” (Rwandan C, personal communication, January 2023). This comment on privacy echoes John Ruku-Rwabyoma’s perspective. A member of the Chamber of Deputies, he suggested that Rwandans should not concern themselves with other people's private lives (Paszat, 2022b).

Paszat does not analyze Kagame's body language. However, Kagame’s relatively calm manner indicates to Rwandans how he, and thus, in turn, Rwandans, should not perceive LGBT+ as a severe issue. This is supported by an interviewee’s interpretation of Kagame's silence around Turahirwa's video scandal. The interviewee indicated that, “Kagame hasn't said or posted anything about it [Turahirwa]; he doesn't care, and we [Rwandans] shouldn't really care either because we, all of us [referring to the LGBT+ Rwandan community], have to focus on building our country” (Rwandan D, personal communication, January 2023). This interviewee, and numerous others, hold an intrinsic trust in Kagame to promote policies and activism that are best for the nation. The lack of discussion by Kagame about Turahirwa indicates that Rwandans should not be concerned about the situation. Fundamentally, Kagame's lack of position on LGBT+ rights is perhaps the greatest tool in preventing homophobic legislation.

LGBT+ Norms as a Form of Neo-Imperialism

Finally, interviewees expressed their concern for Turahirwa's actions as promoting Global North norms that are not only tied to ethnic constructions but also to globalization (Nagel, 2003). This contradicts earlier Rwandan interviewee’s perceptions of Turahirwa, who utilized traditional Rwandan norms in his Moshions clothing line. Their comments not only helped reinforce the notions of *Ndi Umunyarwanda* by relying on the Rwandan government's narratives of pre-colonial societal structures but was also seen as a response to the globalization of Global North fashion trends. Akin to Nagel's (2003) discussion of the remaking of global cultural products in local settings, Turahirwa's clothing

illustrated a way to promote a Rwandan interpretation of globalized clothing styles consisting of fashion trends found in the Global North. As discussed earlier in this research, multiple authors such as Calvin (2016), Mhaoileoin (2019), Rakner and Gloppen (2021), Klapeer and Laskar (2018), Nunez-Mietz and Iommi (2017) and Rao (2014) discuss how LGBT+ activist groups in the Global North use, often unintentionally, subconscious racial attitudes in 'civilizing' the Global South through the promotion of LGBT+ rights (Paszat, 2022a). Calvin (2016) highlights this problematic relationship between Global North activists trying to promote progressive LGBT+ policies in the Global South. Human rights groups and organizations such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) utilize shame as part of their spectrum to compare LGBT+ rights and societal acceptance with the Global North. It not only relies on a state-centric approach but, as Mhaoileoin (2019) and Rao (2014) describe, establishes a narrative by Western journalists, celebrities, and actors about how the Global South is backwards compared to its European and North American counterparts. We can see the backlash from the Global North's promotion of progressive policies to combat homophobic laws in multiple African countries, such as Uganda and Zimbabwe, which frame their homophobic policies as part of repelling neo-colonialism. Calvin (2016) illustrates this response best, "Most Africans continue to interpret western gay-proselytism (particularly the pressure the Global North democracies exert on African countries) as a form of cultural imperialism or (attempted) neocolonialism" (p. 149).

Rwandans often held similar sentiments, and they were lectured and condemned by the Global North for not upholding the same progressive policies and beliefs. One Rwandan interviewee commented, "It is ridiculous for Rwandans, and all Africans, to be told to uphold rights [LGBT+] that even the West [Global North] are still trying to figure out!" (Rwandan E, personal communication, March 2023). Rwandans, therefore, disagree that LGBT+ rights are a global norm as they believe these rights are constructed mainly in the Global North; even within these nations, they are still grappling with them. Rwandans criticized the United States for being contradictory in accepting LGBT+ people and rights (Rwandan E, personal communication, March 2023). Another Rwandan commented:

America and Europe want to force their new beliefs [LGBT+ acceptance] on us [Rwanda] as 'universal human rights', but they did that before during Belgium colonisation and the missionaries [White Fathers]. How does it keep changing, and why does that change only happen when it comes from the West? (Rwandan D, personal communication, February 2023).

The notion of LGBT+ as a form of neo-imperialism contradicts Watkins' (2017) description of 'homosexuality' within Rwanda's pre-colonial history. Paszat (2022) explains how the disconnect between historical stories and current interpretations of sexuality might stem from the silence around sexuality in Rwandan historical narratives. Interviews and discussions with Rwandans confirm this idea, as many were unfamiliar with varying sexual behaviors and identities in pre-colonial history. Nevertheless, Rwandans perceive the promotion of LGBT+ acceptance as not a global norm, but instead imposed by a select few countries that hold political, economic, and even military influence over 'developing' nations (Nunez-Mietz & Immi, 2017). Additionally, the Global North, through colonization, instilled the previous homophobic norms, which Rwandan society was forced to accept. However, because the Global North has changed its views on those norms, it expects other cultures to adopt the new beliefs or be seen as problematic within the constructed global human rights narrative. This shift reinforces what Rwandans perceive as a hierarchy of international social norms originating from the Global North (Rao, 2014).

Despite this backlash in Rwanda and claims that the global LGBT+ movement is neo-imperialistic, there is a significant difference between Rwanda and its neighbors. Unlike Rwanda, which tries to steer clear of the political aspects of the LGBT+ issue, other African nations, such as neighboring Uganda, use the neo-colonial/imperialistic rhetoric against their domestic LGBT+ communities for political agenda or self-serving agendas (Mhaoileoin, 2019). Political elites create moral panic about 'homosexuality' to divert attention from political crises (Rakner & Gloppen, 2021). This agenda appears mainly absent in Rwanda despite the government frequently accusing and blaming the international community for the nation's failings. For instance, Rwandan officials accused the Global North of helping to foster ethnic divisions that led to the genocide a genocide ideology (Beloff, 2021b). However, none of the informants commented about how they believed a member of the Rwandan LGBT+ community was part of a Global North conspiracy.

When Rwandan interviewees were asked if they view LGBT+ Rwandans as outsiders or 'other' as per Nagel (2003), many replied simply with “no.” This collective response does not mean that Rwanda is free of homophobia; some interviewees did believe ‘homosexuality’ and transgender identities were against basic biology or were unnatural acts. However, no informant discussed or considered the need to condemn or persecute this community if its members followed the Ndi Umunyarwanda belief. When asked whether Turahirwa fit this category, some Rwandan interviewees questioned whether his actions were to gain international attention. Nonetheless, whether he realized it or not, his actions led Rwandans to discuss the LGBT+ community and their inclusion within the Ndi Umunyarwanda belief. More importantly, it also created conversations about how the Global North forces the Global South, through neo-imperialism, to promote LGBT+ rights. During these interviews, no one discussed HIV/AIDS in terms of the LGBT+ community, unlike, for instance, Kenya, which uses the AIDS epidemic to promote homophobic laws (Rakner & Gloppen, 2021). Fundamentally, while there is a belief that the Global North is forcing, through neo-imperialistic mechanisms, LGBT+ progressive attitudes and policies, none accused the Rwandan LGBT+ community of being the 'other' akin to a foreign entity.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding Moses Turahirwa in late 2022 and early 2023 led Rwandans to discuss their perceptions of the LGBT+ community within Rwanda. His mostly nude photograph in front of the Sabyinyo volcano and later leaked same-sex video led to not only his dismissal from Moshions but larger conversations about LGBT+ representation in Rwanda. For this study, Rwandans from Kigali, often between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, wanted to discuss the subject. Unlike some of their African neighbors, many did not believe that Rwandans should demean Turahirwa, or any member of the LGBT+ community, as long as he and other Rwandan LGBT+ members follow Rwanda's Ndi Umunyarwanda belief. They are still considered part of the Rwandan community, as long as they continue to identify themselves primarily as Rwandan, instead of identifying as a member of the LGBT+ community.

Interviewees held this belief, although the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church have instilled homophobic sentiments within much of society since the onset of colonization. However, the genocide against Tutsis significantly altered

Rwanda's understanding of its constructed identity and provided insight into Rwandan perceptions of LGBT+ norms. As Paszat (2022a) rightly notes, "the legacy of the 1994 genocide frames the government's rhetorical commitment to nondiscrimination for minority groups" (p. 543). This complex reality benefits Rwanda's LGBT+ community as they are protected, to some degree, when compared to other African nations that persecute their communities. Fundamentally, most Rwandans, cannot condone government-sanctioned homophobic beliefs that will divide Rwandans based on their sexuality. They know how past divisions, primarily ethnic, lead to civil unrest, war, and genocide.

Nevertheless, the Turahirwa situation illustrates Rwanda's complex ideas about the LGBT+ community. While some interviewees held homophobic beliefs, similar to those found in Uganda and Zimbabwe, Rwandans seem to utilize these anti-LGBT+ beliefs to detract from pressing issues; on the other hand, political leaders may rely on these issues and policies to detract from their own political failures. Doing so largely stems from President Kagame, who holds the primary political power within Rwanda and seemingly has no desire to persecute this community. Instead, he and his ministers have dismissed and prevented anti-LGBT+ legislation, such as Article 217. Some LGBT+ activists in the Global North might condemn Rwanda for not pursuing greater LGBT+ acceptance and promoting awareness. However, promoting LGBT+ rights and privileges are perceived by Rwandans as neo-imperialistic and hypocritical, as the Global North once upheld beliefs which the Global North now view as homophobic and anti-LGBT+.

This article has attempted to explain the problems with the Global North's role in persuading African nations to adopt progressive LGBT+ beliefs and policies. It is essential to stress that despite the best intentions of LGBT+ activists from Global North governments and Non-Governmental Organizations, there is the Rwandan perception that these 'foreign' entities are forcing societal changes upon them. Many Rwandans would rather have these shifts develop organically within their society. This organic development may be more beneficial as it works within current structures rather than foreign ones. The Global North would better support the efforts of LGBT+ activists and communities in the Global South to create change by collaborating with African nations instead of imposing social norms.

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