

## Shifting sexual morality? Changing views on homosexuality in Afrikaner society during the 1960s

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### Introduction

Over a period of seven weeks during March and April 1968, a series of 38 letters on the topic of homosexuality, reflecting a wide range of opinions, were published in *Die Burger*, the leading Afrikaans daily newspaper of the time. It was part of the first public debate on this topic among Afrikaners<sup>1</sup> and was revealing of Afrikaner attitudes. The debate was sparked by the introduction in parliament of legislation to tighten the regulation of homosexual activities.

Because the state interest at the time and the ensuing debate were restricted to male homosexuality, this article focuses on male homosexuality. Thus far the preponderance of scholarship on same-sex relationships in South African society has been on male homosexuality.

The purpose of this article is to contextualise, analyse and evaluate the 1968 homosexuality debate. What was the historical context that gave rise to the debate? What ideological and/or cultural shifts were changing the dynamics of social organisation which had made it possible for many years to draw a veil of secrecy over homosexuality and made the first relatively open discussion of homosexuality in the Afrikaner society possible? What did the 1968 debate reveal about attitudes towards homosexuality in Afrikaner society at the time? What impact did the 1968 debate have on the dissemination of information about homosexuality and the discourse on homosexuality

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1. In this article the term “Afrikaners” refers to Afrikaans-speaking whites who supported Afrikaner nationalism.

in Afrikaner society thereafter?

### **Homosexuality as social taboo in Afrikaner society**

There is no question that homosexuality, which is an integral part of every society, has always existed in Afrikaner society. Researchers have pointed to the evidence of same-sex practices in different South African regions before 1910.<sup>2</sup> Because of the paucity of evidence, no researcher ventured to initiate in-depth research of homosexuality among Afrikaners before the start of the twentieth century. Only gradually have more data been revealed about Afrikaner involvement in homosexual relationships and same-sex activities after 1900. From the 1920s, white middle-class gay subcultures emerged in South African cities. The strength of homophobic attitudes in South Africa became clear when in the late 1930s, moral panic around homosexuality flared up as a result of revelations about an organised male prostitution ring in Johannesburg, which led to a flurry of sensational reports, articles and letters in newspapers. Church leaders, politicians and policemen raised alarm about the potential impact of homosexual activities on young white men and called for stern punitive measures. Nevertheless, during and after World War II the numbers and visibility of urban homosexual subcultures in South Africa were boosted.<sup>3</sup> Afrikaners, older men and younger boys, were

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2. N. Southey, "Uncovering Homosexuality in Colonial South Africa: The Case of Bishop Twells", *South African Historical Journal*, 36, May 1997; M. Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2004), pp 53, 55, 134; S. Newton-King, "For the Love of Adam: Two Sodomy Trials at the Cape of Good Hope", *Kronos*, 28, 2002, pp 21–42; S. Newton-King, "Sodomy, Race and Respectability in Stellenbosch and Drakenstein, 1689–1762: The Story of a Family, Loosely Defined", *Kronos*, 33, 2007, pp 6–44; R. Sinclair, "The Official Treatment of White, South African, Homosexual Men and the Consequent Reaction of Gay Liberation from the 1960s to 2000", D.Litt. et Phil. thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, 2004, pp 39–45.
  3. Epprecht, *Hungochani*, pp 53, 55, 134, 139, 146, 207; M. Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2008), pp 83–4; Sinclair, "Official Treatment", pp 45–46.

also involved in the urban gay scene.<sup>4</sup>

However, silence about and denial of the existence of homosexuality prevailed in Afrikaner society as it prevailed on the rest of the African continent for the greater part of the twentieth century. Epprecht attributes this silence and denial in Africa as much to the Western homophobic norms that dominated the thinking of white missionaries, colonialists and anthropologists who pioneered studies of African societies, as to Africans' own denials, taboos and euphemisms on the issue of homosexuality. He argues that in the powerfully heteronormative African societies a combination of external and internal factors worked in favour of turning a blind eye to the existence of same-sex practices and remaining silent about multiple sexual identities in Africa, which reinforced the stereotype of a heterosexually pure Africa.<sup>5</sup>

For the period until 1960 there is hardly any written evidence about the incidence of homosexuality in Afrikaner society, because it was a social taboo, a topic that was avoided. Almost nothing was written about it in books, newspapers or magazines. In a situation where the general public remained uninformed about homosexuality, negative stereotypes of it continued to prevail. When homosexuality began surfacing in the Afrikaans media it was only to show that it was “sinful“ and “against nature“, and should therefore be censured.<sup>6</sup>

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4. M. Gevisser, “A History of South African Lesbian and Gay Organisation: The 1950s to the 1990s”, in M. Gevisser and E. Cameron (eds), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1994), pp 18, 19, 22–28. There is evidence that as early as the 1930s there were large numbers of homosexual men in Johannesburg. See Report of the Select Committee on the Immorality Amendment Bill, (hereafter S.C. 7–68), i.e. the first report comprising original evidence. Information in memorandum submitted by Dept Social Welfare and Pensions, p 49.
  5. Epprecht, *Hungochani*, pp 7, 10, 225; Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa*, pp 50, 51, 53, 164.
  6. See for example R. Neese, “Agter die Tronkmure 2: Maak Kennis met Ons Loseerders”, *Die Huisgenoot*, 30 October 1959, p 8.

Afrikaner society was not unique in this regard. Silence, denial, shame, gradual acceptance – these phases on to social attitudes toward homosexuality were common in many twentieth-century societies. The repression of homosexuality in the West and colonies controlled by Western imperial powers in Africa and elsewhere reached a zenith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Homosexuals were regarded as sinners or sick people. Same-sex relationships were viewed as „deviant“.<sup>7</sup>

Joubert attributes the apparent conspiracy of silence on what was regarded by the overwhelming majority of Afrikaners as sexually deviant behaviour, to a combination of Victorian prudishness, social hypocrisy and ethnocentric self-delusion.<sup>8</sup> In Afrikaner society, in a similar way to

other European-dominated metropolitan and colonial societies, religion and race were important factors in determining attitudes toward aspects of sexuality. Esterhuyse indicates the strong influence on Afrikaner attitudes towards sexuality of Victorian and Puritan ideas about chastity, in which there was a rather fine line between respectability and hypocrisy and where social taboos proliferated.<sup>9</sup> Taboos of the time prevented public discussion of everything that was regarded as deviant sexual behaviour.

At the very foundation of the secrecy about homosexuality, that was considered to be an unnatural and sinful sexual orientation, was

7. See for example, K. Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400–1800* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007), p 190; R. Crooks and K. Baur, *Our Sexuality* (Wadsworth-Thomson Learning, Pacific Grove, 2002), pp 269, 271–272; M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1: *An Introduction* (Vintage Books, New York, 1980), pp 3, 5, 43; T. Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (Minerva, London, 1995), p 124; C.E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West* (Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2008), p 12.
8. D. Joubert, “n Sosiologiese Siening”, *Perspektiewe op Homoseksualiteit* (Uitgewery Boschendal, Durbanville, 1980), p 49.
9. W.P. Esterhuyse, *Die Mens en sy Seksuele Moraal* (Butterworth, Durban, 1980), pp 16–31. Both Joubert and Esterhuyse refer to the stereotypical views of the Victorian age. However, M. Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994) argues convincingly that Victorians were not as plagued by sexual inhibitions as is generally believed.

a narrow-minded traditionalist religious outlook that was dominant in Afrikaner society. This outlook was based on a literal reading of specific verses in the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Homosexuality was not only regarded as sinful, but it was believed that it should not even be talked about, because it might corrupt society and undermine moral values.<sup>11</sup> The view that sexual deviance should be kept a family secret was not unique to Afrikaners and can be linked to European views about homo-eroticism as the “nameless sin”. Over many centuries the idea that homosexuality was an unmentionable vice, unfit even to be mentioned in Christian society, can be traced in texts.<sup>12</sup>

The result of secrecy about sexual deviance in Afrikaner society was that those who deviated from what was regarded as normal sexual behaviour were isolated. Homosexuals were forced to live a life of stealth. As long as they kept to themselves and did not try to influence “normal” persons, especially young boys, they were usually allowed to do their own thing.<sup>13</sup> Epprecht summarises the prevailing situation by the mid-1960s by stating that same-sex sexuality in South Africa had been pushed deep into the closet or into isolated ghettos.<sup>14</sup>

The marginalisation of and discrimination against gay men in Afrikaner society put severe restrictions on them. In *'n Kas is vir Klere*, Pieter Cilliers relates his life story as a gay man in Afrikaner society. He tells of his guilt-ridden youth when he realised that he was gay; his fruitless efforts to be “healed” by different types of therapy; his

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10. Leviticus 18: 22, 20: 13; Romans 1: 26–27; 1 Corinthians 6: 9; 1 Timothy 1: 10.
  11. See Ephesians 5: 3, 11–12: “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you ... And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret” (King James translation).
  12. See W.R. Dynes (ed), *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, volume 2 (Garland, New York, 1990), p 873 for more detail on the “nameless sin”.
  13. Gevisser, “South African Lesbian and Gay Organisation”, pp 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27. See also the reports by the different divisions of the South African Police, cited in the evidence of Major F.A.J. van Zyl, in S.C. 7–’68, pp 12–13.
  14. Epprecht, *Hungochani*, p 207.

homophobia and inability to maintain “normal” relationships with women; his increasing self-hatred leading to depression and thoughts of suicide; his sexual frustration and obsession with his work; and his alienation from the church because of its turn-or-burn attitude.<sup>15</sup>

Cilliers eventually accepted his identity as a “white, gay, Christian Afrikaner” and came out of the closet in the 1990s. For almost all homosexual Afrikaner men of the generation before Cilliers, coming out had never been an option that they could seriously consider. Because they did not dare to come out into the open, because this would mean social ostracism, they had no bargaining power for the recognition of their individual rights. At the time it was believed by religious and political leaders that they had no claim to rights, because they had broken the moral codes of society.

### **Rearguard action against the criminalisation of homosexuality**

The immediate cause of the debate about homosexuality in Afrikaner society in 1968 was a parliamentary process to change the legislation regulating homosexual activities in South Africa.

Legislation to penalise homosexual behaviour existed from the nineteenth century in the territories that would be joined to form the Union of South Africa in 1910. There were different penalties in different regions for sodomy, i.e. unlawful intentional intercourse of a male person with another male person *per anum*, and “unnatural” sexual behaviour, i.e. any gratification of sexual lust in a manner contrary to the order of nature, which included oral sex between men.<sup>16</sup>

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15. P. Cilliers, *'n Kas is vir Klere* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1997). Cilliers was a schoolboy in the 1960s and most of his book deals with a later period. However, his is the best available text on attitudes toward and experiences of Afrikaans homosexuals during the high-tide of apartheid.

16. See Sinclair, “Official Treatment”, pp 49–50 for more detail on the pre-1948 laws and regulations.

The moves in South Africa against homosexuality were in line with what was happening in other parts of the world. In the nineteenth century, when religious control by Christian churches over Western societies was declining, states became involved in regulating sexuality and it became a matter of public policy and legislation. Regulating sexuality is about the power to prescribe and police norms of sexual behaviour, which are protected by penalties for deviant behaviour. It follows that where heterosexuality is regarded as the norm, homosexuality will be penalised. Therefore, in most Western countries homosexual deeds were criminalised. Heterosexual masculinity was institutionalised by repressive legislation to curb and criminalise homosexuality. Heterosexual power was asserted and homosexual masculinity was subordinated to heterosexual masculinity.<sup>17</sup> Connell points out that historically the relation between hegemonic masculinity and homosexual masculinity has involved the criminalisation of male-to-male sex, as well as intimidation and violence outside the law.<sup>18</sup>

When Afrikaner power was triumphant in South Africa with the victory of the National Party (NP) at the polls in 1948, the racial rather than the gendered order of society was prioritised. Because of the heteronormative attitudes of the majority of its constituency, the conservative NP government would be inclined to tighten the control of homosexuality, but because of other priorities for some years, did not do much about it. However, in due course attention was given to white homosexuality, which had become more visible in urban societies since the 1940s and was regarded by the ruling elite as a challenge to heterosexual masculinity. Retief argues that white homosexuality was perceived by the ruling elite after 1948 to be a weakness in the fabric of white society and a threat to hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy in the country.<sup>19</sup> Epprecht alleges

17. For theoretical discussion on aspects of politics and sexuality relevant to criminalisation of homosexual behaviour, see Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, volume 1; and R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987).
18. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995), pp 78, 155.
19. G. Retief, "Keeping Sodom out of the Laager: State Repression of Homosexuality in Apartheid South Africa", in Gevisser and Cameron (eds), *Defiant Desire*, p 100.

that there was state repression of all types of non-normative sexuality by the apartheid regime and that a masculinist political discourse developed that attempted to link homosexuality to communism and African nationalism, the main enemies of Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>20</sup> Here the context of the Cold War must also be kept in mind. It has been argued that sexual containment was part of the Cold War ideology from the late 1940s.<sup>21</sup>

It is significant that the NP government wished to tighten the control of homosexuality, but only white homosexuality. Although it was a common practice for black mineworkers to have male “wives”, widespread black same-sex practices were tolerated by the political and mining authorities who realised that it had become indispensable for the satisfaction of the sexual desires of a section of the workers. This type of same-sex practice was viewed as situational homosexuality that did not pose a serious threat to heterosexual hegemony.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1950s an explicitly homophobic youth subculture of violent “moffie-bashing” emerged in South African cities.<sup>23</sup> Homophobia was not limited to white communities. *Drum*, a popular magazine aimed at the urban black population, was the first mass publication in which homosexuality was openly discussed and portrayed as a “disgrace” and an “evil”.<sup>24</sup> These homophobic attitudes in South Africa were in line with what was happening elsewhere in the world in the 1950s,

20. Epprecht, *Hungochani*, p 147, 207.

21. See for example E. Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, New York, 2008), pp 109–128. Chapter 5 deals with sexual containment on the home front.

22. T. Dunbar Moodie, N. Ndatshe and B. Sibuyi, “Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Goldmines”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1988; M. waSibuyi, “Tinconcana Etimayinini: The Wives of the Mines”, in M. Krouse, *The Invisible Ghetto* (Cosaw Publishing, Johannesburg, 1993), pp. 54, 58; G. Elder, “Of Moffies, Kaffirs and Perverts”, in D. Bell and G. Valentine (eds), *Mapping Desire* (Routledge, London, 1995), pp 60, 62; Sinclair, “Official Treatment”, pp 54–55.

23. K. Mooney, “‘Ducktails, flick-knives and pugnacity’: Subcultural and Hegemonic Masculinities in South Africa, 1948–1960”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4, 1998, pp 753–774; Epprecht, *Hungochani*, p 141.

24. Epprecht, *Hungochani*, p 165.



because repression and even witch-hunts against homosexuals still occurred in other countries.<sup>25</sup>

In 1957 the Immorality Act was passed. Just a few months earlier homosexuality made the headlines of newspapers when the police arrested 35 white homosexual men soliciting sex on the Durban Esplanade. They were charged with indecent assault and nine of them received suspended sentences.<sup>26</sup> It does not seem as if this incident had a significant impact on the legislative process leading to the adoption of the Immorality Act. For the legislators the main purpose of the Immorality Act was to prevent sexual relationships between people belonging to different races rather than between people of the same sex. Although the 1957 Immorality Act dealt mainly with prostitution, brothels and sex across the colour bar, the sections of the act dealing with prostitution (section 19); public indecency (section 20); and sex by an adult with a person younger than 16 years (section 14); could also be applied to same-sex activities.<sup>27</sup> Although sodomy remained a common law offence, sex between consenting adult men in private was not criminalised. When homosexual men met each other at a gay club and then went to a private residence to engage in sexual activity, the police could not have them prosecuted, because in terms of the law they did not pose a threat to public decency.<sup>28</sup> This must have been frustrating for homophobic policemen. Occasional raids on gay cruising scenes did, however, occur.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1950s and early 1960s the South African Police (SAP) focused their attention on the suppression of black resistance

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25. Sinclair, "Official Treatment", p 52; Epprecht, *Hungochani*, pp 140–141.

26. "Nine Men Sentenced for Indecency", *Natal Daily News*, 23 July 1956.

27. See sections 14(1)(b) and (c), 19(a) and 20(1)(b) and (c) of Act no. 23 of 1957, Immorality Act in the Union of South Africa, *Extraordinary Government Gazette*, CLXXXVIII, 5853, 12 April 1957 (Government Printer, Cape Town, 1957), pp 8, 12.

28. Sinclair, "Official Treatment", pp 49–50, 64–65.

29. For a report of moves against same-sex activities in Pretoria, see "Police Drive against Pretoria's Male Vice Rings", *Sunday Tribune*, 1 September 1957. See also Unknown, *Unspoken Facts: A History of Homosexualities in Africa* (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe, Harare, 2008), p 124.

to apartheid. They had to deal with the Defiance and Anti-Pass Campaigns in the 1950s and then in the early 1960s, with crushing subversion by underground movements such as Poqo; Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK); the African Resistance Movement (ARM); and the South African Communist Party (SACP). By the mid-1960s all the dangerous resistance leaders were either in exile or detained on Robben Island and the revolutionary threat had been (temporarily) warded off. Now the police had their hands free to attend to other policing matters. The policing of sexuality was one such matter.

A police raid in January 1966 on a private home in Forest Town, Johannesburg, where a large party, attended by more than 300 white homosexual men, was being held,<sup>30</sup> set in motion a series of events that focused attention on the issue of homosexuality in South Africa. Much publicity was given in the media to this incident and the extent of homosexuality in the country.<sup>31</sup>

Although the partygoers had, according to a police officer, engaged in the "most indecent acts imaginable" that filled the CID members who participated in the raid with "disgust and revulsion", none of them could be prosecuted for public indecency in terms of the 1957 Immorality Act, because these activities occurred at a private residence and not in public. Those who were arrested were charged with other offences, such as selling liquor illegally, masquerading (wearing women's clothes) and gross indecency.<sup>32</sup>

Public awareness of the issue of homosexuality was raised by the Forest Town raid, which elicited divergent responses. For homosexual persons, Forest Town was a pivotal event which represented an act of defiance and an expression of their newly found self-confidence. The mid-1960s was an era of sexual liberation in the West when the gay rights movement was just beginning to organise and assert itself.

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30. See Sinclair, "Official Treatment", pp 71–72 for more detail on the party.

31. "350 in Mass Sex Orgy", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 January 1966; "Polisie Tref Mans in Vroueklere aan in Johannesburg", *Die Burger*, 24 January 1966; D. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag: Debat oor Homoseksualiteit in 1968* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1974), pp 1–2; Sinclair, "Official Treatment", p 73.

32. S.C. 7–'68, p 11. Testimony by Major F.A.J. van Zyl, CID Pretoria.

Discussions on the Wolfenden Report and the Sexual Offences Act in the United Kingdom (more detail below) heightened awareness of these issues. Gevisser remembers how the spirit of the time also had an impact on the gay community in South Africa:

*Before the 60s homosexuality was something you did, rather than something you WERE. Now the personal was the political, it was an identity, and one you began to wear with pride. Some of this must have filtered through to SA despite censorship, thus both giving gay men more confidence and making law enforcers more jittery. So you could see the clampdown on gay men as something akin to the banning of TV, or the Beatles.<sup>33</sup>*

It was precisely this emergent confidence among homosexuals which prompted strong homophobic reactions. The church and the state, as the protectors of public morality, had to declare where they stood on the issue of homosexuality. Being predominantly conservative in their religious and political outlook it was not surprising that the Afrikaans churches and the NP government sided with those who endorsed heterosexual masculinity as the norm. The media coverage revealing the extent of white homosexuality gave the church and the state the opportunity to elevate homosexuality to the status of some sort of *volksgevaar* (threat to the nation) which held a real threat for the gender order.

After the Forest Town raid the attention of the SAP was focused sharper than ever before on white homosexuality. On 1 February 1966, Brigadier G.J. Joubert, CID chief in Pretoria, sent a circular to all police divisions in the country and appealed to them to act firmly against white homosexuality and "to do everything possible to take the necessary action to eradicate this type of behaviour which influences the morals of the youth as well as the whole populace".<sup>34</sup> Undercover operations were undertaken by the police to identify and round up homosexual networks.<sup>35</sup>

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33. E-mail Mark Gevisser – Rebecca Sinclair, 16 September 2003, cited in Sinclair, "Official Treatment", p 69.

34. Cited in S.C. 7-'68, p 17.

35. S.C. 7-'68, p 12. Testimony by Major F.A.J. van Zyl. See also Unknown, *Unspoken Facts*, p 125.

Some months later Colonel J.J.P. van der Bergh, a CID staff officer at police headquarters in Pretoria, was put in charge of an investigation into homosexuality by all police divisions in the country. This countrywide police investigation established that white

homosexuality was mainly an urban problem. Although there was little consensus between the divisional commissioners of police on the extent of homosexuality and the recommended measures to deal with it, it was stated that "all levels of society practise homosexuality on a scale which was hitherto considered unthinkable".<sup>36</sup> Although more than half of the divisional commissioners of police did not express themselves in favour of changes in the Immorality Act with regard to homosexuality Colonel van der Bergh concluded that the existing legislation was inadequate to cope with the problem of homosexuality.<sup>37</sup> The SAP proceeded to propose amendments to the Immorality Act that would make it possible to punish all homosexual acts, public and private, and to introduce harsher punishment.<sup>38</sup>

Homosexuality was dealt with at the highest level. On 10 February 1966, the national Commissioner of Police, General J.M. Keevey, wrote a letter to the Minister of Justice, B.J. Vorster, to bring the seriousness of the problem to his attention. He attached photographs taken by the police at the Forest Town party and emphasised that prosecution was a problem. In his view it was apparent that stringent measures could not be taken against homosexuals in terms of existing legislation. Because the 1957 Immorality Act was inadequate he advised Vorster to initiate steps to amend it.<sup>39</sup>

Now white homosexuality became a matter of public policy and legislation. Vorster requested the Department of Justice to attend to the amendment of the Immorality Act to make more effective policing

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36. S.C. 7-'68, p 12. Testimony by Major F.A.J. van Zyl.

37. Cited in S.C. 7-'68, p 21.

38. Cited in S.C. 7-'68, pp 21-23.

39. Letter J.M. Keevey - B.J. Vorster, 10 February 1966, cited in S.C. 7-'68, pp 18-19.

of homosexuality possible.<sup>40</sup> When Vorster succeeded Verwoerd as leader of the National Party and prime minister in September 1966, he left it to his successor as Minister of Justice, Peet Pelser, to introduce amendments to the sections of the Immorality Act dealing with homosexuality in the next parliamentary session at the beginning of 1967. In a parliamentary speech Pelser announced his intention to introduce such legislation. He referred to homosexuality as a sign of moral decay, which according to him had led to the downfall of civilisations. This evil had in his opinion to be curbed in order to protect the youth of the country. According to the Minister, the matter had to be approached sympathetically but deliberately.<sup>41</sup> Pelser's hard-line approach was representative of conservative Afrikaner opinion. Interestingly, no opposition MPs ventured to challenge the government position that homosexuality was a threat to society, although one might have expected liberal parliamentarians to argue that the further criminalisation of homosexuality would amount to an infringement of fundamental human rights.

In 1968, draft legislation was initiated in the form of the Immorality Amendment Bill, inter alia to curb homosexuality. The aim of the clause of the draft legislation was to make the commission of unlawful, indecent and unnatural deeds between persons of the same sex punishable, which in effect meant that all homo-erotic deeds performed by men and women would be criminalised. Had this formulation be approved it would have given the police sweeping powers to crack down on homosexuals. A legal expert stated that the bill caused an uproar in legal and medical circles, because it came close to making criminals of about 5 per cent of the population for simply being a certain way.<sup>42</sup>

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40. S.C. 7-68, p 1. Testimony by H.P.J. van Vuuren, Deputy Secretary (Legislation), Department of Justice.

41. Republic of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly* (Hansard), Second Session, Third Parliament, volume 20 (13 March to 5 May 1967), cols 4705-4706.

42. B.v.D. van Niekerk, "The 'Third Sex' Act", *The South African Law Journal*, 87, 1970 (Juta, Cape Town, 1970), p 88.

Fortunately the Department of Justice did not regard the bill as a final product and did not plan to rush it through parliament. It was drafted with the express purpose to create a select committee to investigate the issue properly, with inputs by experts, and then come up with new legislation.<sup>43</sup> Before the second reading of the bill in parliament in February 1968, it was referred to a parliamentary select committee.<sup>44</sup>

It was at this point that the official position of the South African government on how to deal with homosexuality started diverting from what was happening elsewhere. At a time when homosexuality was being decriminalised in many countries and when same-sex acts between consenting adults were punishable in a very small minority of states<sup>45</sup>, South Africa was seemingly moving in the opposite direction.

The Wolfenden Report in the United Kingdom can be cited as an example of trends in Western countries at the time. After several well-known men in Britain had been convicted of homosexual offences, the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, chaired by John Wolfenden, was set up in 1954. It heard evidence from police and probation officers; psychiatrists; religious leaders; and gay men whose lives had been affected by the law. The Wolfenden Report was published in September 1957 and, without condoning or condemning homosexuality, recommended that "homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private no longer be a criminal offence", because "it is not, in our view, the function of the law to intervene in the private life of citizens, or to

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43. See Minister Pelsers' announcement of the procedure to amend the Immorality Act in Hansard, Second Session, Third Parliament, volume 20 (13 March to 5 May 1967), col. 4706. See also S.C. 7-'68, p 2, Testimony by H.P.J. van Vuuren, Deputy Secretary (Legislation), Department of Justice.

44. Hansard, Third Session, Third Parliament, volume 22 (2 February to 22 March 1968), col. 246.

45. See Van Niekerk, "The 'Third Sex' Act", p 91.

seek to enforce any particular pattern of behaviour.”<sup>46</sup> The report’s controversial recommendations attracted considerable public debate. The Homosexual Law Reform Society lobbied for the adoption of the report into law, but the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in the UK had to wait until the more permissive circumstances of the 1960s made it possible. In 1967, precisely at the time when amendments to the Immorality Act were under consideration in South Africa, the Sexual Offences Act was passed in the UK, which decriminalised homosexual deeds between consenting adults.<sup>47</sup>

In South Africa the nine-member select committee was an all-male, all-white body, including parliamentarians of the ruling NP and the United Party (UP) opposition.<sup>48</sup> It was not an exclusively Afrikaans committee. The public was invited to submit evidence to the committee. The investigation by the select committee would be crucial for the legislative process to amend the Immorality Act. Should the formulation in the bill be upheld it would undoubtedly make it easier for the SAP to increase state repression of homosexuality, which seemed to be the original aim of the bill in response to the proposed amendments by the SAP. It seemed that the aim of the legislators was to reinforce heterosexual masculinity as social norm by warding off the threat of white homosexuality.<sup>49</sup> Was the select committee going to rubber-stamp the government’s wishes?

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46. Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution. *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1957).

47. The National Archives, Cabinet Papers 1915–1980, “Before and after the Wolfenden Report” at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/before-after-wolfenden-report.htm> (accessed 2 January 2012). See also E. Chesser, *Live and Let Live: The Moral of the Wolfenden Report* (Taylor Garnett & Evans, London, 1958); C. Berg, *Fear, Punishment, Anxiety and the Wolfenden Report* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1959); A. Grey, *Quest for Justice* (Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1992); P. Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Post-war Britain* (Fourth Estate, London, 1996).

48. See S.C. 7–’68, p viii.

49. Sinclair, “Official Treatment”, p 92.

In South Africa the moves to extend the criminalisation of homosexuality forced white homosexuals into rearguard action to at least try and maintain the status quo. An action group was established to provide legal defence for those arrested at Forest Town in 1966, and it extended its activities to employ the services of legal officers and expert witnesses to give evidence at the inquiry of the parliamentary select committee. Although this body, the Homosexual Law Reform Fund (HLRF), was a lobby group for white middle-class homosexuals on a particular issue and did not envisage itself as a broad-based and permanent gay rights group, it represented the first attempt to launch a formal movement to protect gay rights in South Africa.<sup>50</sup>

It is significant that the HLRF came into existence in South Africa the year before the Stonewall riots in the USA against police persecution of homosexuals. These riots are frequently cited as a defining event in the gay rights movement, where the homosexual community in the USA for the first time fought back against their suppression by the state.<sup>51</sup> Although the HLRF was short-lived, it achieved its immediate goal of countering the emotional homophobia in some police and church circles by having rational medical-scientific and legal arguments presented to the select committee.<sup>52</sup>

Fifteen sittings of the parliamentary select committee took place in Cape Town in February, April, May and June 1968.<sup>53</sup> The members of the committee made it their business to determine whether homosexuality was really a threat to South African society and the youth in particular. The evidence before the select committee included in its first report comprised 349 pages. More than twenty persons or groups of persons, in their individual capacity or on

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50. G. Isaacs and B. McKendrick, *Male Homosexuality in South Africa: Identity Formation, Culture and Crisis* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1992), pp 154–155. See also “Homoseksuele Vergader om Wet te Beveg: Wil R40,000 Insamel”, *Die S.A. Beeld*, 31 March 1968, p 1.

51. The following books deal specifically with the Stonewall Riots: M. Duberman, *Stonewall* (Penguin Books, New York, 1993); D. Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 2004).

52. Unknown, *Unspoken Facts*, p 184.

53. S.C. 7–68, pp xiii, xv, xvii, xix, xxi, xxiii, xxv, xxvii.



behalf of organisations, gave oral evidence. There was evidence from government departments; churches; legal experts; psychiatrists; and eight homosexual persons (six men and two women) who were not identified in the report.<sup>54</sup> There were also about 70 written submissions by government departments; mental health organisations; psychological associations; medical societies; universities; student bodies; academics from various disciplines; women's organisations; churches; religious organisations; legal professionals; and individuals.<sup>55</sup> In his analysis some years later in 1974, Dian Joubert regarded the report containing the evidence before the select committee as the most important single documentary source produced in South Africa on the topic of homosexuality and worthy of inclusion in international bibliographies.<sup>56</sup>

What emerged clearly from the bulk of the evidence was that the perception that homosexuality in South Africa was increasing alarmingly and that it was posing a serious threat to the moral fibre of society was inaccurate. Investigations revealed that although the availability of psychologists and psychiatrists and a sensation-seeking press had increased the visibility and public awareness of homosexuality, it had not been increasing to any disturbing degree and posed no real threat to public morality. It was emphasised that homosexual persons had no desire to corrupt society. The idea that homosexual men were intent on seducing young boys was grossly over-exaggerated.<sup>57</sup>

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54. S.C. 7-68, p iii.

55. S.C. 7-68, p v, vii. See also Republic of South Africa, S.C. 3-69, Report of the Select Committee on the Immorality Amendment Bill (i.e. their second and final report), p ii.

56. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p. 3.

57. S.C. 7-68, pp 58-59, 61, 82, 148, 152-153, 226, 286. Information in memoranda submitted by Dept Social Welfare and Pensions; the Society of Neurologists and Psychiatrists of South Africa; and the Dept Psychiatry, UCT; Testimony by Prof. L.S. Gillis, Dept Psychiatry, UCT; Dr A.A. Zabow, psychiatrist; Prof. S.P. Cilliers, sociologist, UStell; Adv. W.M. van den Berg, Attorney-General of the Cape Province.

Whether medical treatment of homosexuality would be a better option than criminalisation and imprisonment also received much attention in the evidence before the select committee. It must be remembered that homosexuality was at that stage still widely regarded as a mental illness. With one exception,<sup>58</sup> expert evidence indicated that a person with confirmed homosexual tendencies could only be changed by treatment in extremely exceptional cases and that an adult homosexual could not change the nature of his homosexual urges.<sup>59</sup>

Some of the persons who submitted evidence and some of the committee members were in favour of the proposed amendments to the Immorality Act, because they gave expression to public norms;<sup>60</sup> were in line with biblical texts about homosexual practices;<sup>61</sup> and would make it easier for the SAP to police homosexuality.<sup>62</sup> However, most of the individuals and organisations that presented evidence agreed that existing legislation provided sufficient protection for the community and that imprisonment was not a fitting punishment for homosexual activities. It would be advisable to treat homosexuality as a moral issue rather than a criminal offence.<sup>63</sup>

58. S.C. 7-'68, pp 309–316, 318–319. Testimony by Dr A.G.S. Gous, Youth Secretary of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) in the Northern Transvaal, who believed that homosexuality could be cured by therapy.
59. S.C. 7-'68, pp 98, 102, 114, 126–127, 133–136, 139, 145, 148–149, 150, 156, 203, 278–279. Testimony by Prof. Gillis; Dr C.G.A. Simonsz, Senior Psychiatrist, Valkenberg Hospital; Dr I. Sakinofsky, Senior Psychiatrist, Groote Schuur Hospital; Dr Zabow; Dr G.P. Fourie, gynaecologist and obstetrician; Dr R.E. Hemphill, psychiatrist; Prof. A.B. van der Merwe, Professor in Abnormal and Clinical Psychology, University of Stellenbosch; Mr "A" and Mr "H", homosexuals; Information in memorandum submitted by Dr Hemphill.
60. S.C. 7-'68, p 165. Comments by J.T. Kruger.
61. S.C. 7-'68, pp 300, 302, 305, 306–307. Testimony by Dr Gous.
62. S.C. 7-'68, pp 14–15, 29–32. Testimony by Major F.A.J. van Zyl.
63. S.C. 7-'68, pp 3, 56–57, 60–61, 158, 210, 214, 216–218, 248, 335. Testimony by H.P.J. van Vuuren, Deputy Secretary (Legislation), Department of Justice; Dr J.A. Grobler, Deputy Secretary, Department of Social Welfare and Pensions; Prof. Gillis; Prof. Cilliers; Mr "C", a homosexual; and Adv. R.W. Rein, Attorney-General of the Transvaal.

From the evidence it was also clear that from a legal perspective it was unlikely that the proposed amendments could be implemented successfully; they would certainly put intolerable pressure on the capacity of the SAP and courts. It would be an unenforceable task to detect same-sex activities in private. Nor was it feasible to try and eliminate homosexuality through repressive measures. Prosecution and imprisonment would be counterproductive and would increase rather than decrease homosexuality and promiscuity. Therefore homosexuality should only become a matter of criminal investigation when it involved public misbehaviour, the seduction of youth, prostitution and blackmail.<sup>64</sup>

In the light of the evidence the proposed amendment to the Immorality Act could hardly be justified. The articulate way in which those who pleaded for moderation in the face of a morally conservative government had put their case to the select committee, certainly influenced the outcome of the process. The evidence by medical and legal professionals made it clear that stricter legislation was neither justifiable nor practicable. It was evident that it would be impossible to police all same-sex activities with a police force whose human resources were stretched to the limit by the enforcement of apartheid measures such as influx control (the "pass laws"). Sinclair speculates that the possibility that the son of one of the committee members was gay could have influenced the final recommendation by the select committee,<sup>65</sup> but I would argue that this could not have persuaded the other eight commissioners to change their views on the matter. In my opinion the evidence against implementing the proposed amendment before the committee was so compelling that they had no choice but to accept it.

64. S.C. 7-768, pp 76-77, 97-99, 158, 160-161, 190-191, 199, 215, 290-291, 333-334, 336. Information in memorandum submitted by the Society of Neurologists and Psychiatrists of South Africa and the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town. Testimony by Prof Gillis, Dr Sakinofsky, Prof. Van der Merwe, Prof. Cilliers, Adv. van den Berg, and Adv. Rein. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 23, 24-26, 30; Hansard, Fourth Session, Third Parliament, volume 26 (24 March-9 May 1969), cols 4803-4804.

65. Sinclair, "Official Treatment", p 126.

The select committee could not finish their work during the 1968 parliamentary session and they requested that they be reappointed in 1969 to finish their duties. This was done and they met four times in February and March 1969. At these meetings the original bill was amended by the select committee.<sup>66</sup> The clause dealing with male homosexuality in the amended bill read as follows: „A male person who commits with another male person at a party any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification, shall be guilty of an offence“. This would be inserted as section 20A in the Immorality Act and a penalty of a maximum of a R400 fine or two years' imprisonment or both was applicable. „Any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion“ meant that not only sodomy, but all public same-sex deeds (e.g. tongue-kissing and intimate dancing) would be illegal, although legal experts appealed to the courts not to interpret such acts as falling within the scope of the prohibition.<sup>67</sup> The insertion of „a male person“, thus excluding lesbianism, and „at a party“, meaning that more than two persons had to be present, considerably narrowed the scope of the particular clause, so that it stopped well short of a blanket criminalisation of all homo-erotic activities. Thus the amendment proposed in the bill was considerably watered down by the new amendment recommended by the select committee.<sup>68</sup>

There was mixed reaction to the amendment put forward by the select committee. The editor of the *Cape Times* congratulated the committee on their humane and common-sense approach to the issue of homosexuality.<sup>69</sup> In the *South African Law Journal*, regret was expressed that on the issue of homosexuality South Africa was moving in a direction opposite to what was happening elsewhere in the civilised world by this „unfortunate throwback to times when legal concepts were crude and criminal law steeped in the taboos of

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66. Republic of South Africa, S.C. 3-'69, Report of the Select Committee on the Immorality Amendment Bill.

67. See Van Niekerk, "The 'Third Sex' Act", p 89.

68. Van Niekerk, "The 'Third Sex' Act", p 87.

69. *The Cape Times*, 19 March 1969.

a superstitious age<sup>70</sup>.

The cabinet approved the recommendation by the select committee. When he introduced the amended bill during the 1969 session, Minister Pelsler assured his constituency that existing measures to curb homosexuality were not being relaxed and that no concessions would be made.<sup>71</sup> The new bill was adopted without any further discussion<sup>72</sup> as the Immorality Amendment Act, no. 57 of 1969.<sup>73</sup>

Elder's interpretation of this legislation is that it was another step in the imposition of heterosexuality by the apartheid state, that „sought to control and regulate bodies“. To satisfy its voters it was important for the National Party government to be seen enforcing policy that protected the culture, morality and economic interests of Afrikanerdom. The legislators needed stricter legislation to curb the perceived threat of an emerging urban gay subculture, which was becoming „a foil for heteropatriarchal Afrikaner culture“. Same-sex practices were thought of as a „bodily transgression against ‚natural encodings‘ of the body“. Elder points out that the objective of the new law was to regulate homosexual activity between white men only,<sup>74</sup> and that the apartheid government did not pay much attention to homosexuality in hostels for black workers, which involved a much larger number of men. White male homosexuality threatened “a patriarchal and racial order that shaped interlocking structures that provided many white Afrikaner males access to power

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70. Van Niekerk, “The ‘Third Sex’ Act”, p 88.

71. Hansard, Fourth Session, Third Parliament, volume 26 (24 March to 9 May 1969), cols 4800–4801.

72. Hansard, Fourth Session, Third Parliament, volume 26 (24 March to 9 May 1969), col. 4805.

73. Republic of South Africa, *Government Gazette*, 47, 2404, 21 May 1969. Act no. 57 of 1969, Immorality Amendment Act.

74. Prior to 1988, when the Immorality Act was amended to include lesbian sex (i.e. to make sexual deeds between adult women and girls under the age of nineteen an offence), legislation in South Africa made no mention of homosexual activities between women.

in South Africa”.<sup>75</sup> The fact that activities in mine compounds were ignored demonstrated that the government had no essential concern over bodily acts, but was concerned about the potential threats a homosexual identity could pose to the fabric of Afrikaner society.

Kotzé interprets the 1969 legislation quite differently. According to him, it implied a formal acceptance by the state of the homosexual subculture.<sup>76</sup> It was indeed a victory of sorts for homosexuals. Section 20A made public homosexual acts illegal, but sex between consenting adult men in private was excluded. The government’s aim was to consolidate existing legislation and to tighten control over male homosexual activities. Ironically, the act maintained the status quo rather than making it easier to prosecute homosexuals in court. Homosexual men would certainly have preferred a total decriminalisation of same-sex practices between consenting adults on the same pattern as the Sexual Offences Act in the UK. They had to be satisfied with the second prize, i.e. the maintenance of the status quo. At least the drive by the SAP to get same-sex practices in private criminalised was blunted by the rational approach of the select committee in their interpretation of expert evidence. In effect the fact that the draft bill was watered down gave homosexuals the assurance that they would not become the victims of a state-sponsored witch-hunt.

Homosexuals were by no means freed from persecution. Sinclair interprets the 1969 amendment as follows:

*This did not mean that the NP government was lenient towards homosexual men. It simply meant that white homosexuality had to be hidden away so South Africa could continue her conservative, Christian tradition with no visible threat to its power and well-established hegemonic masculinity.*<sup>77</sup>

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75. G. Elder, *The South African Body Politic: Space, Race and Heterosexuality*. <http://www.uvm.edu/~geograph/bodies.html>, 15 December 1998. Accessed 30 January 2008.
76. C.G. Kotzé, “n Dieptepsigologiese Ondersoek na die Verskynsel van Homoseksuele Gedrag”, D.Phil. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1974, p 30.
77. Sinclair, “Official Treatment”, p 131.

The practical situation with regard to homosexuality in the South African legal system was that “crimes against morality”, including sodomy and “unnatural” sexual acts (e.g. oral sex between men), were common law offences. In effect common law plus sections of the Immorality Act meant that sexual acts between two men were in no circumstances legal,<sup>78</sup> although some interpretations of the Immorality Act suggested that same-sex practices between consenting adults in private were legal.<sup>79</sup> During the 1970s there were almost 4 000 prosecutions and more than 2 000 convictions in South Africa for homosexual activities.<sup>80</sup>

It was not only the police and justice system that subjected homosexual persons to discrimination. Another notorious aspect of state repression of homosexuality at this time was the programme of the South African Defence Force to try and “cure” homosexuals through aversion therapy.<sup>81</sup>

### **The process of moral liberalisation**

Afrikaner urbanisation occurred at a time, in the first half of the twentieth century, when there was a strong reaction in the Western world against what was perceived to be the strict sexual taboos of the Victorian age and when there was a growing openness to discuss matters of sex in public.<sup>82</sup> Urbanisation and the process of modernisation that accompanied it eventually led to the gradual liberalisation of the Afrikaner culture.<sup>83</sup>

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78. D. Joubert, “Homoseksualiteit”, *Maatskaplike Werk/Social Work*, 21, 1, 1985, p 40.

79. B. Helm, “Deviant or Variant? Some Sociological Perspectives on Homosexuality and its Subculture”, in ASSA, *Sociology Southern Africa. Papers from the First Congress of the Association for Sociologists in Southern Africa* (ASSA, Durban, 1973).

80. Isaacs and McKendrick, *Male Homosexuality in South Africa*, p 151.

81. Unknown, *Unspoken Facts*, p. 124.

82. Esterhuysen, *Die Mens en sy Seksuele Moraal*, pp 7–8, 32–56.

83. Joubert, “’n Sosiologiese Siening”, pp 50–51.

The series of events set in motion by the 1966 raid on the gay party at Forest Town in Johannesburg occurred precisely at the time when an all-out struggle for supremacy in the inner circles of Afrikanerdom between *verkeramples* (conservative extremists) and *verligtes* (more open-minded moderates) was at its fiercest.<sup>84</sup> Conservatism held sway in Afrikaner society up to the 1960s, when new voices started to be heard among the Afrikaner elite, expressing a more liberal outlook. Albeit very gradually, conservatism was losing ground and a liberalisation of the moral values underlying Afrikaner cultural identity was taking place. Albert Grundlingh argues that the exponential economic growth of the 1960s and growing materialism accelerated the liberalisation of Afrikaner society. The embrace of consumer culture caused currents from abroad to start having an impact on the younger generation of middle-class Afrikaners and making small cultural inroads into Afrikaner self-perceptions and world views.<sup>85</sup>

In Europe and America the 1960s was the decade when leftist politics made big strides and which was associated with the sexual revolution. The civil rights movement and second-wave feminism were on the rise. It was the era of the hippy counterculture with its “make love not war” slogan. The ideas of greater sexual freedom and free love were at the forefront in the “Summer of Love” in the USA in 1967, and this easy-going, permissive attitude spread

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84. The terms *verkeramples* and *verligte* were coined in 1966 by Prof. Willem de Klerk to denote the opposing political outlooks among Afrikaners. *Verkeramples* referred to the very conservative extreme rightwing position and *verligte* to the more enlightened moderate position. For an analysis of the *verlig-verkeramp* struggle from different viewpoints, see J.H.P. Serfontein, *Die Verkeramples Aanslag* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1970); B.M. Schoeman, *Vorster se 1000 Dae* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1974); J.A. du Pisani, *John Vorster en die Verlig-Verkerampstryd* (Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, 1986).

85. A.M. Grundlingh, “Are we Afrikaners Getting too Rich? Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21, 2/3, June/September 2008.



rapidly. Western sexual norms were in a process of radical change.<sup>86</sup>

The emerging gay rights movement joined forces with other leftist movements in campaigns to secure equal human rights for formerly marginalised groups. One of the major thrusts of the gay rights movement from the sixties was to decriminalise homosexuality.<sup>87</sup> In one Western country after the other same-sex practices in private between consenting adults were being systematically decriminalised.<sup>88</sup>

Despite the strong anti-liberal lobby in Afrikaner society that tried to block liberalising influences, they inevitably filtered through on the popular culture level and raised questions about traditional sexual norms. At a time when the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was still controlled by the conservative section of the Afrikaner elite and television had not yet been introduced for fear of its liberalising potential, the print media played a crucial role in this respect. The *Sestigers*, a new literary movement consisting of young novelists such as Etienne Leroux and André Brink, rejected the constraints of Christian-National moral values and introduced sex and sexuality more explicitly into Afrikaans literature.<sup>89</sup> The Afrikaans Sunday newspapers, locked in a fierce competition to boost their circulation, started using the sensationalism and scandal-mongering typical of the yellow press to draw a larger readership. They moved away from the prudishness that had characterised the Afrikaans media and became more daring in their coverage of matters dealing with sexuality. These Sunday papers not only reflected the change of moral values in Afrikanerdom, but helped to shape these changes.<sup>90</sup>

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86. For more information on the sexual revolution and the changes in sexual norms see D. Allyn, *Make Love, not War. The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (Little, Brown & Co., New York, 2000); J. Escoffier (ed.), *Sexual Revolution* (Running Press, New York, 2003).

87. Isaacs and McKendrick, *Male Homosexuality in South Africa*, p 141.

88. Joubert, “ ‘n Sosiologiese Siening”, p 50.

89. Esterhuysen, *Die Mens en sy Seksuele Moraal*, p 3.

90. For details on how the editors interpreted their function, see S. Pienaar, *Getuie van Groot Tye* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1979); D. Richard, *Moedswillig die uwe: perspersoonlikbede in die noorde* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1985).

The shift towards more openness with regard to sexual topics did not mean that in the 1960s the stance within hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity on what constituted “real manhood” had significantly changed, or that negative perceptions about homosexuality had softened. However, the climate was right for the taboo on the public discussion of issues such as homosexuality to be lifted.

### **The 1968 homosexuality debate**

While the amendment of the Immorality Act was under consideration in parliament there was a debate on the issue of homosexuality in the media. The taboo on the discussion of homosexuality in Afrikaner society was broken. The 1968 debate was the first public debate on the topic of homosexuality among Afrikaners and was revealing of Afrikaner attitudes about the issue at the time.

All the publicity after the 1966 Forest Town raid on the extent of homosexuality in the country aroused public awareness and interest. Reporting on homosexuality in Afrikaans newspapers was at first, in 1966 and 1967, rather low-key.

This article focuses on the coverage of homosexuality in *Die Burger*, although other Afrikaans newspapers also published reports and letters on the topic. *Die Burger*, based in Cape Town, was the flagship daily of Nasionale Pers, the southern newspaper group, and in the 1960s it was the leading Afrikaans daily newspaper. Its editor, Piet Cillie, was a spokesperson for the *verligte* viewpoint in Afrikaner circles and was the most influential Afrikaans newspaper editor of his time. The Afrikaans papers of Nasionale Pers and the northern press groups (Voortrekkerpers; Afrikaanse Pers) all supported the National Party government. However, whereas most of the northern Afrikaans newspapers carefully toed the party line, Cillie and his colleague Schalk Pienaar, editor of *Die S.A. Beeld*, a Sunday paper published by Nasionale Pers in Johannesburg, saw their role as that of opinion-makers, who had to suggest new lines of thinking to the

ruling elite and the Afrikaans public.<sup>91</sup>

Cillié often clashed with hard-line conservatives and the anti-liberal lobby in the NP and was not averse to challenging the party leadership on contentious issues. He was an advocate of the open debate, where ideas from different perspectives were put forward and weighed up against one another. This is also evident from *Die Burger's* coverage of homosexuality in the 1960s.

When *Die Burger* reported on the Forest Town raid in January 1966, a report by the Nasionale Pers reporter on the Rand was used and he wrote from the perspective of heterosexual masculinity. Emphasis was placed on the non-normative behaviour of the 300 homosexual men at the party. They danced with one another; some were wearing women's clothes and make-up; others were naked; and some were openly flirting, holding hands or kissing. The reporter clearly wanted to convey a sense of disgust and distaste of this type of behaviour. Juxtaposed to this was the depiction of the clever and effective way in which the police clamped down on the partygoers.<sup>92</sup>

In April 1967, when Minister Pelsler announced the planned amendment to the Immorality Act in his parliamentary speech, the editor of *Die Burger* himself responded in an editorial. Now the tone was different and the editor emphasised the seriousness and complexity of the issue of homosexuality. He referred to views of homosexuality in the Old Testament of the Bible, but also in ancient Greece and the Islamic societies. He mentioned the creativity and achievements of famous homosexuals. His view was that children needed to be protected against any type of sexual abuse, heterosexual as well as homosexual, and that sexual perversion had to be curbed. For him, it was an open question whether homosexuality could or

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91. The following autobiographies and biographies of Cillié and Pienaar are available: P.J. Cillié, *Tydgenote* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1980); J.C. Steyn, *Penvegter: Piet Cillié van Die Burger* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2002); Pienaar, *Getuie van Groot Tye*, F.A. Mouton, *Voorloper: Die Lewe van Schalk Pienaar* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2002).

92. "Polisie Tref Mans in Vroueklere aan in Johannesburg", *Die Burger*, 24 January 1966.

should be rooted out by strict legislation. He questioned Minister Pelser's claim that homosexuality had undermined civilisations. He concluded by expressing the view that the legislators would have to make an assessment of whether the significance of homosexuality for the moral wellbeing of the people was being overrated or underrated.<sup>93</sup> Although carefully worded, his editorial revealed a tone of scepticism on whether the government was not perhaps overreacting to the alleged threat of homosexuality.

When the parliamentary select committee investigating homosexuality was in session in the first half of 1968, receiving written submissions and hearing evidence in Cape Town, it was of course a topical issue. Letters dealing with homosexuality were published in most Afrikaans newspapers. The reason why the 38 letters in *Die Burger* are used in this article for an analysis of Afrikaner opinion at the time, is that they were published over a period of seven weeks as an ongoing debate. In the letter column of *Die Burger*, correspondents reacted to the viewpoints of other letter writers. It had the nature of a lively debate, whereas the letters on homosexuality in other Afrikaans newspapers were published sporadically over a longer period of time, which meant that they did not necessarily take the form of an ongoing debate.

Against the background of a situation in South Africa in the 1960s when the ruling elite was still predominantly conservative and was trying to keep the liberalising influences in other parts of the world away from Afrikaner society, *Die Burger* as a leading Afrikaans newspaper, opened its letter columns for a debate about the hitherto taboo topic of homosexuality. Although the taboo had gone, the debate was not conducted on the basis of total equality and openness. All but two of these letters were published under pseudonyms and the two correspondents who used their real names both expressed anti-homosexual views. This showed that those who were sympathetic towards homosexuals did not dare to "come out" and reveal their identity.<sup>94</sup>

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93. "Perversiteit", Editorial, *Die Burger*, 29 April 1967.

94. See Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 36–72 for the full text of all the letters.

This first public debate in Afrikaans on homosexuality clearly reflected the opposing viewpoints on the issue at the time. Whereas the select committee tried not to mix factual and normative issues the letter writers freely mixed facts and value judgements.

Outright denial of the existence of homosexuality amongst Afrikaners was one extreme response that could be expected. One letter-writer expressed the opinion that a discussion of homosexuality was improper in decent circles and wrote that in “*ons Boeresamelening*” (our Boer society) the aberration of homosexuality had always been condemned as a reprehensible sin, and that to his knowledge it was virtually non-existent in Afrikaner circles.<sup>95</sup> In another letter the same person added that homosexuality had heathen origins dating back to before the Middle Ages and that it was beyond his comprehension that such a thing still occurred in a modern society. He associated homosexuality with peoples of the Near and Far East and “Bantu tribes”.<sup>96</sup> This was, according to the psychological explanation, an expression of the typical thinking pattern of the authoritarian personality, which was prone to classifying anything to which it was averse in terms of the “other”.

In response, a homosexual person wrote that homosexuality was in fact more common among Afrikaners than in the English-speaking community, precisely because of “*ons strenge opvoeding in geslagsake*” (our strict upbringing in matters relating to sex). He pointed out that the Afrikaner was given to closing his eyes to things which did not suit him. His advice was that there should be a more understanding attitude towards the issue of homosexuality, which would allow the youth to discuss it freely and avoid making it a taboo. In his experience, with matters as they were in Afrikaner society, it was too late for “effectivetreatment” by the time a homosexual visited a

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95. Landdros, Kaapland, “Dié Euwel Moet Uitgeroei word”, *Die Burger*, 15 March 1968, p 16. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 38-9.

96. Landdros, Wes-Kaapland, “Hy Wandel Soos Brullende Leeu”, *Die Burger*, 29 March 1968, p 16. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 55.

psychologist.<sup>97</sup>

A number of the letter-writers, but less than half of them, represented the traditionalist, conservative, rigidly anti-homosexual and homophobic viewpoint. They condemned homosexuality as sinful, evil, unnatural, destructive, a sign of moral decay and a threat to public morals; it was something that had to be rooted out.<sup>98</sup> Facts and value judgements were confused in most of the anti-homosexual letters, which were rather irrational, almost hysterical. Participants on this side of the debate, almost without exception, referred to biblical pronouncements in an attempt to justify their opinions. According to them, homosexuality ran counter to the divine order of creation, of which “*normale seksuele verbouing binne die orde van die huwelik*” (normal sexual relations within marriage) formed part.<sup>99</sup> It was in their view the duty of the state, particularly a Christian state, as God’s servant, to punish the repugnant sin of homosexuality.<sup>100</sup>

On the opposite side, more than half of the letter-writers (many, but not all of them evidently homosexual) rejected the view that homosexuality was sinful, decadent, destructive and threatening to Afrikaner society and needed to be criminalised. They accused their opponents of being not only intolerant, vindictive and self-righteous, but also of being uninformed and ignorant about the complexity

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97. Verstote Afrikaner in P, “Homoseksualiteit Volopper onder Afrikaners”, *Die Burger*, 20 March 1968, p 20. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 41–42.

98. D. de Villiers, Paarl, “Homoseksuele kan maar Verdryf word”, *Die Burger*, 15 March 1968, p 16; Landdros, Kaapland, “Dié Euwel Moet Uitgeroei word”, *Die Burger*, 15 March, 1968, p 16; D.D.M. de Villiers, Paarl, “Goddelike Orde Vereis Normale Seks”, *Die Burger*, 25 March 1968, p 12; Amor Patriae in S., “Wat van Sodom en Gomorra? Wil Leser Weet”, *Die Burger*, 26 March 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 38–40, 49–51.

99. D.D.M. de Villiers, Paarl, “Goddelike Orde Vereis Normale Seks”, *Die Burger*, 25 March 1968, p 12; D. de Villiers, Paarl, “Wet Gaan om die Daad”, *Die Burger*, 12 April 1968, p 10. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 49–50, 65.

100. Dr D.R. Snyman, Rosebank, “Staat van God 'n Dienaar”, *Die Burger*, 28 March 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 53.

of this sexual orientation by lumping all forms of homosexuality together and confusing perversity and homosexuality. They pleaded for a realistic acceptance that homosexuals were an integral part of society and could make a valuable contribution to society, instead of embarking upon an anti-homosexual witch-hunt. Referring to the distinction between public and private morality, they supported the argument behind the legislation that had been enacted in several European countries that same-sex practices in private between consenting adults should be decriminalised. Most of the writers on this side of the debate expressed the opinion that education, rather than criminal prosecution, was the way to go.<sup>101</sup> One writer ventured to state that homosexual love, in the same way as heterosexual love, was a gift from God,<sup>102</sup> quite a bold standpoint in Afrikaner circles at the time.

According to one of the letter-writers the two opposing viewpoints expressed by participants in the debate could be described as traditionalistic and realistic. The traditionalists emphasised the sinfulness and moral decay of homosexuality and demanded that

101. Realis, Kaapstad, "Homoseksuele Kry jy op Alle Vlakke", *Die Burger*, 11 March 1968, p 10; Realis no. 2, Stellenbosch, "Hulle wil nie Sien, Hoor of Praat nie", and Verstote Afrikaner in P., "Homoseksualiteit Volopper onder Afrikaners", *Die Burger*, 20 March 1968, p 10; Sosioloog, Kaapstad, "Sal Julle Ook dié Slang Vermorsel?", Ginekoloog, Kaapstad, "Opvoeding hier Nodig Pleks van Wette", and Nog 'n Realis in O., "Heelwat Onkunde Bestaan oor Homoseksualiteit", *Die Burger*, 21 March 1968, p 12; Bolander, Stellenbosch, "Vernedering sou Alles Behalwe Mooi wees", *Die Burger*, 22 March 1968, p 14; Gebalanseerd op G., "Kyk wie Gooi Klippe", *Die Burger*, 27 March 1968, p 16; Realis no. 3 in B., "Wetgewing Genoeg", *Die Burger*, 29 March 1968; Ginekoloog, Kaapstad, "Hierdie Mense moet Hulp Soek", *Die Burger*, 4 April 1968; Idealis op S., "Ons kan Verder Probeer Dink", *Die Burger*, 8 April 1968, p 12; Student, Johannesburg, "Homoseksualiteit Moet Toegelaat word", *Die Burger*, 10 April 1968 p 12; Vrygesel, Kaapland, "Ope Gesprek 'n Lering", *Die Burger*, 22 April 1968, p 12; Kampvegter, "Mens Moet nie Oordeel", *Die Burger*, 30 April 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 36–38, 40–49, 52–53, 53–54, 57–58, 60–61, 63–65, 67, 71–72.
102. Kerkganger op S., "Wetgewing sal Spanning Skep", *Die Burger*, 3 April 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 56.

their normative viewpoint, based on a particular interpretation of the Bible, should be applied. The realists emphasised the factual situation, rejected more stringent legislation as a solution, and believed that responsible homosexual persons could lead a discreetly private sex life without injury to society. He/she suggested a third possibility, that of idealism, which implied that in the light of changes in moral perceptions, the whole issue had to be reconsidered to replace outdated traditional patterns with new moral principles and legislation relevant to the contemporary situation.<sup>103</sup>

The 1968 debate revealed the diversity of opinions about homosexuality in Afrikaner society.<sup>104</sup> For the first time it brought to the fore the question whether homosexuality really posed a threat to existing normative patterns in Afrikaner society.<sup>105</sup> In his discussion of the debate Joubert (a sociologist) came to the conclusion that evidence before the parliamentary select committee showed that the absolutist moral condemnation of homosexuality in Afrikaner society was the result of ignorance and misconception on the nature, extent and consequences of homosexuality.<sup>106</sup> He saw the debate in *Die Burger* as proof that there was progress in Afrikaner society towards condoning, but not necessarily going so far as general acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative sexual orientation. Somewhat too optimistically (he was writing in 1974) he stated that homosexuals no longer resigned themselves to a state of secrecy, shame and guilt, and to a self-definition of deviance, but that they were starting to demand recognition and a place in the sun of heterosexual society.<sup>107</sup> At the time similar demands were being heard more frequently in the Western world, but it would yet be some time before they started making a significant impact in Afrikaner society.

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103. Idealis op S., “Ons kan Verder Probeer Dink”, *Die Burger*, 8 April 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 60.  
104. Joubert, “’n Sosiologiese Siening”, pp 53–54.  
105. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 81, 83.  
106. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 87.  
107. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 94.



## Increasing openness about homosexuality

As it was in many other societies, the discourse on homosexuality was directly linked to religious views in Afrikaner society. However, the churches and religious leaders did not begin the public debate on the topic. It was the report of a parliamentary select committee and the letter columns of newspapers that brought this particular discussion into the public domain and started the process of disseminating information about homosexuality. However, in the 1960s most Afrikaners turned to the churches and their ministers of religion for guidance, based on the Bible, on what the correct stand should be as a moral issue.

The ideological divisions in Afrikaner society had also spread to the Afrikaans churches. The frustration of church leaders who resisted rigid traditionalism was highlighted by the Cottesloe meeting of representatives of the World Council of Churches in 1960 and its aftermath. Beyers Naudé was forced out of the Dutch Reformed Church and other sympathisers were temporarily sidelined.<sup>108</sup> But a degree of uneasiness sometimes surfaced at the way the churches were inclined to hush up thorny issues. In the early sixties, for instance, a pastor protested against the upholding in the church of the romantic image of the family, which he could support no longer because it was concealing the reality of dysfunctional family life.<sup>109</sup>

The position of the Afrikaans churches, by now on the brink of a gradual transition from *verkerampte* to *verligte* leadership, was rather ambivalent on the issue of homosexuality. At this stage most senior church leaders represented the conservative viewpoint. In their evidence before the parliamentary select committee in 1968, some church leaders joined the police in calling for more stringent legislation

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108. See A.H. Lückhoff, *Cottesloe* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1978); P. Walshe, *Church versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute* (C. Hurst, London, 1983); C. Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: Pilgrimage of Faith* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1990); B. Naudé, *My Land van Hoop: Die Leve van Beyers Naudé* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1995).

109. Pastor F. Hecht, "Gesinsgeluk: Romanties of ...?", *Die Kerkbode*, 113, 24, 14 June 1961, p 792.

to curb homosexuality.<sup>110</sup> Police and church, with the respective aims of maintaining public order and fighting against sin, concentrated their evidence on same-sex practices rather than the phenomenon of homosexuality in all its complexity.<sup>111</sup>

Opinion pieces by Afrikaans ministers of religion on the issue of homosexuality emphasised the view that same-sex practices were a sin and reflected the conservative “turn or burn” attitude of the churches. The person who was responsible for the weekly religious column in *Die Burger* responded to the debate in the letter column by stating that homosexuals should seek God’s forgiveness and request that He help them to overcome their homosexual desires and remain celibate. He compared homosexuality to alcoholism. According to him the Bible was clear that homosexuality was a sin and he regarded it as “totally impossible” to reconcile a relationship between two people of the same sex with the biblical concept of marriage. He also ruled out the possibility that there could be real love between homosexual partners.<sup>112</sup>

An article written by *dominee* (Reverend) J.S. Krüger for *Die Kerkbode*, the mouthpiece of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) in response to the public debate was one of the earliest opinion pieces on homosexuality published in an official organ of an Afrikaans church. Krüger stated that the church should base its sexual ethics on the Bible. He cited texts to show that both the Old and the New Testament rejected homosexuality as sinful and a transgression against God’s order represented by the institution of heterosexual marriage. In principle, Krüger argued, only one stance was acceptable: homosexuality is an abnormality, a pathological phenomenon, an expression of the sin of humans in their fallen state.<sup>113</sup>

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110. The DRC Synods of Northern Transvaal (1968) and the Cape (1969) supported the new legislation.

111. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 88.

112. Soeker, “Die Homoseksuele Mens”, *Die Burger*, 20 April 1968, p 8.

113. Ds. J.S. Krüger, “Soeklig van die Skrif op Homoseksualiteit”, *Die Kerkbode*, 15 May 1968, pp 646–647.

However, some leaders and members of the Afrikaans churches were moving away from old-style conservatism. During the 1970s this new generation began to fill the top positions in the church leadership and made their presence felt at synods. In line with trends elsewhere in Christian churches, these new leaders had a different approach to interpreting the scriptures. They believed that not everything in the Bible should be taken literally; that differences in culture between biblical and modern times should be taken into account; and that the Bible should be studied critically and made relevant to the needs of contemporary society. They also emphasised that individual Christians should take a larger measure of responsibility for their own everyday decisions, rather than to look to the church to lay down the law on all moral issues.

In the 1968 media debate, three of the people who wrote letters to *Die Burger* gave indications of a new approach to interpreting the scriptures. One argued that no definitive Christian dictates regarding homosexuality could be inferred from the Bible, because the verses in the Old Testament and the Paulinian epistles dealing with homosexuality had to be read against the particular socio-political background in which they had been written.<sup>114</sup> The second letter-writer took a similar view and said that the coming of Christ had changed many of the laws of the Old Testament and that Christ had never condemned homosexuality.<sup>115</sup> The third letter referred to a book (*Die Evangelie in Krisis*) by an emerging Afrikaans theologian, Johan Heyns, in which the pre-scientific nature of the Bible was explained. In his/her letter this writer proceeded with a critical interpretation of the various biblical pronouncements used by the anti-homosexual letter-writers; he/she showed that these pronouncements could also be interpreted in other ways.<sup>116</sup>

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114. Moralis, "Homoseksualiteit: Strenger Wette Gevra", *Die Burger*, 27 March 1968, p 20. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 52.

115. Kerkganger op S., "Wetgewing sal Spanning Skep", *Die Burger*, 3 April 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, p 56.

116. Homo sapiens, "Bybel Moet Nie Misbruik word vir Bewyse", *Die Burger*, 16 April 1968, p 12. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 65–67.

Persons on the anti-homosexual side of the debate rejected these less condemnatory interpretations of the Bible and accused their opponents of either deliberately questioning the validity of certain sections of the Bible or lacking in true knowledge of the teachings of the Bible.<sup>117</sup> In response, one letter-writer condemned the selective use of biblical texts in an attempt to justify anti-homosexual viewpoints, because “even the Devil can cite the Scriptures to his purpose”.<sup>118</sup>

Fundamentalist views, based on a literal reading of scripture, were clearly still strongly entrenched in the Afrikaans church by the end of the 1960s. Fundamentalists challenged the new critical reading of the Bible as representing a dilution of the authority of God’s Word. It was clear that views of homosexuality in church circles had not changed fundamentally. It was still regarded as a sin and a “condition” that should not be accepted as inevitable, natural or normal. Homosexuals were advised to undergo therapy which might “heal” them.<sup>119</sup>

However, as in other spheres of Afrikaner society, the trend in the churches gradually moved away from traditionalist conservatism towards more liberal values. With the church leaders being regarded as the most authoritative voice on moral issues in Afrikaner society, this theological shift was also bound to influence the outlook with regard to sexual behaviour and orientation. Particularly in the seventies the impact of the sexual revolution in the Western world filtered through and views on sexual morality underwent an accelerated process of transformation in Afrikaner society.

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117. G.J.K. op S., “Die Ou Testament Moet ook nog Behou word”, *Die Burger*, 23 April 1968, p 14; Amor Patriae in S., “Laat Straf Swaar wees Hier op Aarde”, *Die Burger*, 24 April 1968, p 12; Navorser op C., “Enkele Vrae aan Homoseksuele Christene”, *Die Burger*, 26 April 1968, p 16. See also Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 67–68, 70–71.

118. Joubert, *Tot Dieselfde Geslag*, pp 69–70.

119. P.J. de Bruyn, *Wat Dink u van Seks?* (Deputate vir Evangelisasielektuur van die Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika, Potchefstroom, 1973), p 7; T.A. van Dyk, *Homoseksualiteit* (Instituut vir die Bevordering van die Calvinisme, PU vir CHO, Studiestuk nr. 56, Potchefstroom, 1974), pp 10–11.

The idea that homosexuality was taboo and should not even be a topic of open discussion was dropped after the 1968 debate. Contesting views of homosexuality started featuring more often in public debates in Afrikaner society. By the end of the seventies, the Stellenbosch social philosopher Willie Esterhuysen came to the conclusion after a series of conversations with a variety of Afrikaners, especially young people, that traditionalist values with regard to sexual morality had lost their iron grip. Even ordinary people were prepared to talk about issues, experiences and personal opinions that had previously been shrouded by a veil of absolute secrecy. According to Esterhuysen, this should not be interpreted as a sign of moral decay. The Afrikaans literature and news media should not be condemned for reflecting the new sexual morality. They were not undermining morality, only representing a cultural shift which had already taken place. The gap in Afrikaner society between public and private morality was narrowing. Old norms about respectability and chastity were coming under pressure and taboos were being lifted. Afrikaner society, in a process of diversification, was becoming more tolerant with regard to matters which had formerly been subject to strong social sanctions.<sup>120</sup>

Neither the greater openness about homosexuality nor its mainstreaming were an unqualified blessing for homosexual persons. Prior to the 1960s, when no one talked about homosexuality, gay people experienced considerable privacy and protection by being overlooked. Obscure areas of tolerance existed. The fact that homosexuality came out into the open from the 1960s changed their situation in positive and negative ways. On the one hand, even more understanding and tolerance could be demanded for their circumstances. They found themselves in a position where they could initiate a “reverse” discourse, speaking on their own behalf and demanding that their legitimacy and rights be acknowledged. On the other hand, they were now more vulnerable to harassment, violence and anti-gay activism than previously been the case.<sup>121</sup>

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120. Esterhuysen, *Die Mens en sy Seksuele Moraal*, Preface, pp 4–10, 46–47, 49, 50.

121. Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, pp 261, 289; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p 101.

## Conclusion

The events between the raid on the homosexual party-goers in 1966 and the amendment of the Immorality Act in 1969 are often interpreted as just another phase in the subjection of homosexuality to hegemonic heterosexual masculinity in South Africa; one which made the legislation regulating homosexual activity stricter in order to curb the perceived threat of an emerging urban gay subculture.

However, I have argued in this article that the attempts by the conservative Afrikaner elite to curb the “evil” of homosexuality, as minister Pelsler stated in parliament, and to stop the “moral decay” to “protect the youth of the country” had a number of unintended consequences:

- The serious threat to their existence posed by the parliamentary investigation spurred the middle-class gay community into action. They proceeded to organise legal representation and to spread the message countrywide that they had no evil intentions of corrupting society. The establishment of the Law Reform Fund was the first attempt to formally organise a section of the gay movement in South Africa around a particular issue, although it did not last long.
- The subsequent findings of the parliamentary select committee overturned those of the preliminary police investigation that homosexuality threatened society and should be criminalised. Therefore the original bill was amended by the select committee in such a way that although homo-erotic activities between consenting male adults in private was not yet legal, a major clampdown on all homo-erotic activities was at least avoided. To some extent the status quo was maintained for the next two decades.
- The taboo on homosexuality, which had barred it from public discussion in Afrikaner society was finally lifted in 1968 when the parliamentary investigation into homosexuality led to media

coverage in the letter columns of Afrikaans newspapers such as *Die Burger*, and a polemic debate arose between people holding different views. A range of opinions on homosexuality amongst Afrikaners was revealed by this debate. This opened the door for the dissemination of information on the complex issue of homosexuality and for a freer discussion of the topic in which gradually liberalising religious views played a crucial role.

I have attempted to contextualise the 1968 debate on homosexuality in *Die Burger* within the broader ambit of the *verlig-verkramp* contestation in Afrikaner society, which was playing out in the National Party and many Afrikaans organisations at the time. This split reflected shifting power relations within Afrikaner society, but at the same time contributed to the gradual liberalisation of Afrikaner thinking that would eventually lead to major political and cultural changes in the country.

### **Abstract**

A police raid on a gay party in Johannesburg in 1966 set in motion a series of events which led to a proposal in parliament that there be amendments made to the Immorality Act that would criminalise male and female homosexuality. In an attempt to block these amendments, the Homosexual Law Reform Fund was established to state the case of the middle-class gay community before the select committee that had been formed to conduct an enquiry on the proposed legislative amendments. This is seen as the beginning of the organised gay rights movement in South Africa. For Afrikaner society, the work of the parliamentary select committee was particularly significant because in 1968 it triggered a debate in the letter column of at least one Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Burger*. It was a historic debate. Previously homosexuality had not been a topic for public discussion in “decent” Afrikaner circles. Now the taboo was lifted for the first time. After the 1968 homosexuality debate there was freer dissemination of information about gay people and the discourse on homosexuality slowly gained momentum. This article contextualises, analyses and

evaluates the 1968 debate.

**Keywords:** Homosexuality; same-sex relationships; Afrikaner society; morality; (de)criminalisation of homosexuality; South Africa; Immorality Act; Afrikaans newspapers; *Die Burger*.

### Opsomming

‘n Polisieklomp op ‘n partytjie vir gays in Johannesburg vroeg in 1966 het ’n kettingreaksie veroorsaak, wat gelei het tot ’n voorstel in die parlement dat die Ontugwet gewysig moet word. Die bedoeling was om homoseksualiteit onder beide mans en vroue te kriminaliseer. Om so ‘n wetswysiging te probeer stuit, is die Homosexual Law Reform Fund in die lewe geroep om die gay middelklasgemeenskap se saak te stel aan die gekose komitee wat ondersoek moes instel na die voorgestelde wetswysiging. Hierdie kortstondige maar suksesvolle organisasie word beskou as die begin van ’n georganiseerde beweging vir gay-regte in Suid-Afrika. Vir die Afrikanersamelewing is die parlementêre gekose komitee van besondere belang, want dit het in 1968 ’n debat in die briewekolomme van Afrikaanse koerante soos *Die Burger* aan die gang gesit. Voorheen was homoseksualiteit nie ‘n onderwerp wat in die openbaar deur “ordentlike” Afrikaners bespreek is nie. Die briewedebat in die koerante het die taboe onherroeplik opgehef. Daarna is inligting oor homoseksualiteit openliker versprei en die diskoers oor homoseksualiteit het geleidelik onder Afrikaners momentum gekry. Hierdie artikel kontekstualiseer, ontleed en evalueer die 1968-debat.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Homoseksualiteit; selfdegeslagverhoudings; Afrikaner-samelewing; moraliteit; (de)kriminalisering van homoseksualiteit; Suid-Afrika; Ontugwet; Afrikaanse koerante; *Die Burger*.