“In the Image of God”: Reconstructing and Developing a Grassroots African Queer Theology from Urban Zambia

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Abstract
This article is a contribution towards the development of queer theologies in contemporary African contexts. Based on fieldwork in the gay community in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, the article explores the significance of the theological notion of the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God, in the self-understanding of Zambian gay men as being gay and Christian. Bringing this incipient grassroots theology into conversation with broader theological discourses, in particular African theology (including African women’s theology) and queer theology, we interrogate current understandings of the *Imago Dei* that either ignore sexuality or exclude same-sex loving people (in African theology) or that conceptualize queerness from white Western privileged perspectives (in queer theology). Hence we develop the notion of the *Imago Dei* as a stepping stone towards an African queer theology.

Key-words: queer theology; African theology; Image of God; creation; homosexuality; gay; Africa

Introduction
As a result of a wide range of developments over the past 10-15 years – the introduction of new anti-homosexuality legislation in countries like Uganda and Nigeria, the use of overt homophobic rhetoric by political leaders such as Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, the leading role of African bishops in the crisis around homosexuality in the global Anglican Communion, and the reports of violence against LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people in several African countries – Africa is now widely associated with homophobia and is even considered to be the worst continent to be gay (France24, 2014). This monolithic perception of ‘African homophobia’ is problematic for various reasons (cf. Awondo, Geschiere and Reid, 2012) but rather than discussing these, the present article aims to counter-balance this

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perception by foregrounding the perspectives of local African LGBTI communities. After all, the increased public manifestation of homophobic or anti-homosexual rhetoric and politics in many African societies go hand in hand with an increased public visibility of communities organized around LGBTI or otherwise ‘queer’ identities and the struggle for their rights. For example, in a recent essay on the struggles of African lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, Kenyan activist Gathoni Blessol stated that LGBTI persons

are not aliens from space or the West – like it is claimed – but are a representation of our African communities... [They] are African through and through, are religious, are part of the rich cultural diversity and ... are daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and family, neighbours and even grandparents of our African communities. (Blessol 2013, 220)

Not only does Blessol in her essay, like her fellow contributors to the *Queer African Reader*, claim a space for LGBTI people within African traditions and communities, but doing so she also refers to religion. The suggestion that African LGBTI people are religious might surprise some readers, since religion is widely considered a key factor fuelling ‘the waves of homophobia’ in contemporary Africa. As Marc Epprecht writes:

many African lgbti ... are proudly, happily and deeply religious. ... This religiosity often strikes secular activists and scholars from the West as surprising, not least given how how religious leaders are commonly at the forefront of whipping up homophobic hatred: homosexuality is ‘against African traditions’, is ‘unIslamic’ and ‘unbiblical’, in the milder language. (Epprecht 2013, 66-67).

Inspired by these observations of African LGBTI religiosity, in this article we aim to get a step further and explore how the apparent ability to combine, and possibly to reconcile, religious faith and ‘dissident’ sexuality might provide a stepping stone towards an African queer theology. This is important because the discourse of queer theology, on the one hand, so far is largely Western centered, while the discourse of African theology, on the other hand, so far has hardly engaged with questions of sexual and gender diversity.3

Our discussion focuses on Christian theology, and our methodology is informed by contextual theological approaches. Both African theology and queer theology are contextual forms of theology, as they seek to reflect upon faith in concrete social, political, and cultural contexts. Kwame Bediako (2004, 17) points out that even contextual theologies have the risk of becoming too academic or elitist, and hence he underscores the need to engage with ‘spontaneous, implicit or grassroots theology, as [such] theology … comes from where the faith

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3 Some notable exceptions to the latter are Mombo 2006 and the special issue of the *Journal of Gender & Religion in Africa* on Same-Sex Sexuality (Phiri and Nadar 2011).
lives, in the life-situation of the community of faith’. In this article we seek to reconstruct and make explicit the spontaneous, grassroots theology that we found in one particular community: the gay community in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. This is a community organized around sexual identity and not primarily around faith. However, doing research in this community we found almost all members identifying as Christian and practicing their faith in various ways, often within established churches even if these churches did uphold negative teachings about their sexuality. Even more, we found many members quite well able to combine, negotiate and reconcile their sexual and religious identities. This Zambian gay community, thus, appeared to be a site of faith, evidencing the claim made by many a queer theologian that faith often is found at the margins of, or indeed outside, the institution called ‘church’. Reconstructing the grassroots theology that we found in this community, we focus on the notion of the Image of God, more precisely the belief to be created in the image of God, which was central in the accounts of many of our interviewees. In order to build a meaningful and constructive conversation, in this article we will first discuss the understanding of the Image of God in African theology in relation to issues of homosexuality, than we will do the same with reference to queer theology before drawing the focus of attention to the grassroots theology from the gay community in Lusaka.

The fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted independently by the authors in July-September 2013, when we were both investigating issues of religion and sexuality in the gay community in Lusaka. Our studies had slightly different foci but shared a general interest in the ways how Christian gay men in Zambia negotiate their sexual and religious identities (see Phiri and West 2014; Van Klinken forthcoming A). Discussing our initial findings, we found the notion of the image of God occurring frequently in the material that each of us had collected and decided to do some collaborative work on this of which the present article is the result. This collaborative enterprise of a black Zambian female and heterosexual identifying scholar and a white European male and gay identifying scholar reconstructing the implicit theology of Zambian gay men can be presented as one example of queer solidarity in a globalizing world. Yet it also raises complex methodological questions, related to Gayatri Spivak’s famous question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ After all, do Zambian gay men’s voices really need to be ‘represented’, and their ‘implicit theologies’ to be ‘reconstructed’, by scholars who are not part of their community? We do not have space to dwell on these questions extensively, but let us point out that we do not claim to speak for, or on behalf of, the Zambian gay men who participated in our study. Instead, following the principles of qualitative data analysis, on the basis of interviews (conducted by Van Klinken) and focus group discussions (conducted by Phiri) we seek to give a systematic account of their often fragmented and implicitly articulated thoughts and beliefs, which are brought into conversation with more formal, academically articulated, theologies. By taking their grassroots theology seriously as a contribution to theological debate and as a basis to engage critically with established theological discourses, we seek to foreground the agency of our research participants, and of LGBTI communities in Africa more broadly, and to acknowledge them as loci of queer theologies, and of queer politics more broadly, in contemporary African contexts.
Before we proceed, the issue of terminology needs to be addressed. So far, we have used the acronym LGBTI, referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. We are aware that these originally Western categories of non-normative sexual and gendered identities and bodies cannot unproblematically be applied to African contexts. However, in this article we follow the increased use of these terms by African sexual and gender diversity activists (cf. Ekine and Abbas 2013), focusing specifically on gay identities. Indeed, our research participants all referred to themselves as ‘being gay’ – this English term allowing them to inscribe a globalized narrative of sexual identity and rights. The specific meanings of the term ‘gay’, or of any other category included under LGBTI, might however be context-specific and can therefore not be taken for granted. Related to ‘gay’ is the term homosexuality: as far as this refers to same-sex practices, homosexuality is arguably not un-African since such practices have been reported in many different precolonial African societies; however, in the modern Western understanding, the word is informed by a particular concept of sexual identity or sexual orientation – people are homosexual – which relatively recently was introduced in African contexts, as part of a globalizing discourse of LGBTI identities and related claims towards human rights. Finally, in this article we use the term ‘queer’, derived from the body of literature around queer theory, queer studies and indeed queer theology that emerged in the Euro-American academia in the 1990s. The use of this term, and its underlying theoretical discourse, in African and other postcolonial contexts is contested. A major criticism of queer theory has been that it is too white and western to be applicable to African and other postcolonial contexts, and that it struggles to fully include categories of race and ethnicity in the queer discourse (cf. Cornwall 2011, 72-113). Yet the term has recently been adopted by African scholars and activists, such as in the Queer African Reader edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (2013), and in the volume Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities compiled by Zethu Matabeni (2014). Ekine and Abbas (2013, 3) acknowledge the limitations of queer in relation to African neo-colonial realities, but they yet adopt the term to denote a political frame: ‘We use queer to underscore a perspective that embraces gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks’. In a similar way, we use the terms ‘queer’ and ‘queer theology’ in this article because the grassroots theology we found in the Zambian gay community is political and presents a fundamental challenge to mainstream African theological discourse which so far has not embraced gender and sexual plurality but rather tends to maintain and reinforce heteronormative lines of thought.

**African Theology: Ethnicity, Race and Gender in the Image of God**

African theology is an umbrella term for a variety of contextual Christian theologies that began to emerge in Africa from the mid-20th century in response to the Western theologies that until then dominated the mission-founded churches and theological institutions on the continent. In the course of time, different paradigms of African theology emerged (see Maluleke 2005). First, inculturation theologies protest against negative colonial and missionary interpretations of
African religio-cultural traditions, and seek to revalue these traditions positively in an attempt to develop expressions and articulations of the Christian faith that are ‘authentically African’. Second, African liberation theologies are primarily concerned not with culture and identity but with socio-political issues. One form of African liberation theology is black theology, particularly strong in Southern Africa under Apartheid. Third, theologies of reconstruction have been developed to engage with the project of post-colonial nation-building. Fourth but not least, African women (or feminist) theologies emerged as a major correction to African theologies more generally which tended to exclude women’s experiences and perspectives. Acknowledging this diversity, in the present section we examine first, how African theologies have employed the notion of the image of God, and second, how they have engaged with issues of homosexuality.

In African theology, the notion of the image of God has mainly emerged in debates around three critical categories: ethnicity, race and gender. One of the more extensive accounts can be found in the work of Gabriel Setiloane on the image of God among the Sotho-Tswana people. Taking up a key question in the inculturation debate – the question of the (dis)continuity of the conception of God in African traditional religion(s) and Christianity – he argues that the Sotho-Tswana traditionally have a ‘much wider, deeper and all-embracing concept’ than the one introduced by European missionaries (Setiloane 1978, 42). Setiloane is primarily concerned with African people’s imagining of God, rather than with the (Judeo-Christian) notion of people being created in the image of God which is the focus of this article. However, his work deserves mentioning because it raises the question whose voices are included when it comes to thinking about God. Setiloane foregrounds the perspectives of those who have been marginalized on the basis of their ethnicity and race by the normative theology of white European missionaries; in this article we make a similar move by privileging those who have been excluded from God-talk in African contexts because of their sexuality.

More directly relevant to our interest in the *Imago Dei* is Tshenumwani Farisani’s account on black people’s experiences in South Africa under Apartheid. Under the telling title, ‘Between the Image of God and the Image of Men’, Farisani (1990) critically points out that black people know what it means to be treated as less than their creator intended. Discussing how black lives have been systematically under-valued, and how blacks are constantly in transit between being citizen and non-citizen, human and nonhuman, native and foreigner in their own land, he presents the reality of blacks in South Africa as a disgrace to the image of God in which they are created, and he calls upon the black population to persistently strive to realize the image of God within them through the struggle for political liberation. Beyond Southern Africa with its tradition of black theology, the notion of the image of God occurs in a broader African liberationist theological discourse, for example by first Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere, who powerfully stated: ‘We say man (sic) was created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed, wretched – which is the lot of the

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4 Some African women theologians use the term ‘feminist’ to describe their work, but this is controversial. The commonly accepted term is African women’s theology (see Phiri and Nadar 2006, 3-4).
majority of those he (sic) created in his own image’ (quoted in Rwiza 2006, 244). It becomes obvious that the Imago Dei is closely related to a notion of human dignity and hence is central to political theological arguments addressing the oppression, exclusion and marginalization of black Africans through Apartheid, colonialism and other structures of injustice.

When African women’s theology emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, one of its major criticisms of African (male) theology was that women’s experiences and perspectives were not being included. Thus, they criticize liberation theologians for being concerned with poverty and oppression in postcolonial Africa but ignoring that women are ‘at the bottom of the heap when it comes to oppression and exploitation’ (Njoroge 2000, 130). With reference to inculturation theology, they point out that ‘culture’ should be approached more critically because ‘inculturation is not sufficient unless the cultures we reclaim are analyzed and are deemed worthy in terms of justice and support for life and the dignity of women is ascertained’ (Kanyoro 2002, 26).

Being concerned that the humanity of women is not fully respected but rather threatened by the patriarchal traditions in African societies, cultures and religions, including the Church, African women theologians often employ the notion of the image of God as the basis of a theology that recognizes the equal human dignity of men and women. Thus, Oduyoye (2001, 69) states:

> Humanity in all its variety exists in the very image of the divine. This affirmation of the dignity and integrity of humanity is grasped by women theologians as the basis of the prophet demand that we ‘be holy’, women and men together, all races, all ethnic groups, all nationalities. Each human is to reflect the divine and be related to God the source of human being.

To enable this inclusive notion of humanity in all its variety existing in the image of God, Oduyoye and other African women theologians realize that the way in which God-self is imagined needs revision. With feminist theologians in other parts of the world they question the masculine language for God that dominates the Christian tradition, yet doing so they draw on specifically African traditions. For example, Rose Abbey (2001) questions the masculinity of God while referring to the Ga people of Southeastern Ghana where God is traditionally known as Ataa Naa Nyonmo, meaning Father Mother God. Hence she advocates a shift from African theology’s masculine understanding of God towards a more gender inclusive imagining. Likewise, Oduyoye invokes gender-specific imaginary when she emphasizes ‘mothering as a quality of relating which is found in God and is expected not only of women but of men and women because we are beings created in the image of God’ (ibid, 48). She interprets divine mothering in terms of God’s hospitality to humanity, and immediately translates this into an ethical obligation of hospitality, harmony and ‘the cultivating of life-enhancing relationships’ in the human community (ibid, 48).
Along various lines, African women theologians have re-imagined God in ways that buttress the equal human dignity of women and men. They invoke the *Imago Dei* in their criticisms of patriarchy in African cultures and Christian traditions, and in their prophetic calls for gender equality and justice. As Isabel Phiri (2002, 77) puts it,

> Gender justice means promoting the humanity of both women and men in the church and using their gifts as revealed by God. Any form of discrimination and oppression mars the image of God in creation and humanity, for God is a God of justice and the practice of Christianity is supposed to reflect the justice of God.

Where African (male) theologians have employed the notion of the image of God to address issues of race and ethnicity, women theologians have broadened the discourse to include issues of gender. Yet however radical and relevant their move towards a theology of gender justice might be in African contexts, we critically observe that they have generally discussed questions of gender within the parameters of heterosexuality. Even their writings on women’s sexuality and embodiment are generally based on an implicit assumption, and sometimes an explicit norm, of heterosexuality (cf. Van Klinken and Gunda 2012, 129). Only in recent years this has begun to change.

African theologians until recently hardly engaged with issues of homosexuality. Only with the recent politicization of homosexuality in African contexts, the topic has begun to be addressed from various perspectives. As Van Klinken and Gunda (2012) have demonstrated, several theologians working in the inculturation paradigm have uncritically adopted the popular ‘homosexuality is un-African’ rhetoric, using culture-based arguments to reject homosexuality (rather than to reclaim indigenous traditions of gender and sexual diversity). The same actually applies for theologians who are more involved in the liberationist discourse. However, a few African theologians, including some prominent women theologians, have begun to use the motif of liberation to denounce the oppression and marginalization experienced by sexual minorities in Africa. Thus, in the context of South Africa, the tradition of black liberation theology has been invoked – among others by Desmond Tutu (1997) to argue that sexuality, like race, cannot be a category of exclusion and discrimination, followed by a call for commitment towards justice and human rights. Furthermore, developing a theological response to the challenges of HIV and AIDS, Musa Dube, a leading African woman theologian, has most explicitly argued that the discrimination of homosexuals, like poverty, gender inequality, ethnic conflict, and globalization, is one of the social injustices fueling the HIV epidemic. She proposes an HIV and AIDS liberation theology ‘that seeks to liberate from all kinds of oppression and exploitative structures, and that promotes justice in individual relationships, societies and in the global world’ (Van Klinken and Gunda 2012, 131). Interestingly, Dube (2008, 40) bases her argument theologically on the account of creation. Creation, in her understanding, means that all life is sacred: ‘[A]ll people, regardless of their color, gender, class, race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, health status, age, or sexual orientation, were created in God’s image and are loved by God, who is the source
of human dignity’. Thus, here we find a reference to the *Imago Dei* from an African theologian, arguing that sexual orientation does not disqualify people’s creation in the image of God; in other words, LGBTI lives, too, are sacred. Although Dube is rather progressive in making such a statement, the above overview makes clear that her argument builds on a strong tradition in African theology. Dube’s initial move towards a more inclusive conception of the *Imago Dei*, which takes the category of sexuality into account alongside categories of gender, race and ethnicity, has not yet been followed up with more substantial accounts, but at least an opening has been created.

**Queer Theology: Sexuality, Bodies and Desire in the Image of God**

Queer theology emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s in Euro-American circles, especially in the United States and in Britain. It traces its origins to the 1970s when mostly gay theologians made connections between theology and the gay liberation movement. However, building on the work of post-structuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler and on the larger body of queer theory, queer theology in the words of Elizabeth Stuart (2003, 89) is ‘radically different’ from earlier gay and lesbian theologies: ‘This is because queer theorists, unlike gay liberationists, do not fight for the liberation of oppressed sexuality, their rallying cry is not to ‘come out’, rather their goal is to liberate everyone from contemporary constructions of sexuality (Foucault) and gender (Butler).’ Stuart goes on by pointing out that queer theory questions the very notion of sexual identity, and that is why ‘queer theology is not an identity-based theology’ but rather an ‘anti-identity based theology’ (ibid, 89). Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004, 5) put it more positively when they present queer theology as a movement of people probing sexual constructions of theology and taking seriously ‘the queer project of deconstructing heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology, but also unveiling the different, the suppressed face of God amidst it’.

In gay liberation theology (indeed, the discourse that preceded, but has not been completely replaced by, queer theology) the notion of the *Imago Dei* is a popular theological theme. For example, Richard Cleaver offers a detailed reading of the Genesis creation stories to develop a communal and inclusive understanding of the image of God. Referring to Genesis 1: 26-28 as well as Genesis 2, 1-11, he concludes that taken together,

this myth teaches about a human species that is collectively an image of God (Genesis 1), in need of companionship and variety (Genesis 2), and always attracted sexually to other human beings. … Taken as a whole, the creation myth tells us that people need one another in order to become the image of God, to become fully human. (Cleaver 1995, 65)

He uses this communal understanding of the image of God to address ‘the fear of annihilation through the erasure of our identities’, that he observes to be ‘one of the deepest shadows on our lives as lesbians and gay men’ (ibid, 62). To overcome this fear, he suggests that gay and lesbian people should not fight their struggles individually but in solidarity with one another and build a
community in which they collectively reflect the image of God. Cleaver’s account shows that the difference between gay liberation theology and queer theology is not always as radical as suggested by Stuart. Indeed, his account maintains a strict binary understanding of gender that has been problematized in queer theory. Also, his concern about ‘the erasure of our identities’ seems to be out of line with the queer celebration of gender and sexuality beyond any essentialist notion of identity. But his emphasis on diversity, interdependence and mutual sexual attraction within the image of God can be considered as profoundly queer.

The latter notion has been developed much more radically by Marcella Althaus-Reid, who is interested in the queer God, that is, God as found ‘in the complexity of the unruly sexualities and relationships of people’ (Althaus-Reid 2003, 33). Thus, she writes:

The theological scandal is that bodies speak, and God speaks through them. What Jean-Yves Lacoste has called a kenotic existence (Lacoste 1994), that is the realization that human beings need to accept that they exist only in the image of God, could also mean to realise that Queerness is something that belongs to God, and that people are divinely Queer by grace. (Althaus-Reid 2003, 34)

For Althaus-Reid, people’s existence in the image of God is fully embodied and incorporates their bodies and desires. Hence it is in the variety of people’s sexual relationships that we can find the image of God, and indeed God-self who turns out to be ‘a stranger at the gates of Hegemonic Theology [found] amongst loving expressions of relationships at the margins of the defined decent and proper in Christianity’ (ibid, 171).

Arguably, queer theology has radically broadened the understanding of the *Imago Dei*. Not only does it claim, as gay and lesbian theologies have done before, that LGBTI people too are created in the image of God. By presenting a deeply incarnational account in which God is found in human flesh and human flesh thus reflects God, queer theology puts sexuality in all its varieties central in the understanding of the image of God. This is certainly relevant in African contexts where certain forms of sexuality have recently become heavily policed and politicized, and where same-sex loving people have been excluded and marginalized, not at least through the norms reinforced by what Althaus-Reid would call Hegemonic Theology. Yet when it is about the relevance and applicability of queer theology and its understanding of the image of the queer God in African contexts, also a critical point needs to be made.

Queer theology, by presenting itself as a radical transition from earlier (identity-based) gay and lesbian theologies, has developed a normative notion of queerness. Not only is queerness conceptualized as something beyond essentialist notions of identity, but also as radically transgressive of any traditional boundaries, categories and normativities. Indeed, for Robert Goss (2002) is transgression the metaphor for queer theologies, and Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000) exemplifies this transgressive mode by naming her queer theological project as *indecent theology*. Indeed, not any consensual sexual practice seems to be considered taboo for these theologians.
when they seek to make theological sense of a variety of sexual and erotic pleasures including practices such as SM, leather and bare-backing through which queers reflect the image of God.

Nathanael Homewood (forthcoming) has recently criticized queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner for their normative definition of queer worldmaking as ‘radical, anti-normative and actively aggressive politically’, and this criticism can also be applied to the above-mentioned transgressive queer theologies. Building on Biddy Martin’s suggestion that much of queer theory contains ‘an enormous fear of ordinariness or normalcy’ and pays ‘far too little attention to the dilemmas of the average people that we also are’ (quoted in Homewood forthcoming), Homewood seeks to broaden the conception of queerness to include the sexual and religious practices of his research subjects, Christian Zimbabwean gay men who ‘find it salutary, meaningful, or safe to participate in religious regimes of normal’. The normative notion of queerness as beyond identity and as radically transgressive will also appear to be problematic in view of our research subjects, Christian gay men in Zambia, as we will explore below, have a rather essentialist understanding of their sexual identity and seek to normalize their gay-selves within the image of God. Excluding them from the queer theological discourse because they are not transgressive enough would indeed expose the normativity at work within the queer discourse itself. It would also reveal queer theology to be a project of white privileged middle class scholars in Western academia ignorant of the strategies of survival and meaning-making employed by queer people in other parts of the world, and indeed also in sections of Western societies. Therefore, in this article we posit that queer theology in Africa is possible and timely – but only if it takes cognizance of the social, cultural and political specificities and sensitivities in African contexts, and gives an epistemological privilege to queer communities living in these contexts. That is why we now turn the focus of our attention to the community in which we conducted our research, the gay community in Lusaka.

Zambian Gay Men: Love in the Image of God

In Zambia, where we conducted research in the gay community, homosexuality has become strongly politicized. Same-sex practices have been prohibited in the country since the introduction of anti-sodomy laws during the colonial period, but only in recent years issues of homosexuality and LGBTI rights have become subject of heated public and political debates. These issues are discussed in a highly spiritualized discourse, in which those who advocate the human rights of sexual minorities, and indeed sexual minorities themselves, in popular rhetoric are being associated with the Devil or the Antichrist, and in which ‘gay rights’ are considered a sign of the end times (Van Klinken 2013). Having been declared a ‘Christian nation’ by born-again President Frederick Chiluba in 1991 – a declaration that was later enshrined in a preamble to the Constitution –, in Zambia the politics of homosexuality are shaped by a form of (Pentecostal) Christian nationalism in which the citizenship of gay and lesbian people and other sexual minorities is deeply contested (Van Klinken 2014). One typical example is a statement made in 2013 by the then Minister of Justice, Wynter Kabimba, that there is ‘no room for gays in
Zambia’ because ‘as Zambians, we declared that we are a Christian nation and there is no way we can allow this un-Zambian culture’ (Namaiko 2013).

In Zambian public debates on homosexuality and LGBTI rights, religious arguments frequently occur. Interestingly, and critically, one of the popular arguments centers on the inhuman nature of homosexual acts, invoking the notion of the Imago Dei. For example, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia’s firm defense of the continued criminalization of homosexuality appears to be informed by a particular evangelical concern with human dignity. From their perspective, ‘criminalising homosexuality is a way of preventing gay and lesbian people from inhuman behaviour, and thus a way of protecting their true humanity, that is, their Imago Dei’ (Van Klinken forthcoming B). This deployment of the Imago Dei in arguments against homosexuality can be further exemplified with quotes from contributors to online debates on Zambian news websites. For instance, in response to an article on the website Lusaka Times with the heading ‘Gays and Lesbians in Zambia’, one commenter writing under the name ‘Shikabunda’ stated:

Animals were created earlier than man and they have stuck to GOD-given natural principles of SEX. Why should man, though created later but in GOD’S IMAGE flout the principles of nature. IT CAN ONLY BE BY THE DEVIL’S INFLUENCE. (Shikabunda 2012)

This quote is illustrative of a popular Zambian discourse in which homosexuality is considered as unnatural and indeed satanic, something that seriously distorts the image of God in the people who practice it.

Against this background, it is particularly significant that in our research in the gay community in Lusaka we found Zambian gay men also referring to the notion of the image of God. In fact, in different ways they were reclaiming the image of God in a context where they were being dehumanized in a popular religious-inspired homophobic discourse. Opposing the popular argument that homosexuality is unnatural and from the devil, they expressed a strong belief that their sexuality is an inborn trait and is part of how they were being created by God. Consciously or unconsciously using the title of Lady Gaga’s hit song, being ‘born this way’ was among the popular phrases they used to describe their sexuality. For example,

Before I was born God knew me! I did not wake up one day and decide to start being sexually attracted to other men. It just happened. I started having weird feelings for other men, and it was scary at first because I did not know why I was not like some of my friends who would be attracted to girls. What I know is that I was born this way.

The essentialist understanding of sexuality reflected in this quote and expressed by our informants generally, is partly strategic: it enables them to make clear that homosexuality is not a
lifestyle or identity they chose (for money, as popular opinion has it) but is something they found themselves with. However, this understanding is based on a deeply religious sense of the self: a sense that they, like other human beings, have been created by God, and in the image of God.

‘The power of gay Christian essentialism’, Stephen Warner writes with reference to the Metropolitan Community Church in the United States, is that it ‘invokes a powerful and benevolent God to proclaim the issue of homosexuality to be beyond human control’, and ‘demands, as a matter of simple justice, inclusion of gays’ into religious communities and society more broadly (Warner 2005 [1995]: 199). From our interviews it appears that for Zambian gay men, this form of gay Christian essentialism first and foremost allows them to feel accepted and loved by God and thus to negotiate their sexuality and faith in a positive way, even if the social climate of homophobia may be too strong for them to publicly claim a space in the church or in society.

Participants varied on the question whether or not God deliberately created them as gay, but they all shared the belief that God created them and therefore accepts them as they are, including their sexuality. For instance,

I think God looks at me as normal as everyone else. Because I am who I am because of him. I wasn’t going to be here if it wasn’t for God. I am who I am, I was born this way. And God made me in his image. So I don’t think God really hates me. I believe in God and I am here because of God. … God made us who we are today. It’s in God image I would say, like how we are, whether we are gay or straight, we are in God’s image. For God it totally doesn’t make a difference whether I am gay or straight – I am just God’s child.

In this quotation the reference to the image of God allows normalizing and humanizing the gay self: regardless of sexuality, all people whether gay or straight are equal children of God the creator. This line of argument challenges popular discourses in Zambia that exceptionalize, exoticize and dehumanize gay people. It allows reclaiming human dignity and arming oneself against discrimination:

This is who I am, this is how I was born. So I asked myself, because I know that, and God knows that, what then is my purpose, what is my significance on this earth? Was I put on this earth to be discriminated against my whole life and finally die?

Such a confident stance obviously is important to survival in the heteronormative and indeed homophobic context of Zambia where gay people’s very existence and sexuality remain highly contested.

Where most interviewees reflected the belief that God is indifferent to sexuality and therefore gay people in the eyes of God are as ‘normal’ as others, at least one participant explicitly suggested that God had deliberately included sexual diversity into creation:
I believe God is the ultimate artists. He can paint classical paintings, abstract art, etcetera. We are just another design for him, so I don’t think it [homosexuality] is wrong. I might like Picasso and another person might like Da Vinci, but they are both masters in what they do. So I think I am made to be like this, because he is a colorful God and he wants diversity – in terms of sexuality and everything else.

Here, the notion of creation is invoked to emphasize diversity rather than equality and ‘normality’, and we could classify this as a more distinctly and radical ‘queer’ understanding – in the sense that it not only enables celebrating the different expressions of sexuality as part of Gods design, but also questioning what is considered ‘normal’.

Further reflecting upon the meaning of ‘being created in the image of God’, several participants suggested the importance of going beyond a binary understanding of gender. In this understanding, it is the complementarity of male and female that makes up the image of God in humankind, and the Imago Dei is thus believed to be best reflected in heterosexual marriage. Without being trained in critical gender studies, our informants intuitively challenged such a heteronormative understanding by emphasizing that it is not the gendered body but the human capacity of love that matters in the image of God, as is expressed in the following two quotations:

Being created in the image of God for me does not point to the physical body that you see. … If you are able to exercise love, by being just to those people who are around you, being able to help others, being able to exercise your power in a way that shows mercy for instance, that for me, that is similar to displaying qualities to those of God.

It’s not man and woman, the image of God is complete when you reflect God … The image of God is complete whether a man loves another man or a woman loves another woman or a man loves a woman. That’s a complete reflection of the image of God – love. It’s not right to say it should be man and woman.

This understanding is rooted in their firm understanding of God as being beyond gender. Refuting strongly masculine images of God, but not particularly attracted to feminine images either, informants foreground the idea of God as love. They believe that God, being the creator, loves all of creation, and they have no doubt that God’s love is wide enough to include them as gay people. As one of them put it, ‘I really don’t know what God thinks about homosexuality, but he loves me anyway.’ This belief helps them to deal with the strongly negative language about their sexuality they hear in church. If love is key to the image of God, then hate can only be un-godly: ‘You see people raising the Bible to say, “God hates fags”—but the word hate has never come out of the Lord’s mouth. So they are the ones, those who are saying this, who are involved in blasphemy’.
Foregrounding the category of love also helped participants to rethink their own sexuality. It was particularly interesting to see how some of them redefined the term ‘men having sex with men’ (MSM), which was introduced in Zambia and wider in Africa as part of HIV prevention strategies, into ‘men who love other men’. Thus they proposed a shift in focus from the sexual acts they may or may not be engaged in with their partners, on which bases they are often otherized and stigmatized, to the universal category of love as central to their relations and identity.

Being MSM is not an identity, MSM is just an act of having sexual intercourse with another man. I call myself a man who loves other men. Because love involves care, sharing and other good things, I love my partner because I share with him, I care for him and it is not just about having sex with him.

Bringing to the fore the centrality of love to their sexuality, identity and relations, these participants humanize their gay selves, thereby debunking popular discourses that reduce being gay to practicing ‘sodomy’. Obviously, for them love is not only a universal category, but has a particular Christian meaning as it is rooted in their belief to be created in the image of God who is love. Hence they can legitimize their own loving relationships as a truly Christian practice that reflects the *Imago Dei*.

Echoing Cleaver’s above quoted notion that human beings need one another in order to become the image of God, several participants indicated a communal aspect in their understanding of the *Imago Dei*. Partly this related to their understanding of loving relationships, erotic or otherwise, as reflecting the image of God. But they also interpreted this in a wider sense, meaning that peaceful coexistence in the community does, in fact, reflect God’s image in humankind. This is hinted at in the following quotation:

God knows why He (sic) created us the way we are. As a Christian, as long as I live in peace with other people, I know I am being what the image of God should be. Actually, peace is God’s quality also, so if I cannot live in peace others should help me to do that, they are also created with qualities of God in them.

In this line of thought, homophobia in society, and indeed any form of discrimination and exclusion, seriously distorts the image of God. The communal understanding of the *Imago Dei* suggested here is significant, as it closely resonates with the *ubuntu* motif that is often said to be typical of African communities. In the philosophy of *ubuntu*, a person only becomes human in relation to others, highlighting interdependence and harmonious coexistence. It might well be that *ubuntu* is the stepping stone towards developing an indigenized African queer theology of the image of God.
Conclusion
In this article we have examined the notion of the *Imago Dei* in three theological discourses: African theology, queer theology, and the grassroots theology in an urban Zambian gay community. Our interest was inspired by a notable observation in our respective studies that the notion of being created in the image of God was highly significant to the ways Zambian gay men negotiated their sexuality and faith. It appears that their incipient theology interrogates and challenges the discourses of African theology and queer theology in several ways. First, within African theology, the *Imago Dei* has been related to issues of ethnicity, race and gender, but generally not with sexuality. Thus, theological understandings of the *Imago Dei* have been developed recognizing the human dignity of Africans, blacks and women, but within a heteronormative framework. By claiming a space under the African sun and in the *Imago Dei*, the Zambian Christian gay men participating in our studies critically challenge African theologians to broaden their conception of the image of God in humankind so that it recognizes sexual diversity and the dignity and rights of sexual minorities. Second, queer theology has explicitly and radically included issues of sexuality, the body and erotic desire into its thinking about God and creation in the image of God. However, ‘queerness’ tends to be conceptualized in this discourse as always and necessarily transgressive, while Zambian gay men first and foremost want to be considered as ‘normal’ and therefore emphasize their capacity of love as a universal human, and indeed Christian, category. Doing so, they widen the scope and definition of love so that it includes their loving and erotic same-sex relationships, which certainly is a queer political move.

Our claim in this article is not that the grassroots theology we found in the Zambian gay theology sets the standard for African queer theology. But we do claim that for such a theology to emerge and be relevant, it should take the grassroots theologies in queer communities on the continent as a starting point. Thus, in addition to the theology that we have reconstructed here many more voices need to be included, bringing in the experiences and beliefs from gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other queer groups from all over the continent. That does not necessarily make a coherent theology, but coherence is not necessarily criteria of queer theologies. It will, however, make a theology that takes the embodied experiences, loving relationships and erotic desires of Africans in all their diversity as a basis for thinking about the *Imago Dei* in new, queer ways.

References


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