Special focus: Gay life and liberation in Southern Africa

Forging a representative gay liberation movement in South Africa

The history of gay liberation in South Africa reflects the history of the country: South African gays were divided along race, class and gender lines despite their common experience of sexual oppression.1 For decades, the public face of the South African gay liberation movement was white, middle-class and male and as a whole it failed to link itself to the broader liberation struggle. From today's vantage point the gay movement was at best equivocal in opposing apartheid, and at worst complicity in supporting it.

And in common with similar movements in other parts of the world, gay organisations in South Africa struggled to reconcile providing emotional and social support for their constituency with the need for a political voice. Until the late 1980s a black gay presence was muted. It would seem that - denied access to the bars, clubs and other spaces taken for granted by their white compatriots - black gays used gay organisations as spaces to socialise and seldom adopted an overtly political stance. Accordingly, gay organisations had a spectrum of political views, from complacency to militancy. And race was not always the determining factor for an organisation's political complexion.

But the launch in 1994 of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality laid the ground for a more unified and representative movement. Swept along by the momentum of constitutional reform, the support of the African National Congress, and the more open political climate of the transition from apartheid to democracy, the coalition has come closer than previous formations to authentically representing the majority of the country's gays. The desegregation of cities has also stimulated a more visible black gay presence. For the first time young people have been able to escape the conservative mores of the townships and their poor social facilities, to create more neutral and gay-friendly spaces in the cities.

But as gay rights activists **Mazibuko Jara** and **Sheila Lapinsky** argue, there is no room for complacency. The race, gender and class inequalities which still divide South Africans need to be reconciled with a sexual identity which unites them. This will involve the deliberate construction, through careful use of resources and appropriate strategies, of a new and more inclusive South African gay identity. It will mean catering in the first instance for the poorer sectors of the community, and for lesbians. The outcome may not reconcile all of the gay community's various interests - that may simply not be possible given the divisions of the past - but there will be a more authentic movement.

Some scenarios

December 3 1994 - The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) is launched by 77 men and women representing 41 organisations at a conference in Johannesburg.

June 1997 - An African lesbian, in her mid-thirties and from semi-rural Mpumalanga, walks to the podium at the NCGLE's third national conference and proposes a resolution committing the organisation to reach out to gay people in rural areas. The resolution is unanimously adopted by the delegates, 70 per cent of whom are black (African, Coloured and Indian) and 40 per cent of whom are women.

Early 1994 - Mark Gevisser, journalist and gay activist, writes

"This country's lesbian and gay sub-cultures have not yet matured to the point of being able to constitute an effective, coherent and united political minority." (1994:82)

These scenarios will be the framework for our interrogation of the roles of race, gender and class distinctions in the history of South Africa's gay liberation movement. Among the questions we ask are:

- To what extent are Gevisser's comments still true in 1998?
- What is our (gay) history? Where have gay South Africans come from?
- Which organisations were there in the past? What issues and campaigns did they take up and how did their racial, gender and class compositions influence their political stances?
- Is it possible to build a representative movement across the divides of race, class and gender?

In answering them we will selectively survey the history of organisation in the South African gay community; analyse the experiences of lesbians and black gays in organisations; and explore ways for present-day gay organisations to build a more representative movement.

Gay organisation: social versus political needs

In South Africa, as in other countries, there is an enduring tension in gay organisations between providing emotional support and safe places to socialise and being a vehicle for political mobilisation. Much of the written history and records of gay organisations reflects the latter role, but - particularly in black communities, which were predominantly poor - many gay organisations were established for socialising and support. By contrast, white, middle-class, gay men were able both to enter and create a subculture quite easily. Their economic power brought with it, among other benefits, access to space and education, and the power to create alternatives, including overtly political ones. (Gevisser 1994:20)

"Pink" is "white": the 1960s and 1970s

In 1968 gays established the Law Reform Movement (LRM) when the government proposed changes to the Immorality Act which would criminalise homosexuality. It was the first stirring of political action in what had been a largely invisible and quiescent community. The LRM raised funds and appointed a legal team to make representations to the parliamentary select committee which was handling the legislation. As a result of their efforts and those of individual gay people, the legislation was dropped, although the existing Sexual Offences Act was later amended to criminalise public displays of affection between men.

Though the LRM was the crucible for political action for gay rights in South Africa, it warrants critical scrutiny. The late 1960s were marked by the state's escalating repression of anti-apartheid dissent, and intensified racial segregation. The LRM was made up entirely of whites, the majority of whom were wealthy men whose political intent did not extend beyond resisting the single issue of anti-homosexual legislation. Their limited response was partly due to the fact that the government itself had defined homosexuality as a white issue - probably because the white gay community was more visible. Had the government targeted black gays, it is nevertheless unlikely - given racial

segregation and differing political perspectives - that there would have been significant solidarity and political links between black and white gays.

By the 1960s, most black opposition to apartheid had been crushed, but later in the decade and in the early 1970s there was a revival of anti-apartheid political activism amongst workers (who formed unions) and white students, spearheaded by the left-leaning National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). An attempt was made to found a South African Gay Liberation Movement on the white campus of the University of Natal, Durban in 1972, but it collapsed after three weeks in the face of police intimidation.

In the 1970s, a series of white gay men's supper clubs were set up in the larger cities, and a new subculture emerged around them. Large numbers of gay Afrikaner men migrated from the platteland to these cities where they found safer spaces and more tolerance. Lesbian subcultures emerged at this time too, in the form of small networks of women involved in sports, parties and friendship, also largely confined to white women. Gay male culture was most established and visible in the Coloured community of Cape Town where it centred around drag shows, hair salons and parties. Very little is known about lesbian or gay male subcultures in African and Indian communities in this period, which may reflect the atomisation of gay life, the prior claim of the anti-apartheid struggle on people's public commitment, or, more likely, a dearth of research.

The 1980s watershed

In 1982, the nominally non-racial Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) was formed mainly by white, middle-class men and functioned largely as a social meeting ground for them. But it did have some black male members, who sought a home in the organisation in the absence of alternatives. GASA was the largest and most sustained gay organisation yet and spawned several smaller groups organised around interests like sports, religion and counselling.

Because of the broadness of its membership, GASA eschewed a political stance and failed to link the struggle for gay equality with the struggle against apartheid - a choice which became more and more untenable as opposition to apartheid intensified. Many other predominantly white organisations were similarly failing to align themselves, even though under the United Democratic Front (UDF) a non-racial political movement was being forged.

In 1986, one of GASA's few black members - Simon Nkoli - was charged with treason along with 21 others in what became known as the Delmas Treason Trial, after the town in which the case was heard. GASA's internal political contradictions and the dominant political conservatism of its white members prevented it from expressing its support for Nkoli and the other trialists, and as a consequence GASA was expelled from the International Lesbian and Gay Association in 1987. Nkoli's experiences and those of the other black men in GASA demonstrate that this was inevitable, and highlight some of the difficulties of trying to build a non-racial movement in the politically-polarised 1980s. Nkoli writes

"The best thing about the membership was that your pink card got you into clubs at discounted prices. But the only place I managed to get into was somewhere in Jeppe St [in Johannesburg]. I was the only black person there and I felt so intimidated that I never went back." (Gevisser 1994:52)

In response to the conservatism of their white counterparts, black members of GASA formed themselves into the Saturday Group, but were finally prevented from meeting at the GASA offices as they "made too much noise". White members of GASA also objected to the preparation of food in the offices and seemed unable to take into account the fact that black gay men were still denied entry into the clubs and bars which white men were free to frequent.

Other black gays in South Africa had similar experiences to Nkoli's.

Hein Kleinbooi felt alienated as a black gay man in the arena of student politics. He joined the Gay and Lesbian Association (GALA) on the campus of the University of Cape Town,

"in search of comfort and the support of others ... But I did not get the support ... What made my sense of alienation even more acute was that the meetings seemed to be great fun for everyone else." (Kleinbooi 1994:265)

For example, videos of the British television series Out on Tuesday were shown and Kleinbooi did not identify with the culture or the humour: ... "the white yuppie culture ... seemed foreign from my own experience". (Kleinbooi 1994:53)
Disenchantment with GASA and other organisations dominated by whites led, in the mid- and late-1980s, to the formation of several new gay organisations. In 1986, former members of GASA set up the Rand Gay Organisation, a small black-led group which lasted for only a year. Also in 1986, another group of disillusioned former GASA members set up Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) in Cape Town, believing that the prevailing repression, and the state of emergency in particular, demanded a response from the gay community. LAGO became OLGA (Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists). It aligned itself with the charterist political tradition of the African National Congress (ANC) and affiliated to the UDF. OLGA's political identification with the anti-apartheid movement was not reflected in its membership, which was confined largely to white middle-class intellectuals.

The largest organisation to emerge in the 1980s was the non-racial Gays and Lesbians of the Witwatersrand (GLOW).2 The majority of its members was black and it was founded, in 1988, for young black people (mainly men) to meet each other. Disenchantment with the apolitical stance of the mainstream gay movement coalesced around GLOW and it became increasingly strident. In 1991, it organised South Africa's first gay pride march, which was also the first public expression of the gay people's political demands. The Lesbian Forum was set up in GLOW; it served a social and support function rather than a political one.

In Cape Town a new organisation was also formed. Midi Achmat comments on why she and others founded the Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians (ABIGALE)

"Black working-class people didn't feel at home in GASA because it was so white and middle class. Then OLGA came along, and we didn't feel at home there either ... Black people who went along found it too intellectual ... It was all politics and no support." (Gevisser 1994:79)

ABIGALE was established as a social support group - intended primarily for blacks - but later became more involved in political activities. Its members were predominantly

Coloured, working class and male. A recruitment drive in the African township of Khayelitsha failed to change the racial composition of the organisation.

There were also sporadic attempts at many universities (mainly those which had a majority of white students) to establish progressive gay organisations. These met with greater or lesser success, but never succeeded in attracting significant numbers of black members.

Thus, in the period leading to South Africa's political transition, the gay movement here was crossed by several persistent fault-lines - the dominance of white middle-class men (irrespective of political persuasion); a faltering black presence; and the tension between organisations' social support and political roles. The result was a refraction of political perspectives.

Lesbians

Lesbians were not visible in the gay organisations of the 1970s and 1980s. While GASA's male members did stymie the efforts of its few female members to raise the organisation's lesbian profile, lesbian organisations themselves seem to have been plagued by the very same problems as organisations in which men dominated.

In the early 1980s in Durban, Sunday's Women was established. Comprised predominantly of white women, the group met to discuss lesbianism and feminist issues and published a monthly newsletter. When some members proposed making connections with the anti-apartheid movement, there was a split between those who sought social support and those who wanted to assume a more prominent political profile.

Black lesbians seldom linked up with the mainly white lesbian organisations, not only because they felt excluded, but also because exposing themselves as lesbians may have alienated them from their more conservative black comrades in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Catharsis: the political transition and the formation of a national gay and lesbian structure

Due largely to lobbying behind the scenes during the negotiations which led to the drafting of the new constitution and the 1994 elections, activists from OLGA and GLOW ensured that what has become known as "the equality clause" - which outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation - was included in the interim constitution.3 They used the argument - irrefutable in the light of South Africa's history - that human rights were indivisible and that if democracy served only to ensure racial equality before the law, then the human rights of a range of marginalised groups of people would have been neglected.

Several minority political parties and right-wing religious groupings opposed the inclusion of the equality clause and began mobilising for its removal from the final constitution. Gay activists responded by forming the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) in late 1994 at a conference where 41 gay organisations from across South Africa were represented. The coalition's mandate and the basis for its political platform was to secure the equality clause.

Ironically, the NCGLE may have been blessed by history. It had a high profile, but its celebrated success in keeping the equality clause at the centre of the constitution had little to do with the strength or level of political mobilisation of the gay community, and more with the times. In fact, the embryonic coalition had to contend with a weak gay political movement, a lack of infrastructure and finance and the absence of strong black and women's organisations. But while the clause was being negotiated, the coalition could take advantage of the majority party, the ANC's, commitment to human rights and a democratic constitutional order, and the coming out of several prominent anti-apartheid activists and their involvement in progressive gay organisations (mainly OLGA and GLOW). And they had a sophisticated lobbying strategy, which they used first in the negotiations for the interim constitution3 and later in Parliament where the final constitution was agreed upon.

Constructing an authentic South African gay identity

The NCGLE has had to make a movement out of disparate elements, which it has done by raising funds from international and local donors to create an infrastructure, through a programme to stimulate the formation of local branches, and by providing leadership training. The relocation of its offices to townships and inner-city areas has increased the confidence of black gays. It has been able to take advantage of the equality clause to advance gay rights and its campaigns have led to the decriminalisation of same-sex sexual practices and the drawing up of legislation which outlaws discrimination in the workplace and other spheres. These successes have won the coalition new constituencies, helped by the more libertarian climate since the elections of 1994. The formation of black lesbian organisations and interest groups in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town may also signal the increased visibility and influence of lesbians in the gay movement.

The coalition now has more than 75 affiliates throughout the country, including lesbian organisations, social groups, political organisations and organisations based around religion, HIV/AIDS, support and counselling, media, and sport. These cover various class, race and gender groups and together they form the nucleus of a gay movement in South Africa.

Affluent, white gay men are still, however, the most influential even though they are not in the majority. The Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade Committee in Johannesburg is a good example of how this influence has played itself out. The pride march usually takes place in the city centre, which is a mainly black residential area. But some white gays have not wanted to participate in the march because they are afraid of the crime and violence associated with the inner city. These feelings prompted a debate about whether the march should relocate to the safer, wealthier - and whiter - suburbs.

The move has been resisted, but the debate is an indication that fault lines still exist in the movement. These rather prosaic struggles will continue in the coming years. In addition, the movement faces other challenges: the realisation of the constitutional promise of equality, dignity and justice for all gay people.

Class and sexuality

Which interests dominate the movement at the moment? One could argue that some of the NCGLE's most celebrated victories, such as the extension of medical aid schemes to the partners of gay employees, do not benefit poor or unemployed gays. What issues,

then, are important to these groups? How are lesbians' interests advanced and taken up? Does the decriminalisation of sodomy really change anything for lesbians? To its credit, the coalition's leadership and several of its affiliates have been able to identify and understand the interconnection of the gay struggle and the broader issues of freedom and development. Not without political fights and tensions, however: the movement's present stance is not entirely secure and the movement itself still has many weaknesses.

The majority of gay people in South Africa are poor. They remain marginalised from the social and economic mainstream and live outside of the emerging gay rights movement (which is, in turn, poorer without them). This knowledge should underpin future NCGLE work and that of locally-based gay organisations. It will help build a gay movement which is as much a home for poor gays as it is for those with access to employment and social services.

A gay activist leadership base, which is representative in terms of race, gender and class, is required, and will only be achieved through strategic recruitment and the education and training of a new leadership. Mobilisation of this kind needs to take sectoral interests and issues into account (such as equal age of consent, safe social spaces for lesbians and young gays, attitudes to disabled gay people). Services (legal, health, counselling and so on) must be made more accessible to the gay community broadly and particularly in poor areas. The construction of a South African gay identity is also necessary for building an inclusive gay movement, and the above will foster its development.

The coalition will also have to strive to change the attitudes of society at large towards gays. Its work with the ANC is instructive in this regard. One of the greatest threats to the permanence of full citizenship rights for all gays is the prevailing belief that homosexuality is unAfrican. For as long as the perception persists that most gays are wealthy white men, life will be harder for gay people in the townships. Furthermore, without the support of the majority of African people for equal rights for gays, no one - not even the powerful - can be confident that they will ever live in a society that is free from discrimination.

In closing and looking back

How was it possible that the NCGLE was able to succeed in presenting a more united and representative face for the gay community, when other organisations - even those that were politically progressive - failed? Much was owed to the times. In the 1990s, after a long period of germination and growth, black gay organisations came to fruition. In part because the desegregation of the major urban centres allowed young gays to escape township life and create safe and tolerant spaces in the city centres, and in part because of the political transition, which despite some uncertainties allowed minority groups to emerge into previously undefined and unrestricted space. The coalition's success in persuading the major political parties to retain the equality clause in the constitution won it many allies, black and white. At the same time, the end of the anti-apartheid struggle, which had so dominated the life of black South Africans, allowed people to come forward and press more personal claims, previously confined to the shadows. The support of the ANC for a wide-ranging equality clause also affirmed the gay community. And members of the coalition are of a younger, more confident generation, less scarred by apartheid and its divisions than their predecessors.

But the coalition's real success - in contrast to the organisations that went before it - is in the recognition that an authentic South African gay identity needs to be consciously constructed and that partisan choices need to be made. It has actively sought to balance its leadership and to seek out and sustain gay organisations in the townships and rural areas. It has also retained the support of white intellectuals and activists. In this endeavour it may have lost the support of some of the traditional cohorts of the gay liberation movement, but it is ultimately more authentic and potentially more enduring.

References

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Footnotes

1 In this article the term "gay" is used to describe both gay men and lesbians. A distinction has only been made between gay men and lesbians where accuracy demands.

2 The Witwatersrand is the name given to the area surrounding Johannesburg.

3 The interim constitution was negotiated by political parties between 1990 and 1994. It provided the basis for the first democratic elections in April 1994, in which a Constituent Assembly (CA) was elected. The CA produced a final constitution in May 1996.