



Tradewinds

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Monthly Newsletter

Gay Life In Southern Africa *Submitted by Roy Liebman, Publications Chair*

In general, gay life in the southern (sub-Saharan) part of Africa is severely restricted because of the conservatism of the population, including the pervasiveness of Islam. This is also evident by the recent split in the Anglican Church over its treatment of gay marriage. The African congregations by and large have voted to secede from the mother church's perceived liberal views on this matter.

BOTSWANA

Although actual arrests are uncommon homosexuality is illegal and punishable by imprisonment. A fledging gay rights group has been refused official recognition because, according to the government, doing so would legitimize criminality. The courts have refused to overturn antigay laws and the President has stated that human rights do not encompass "unnatural" acts. There are some gay-friendly places in the capitol city.

CAMEROON

Homosexuality is outlawed and punishable by imprisonment of six months to five years and a fine of up to 200,000 francs. Torture has been known to be inflicted on gay people. Cross-dressing and private gay nonsexual behavior, no matter how innocuous, is punishable. People are even outed in newspapers. Despite this, there some gay clubs in the capitol city.

ETHIOPIA

This is one of the most conservative of the sub-Saharan nations. Muslim sharia law calls for the death penalty while secular governmental laws mandate a maximum ten year prison term. Suicide and emigration of gays is not uncommon.

KENYA

"Carnal knowledge against the order of nature" and "gross indecency" can be punished by prison terms ranging from five to fifteen years. However there is some gay life in the capitol and laws are not being strictly enforced. There is an official coalition of gays and lesbians which is active.

MADAGASCAR

This is one of the most seemingly liberal countries in southern Africa as there are no criminal laws dealing with the issue of homosexuality. However, tourists from other countries are warned that homosexual acts are not legal and any kind of prostitution is punishable.

MALI

There are no laws against homosexuality but public indecency statutes are sometimes invoked. Most gays and lesbians are forced to marry by family pressure.

NAMIBIA

Male homosexuality is referred to as sodomy and is societally condemned; lesbianism is not so treated. In 2001 the President called for all gays to be arrested and if possible deported as "foreign influences". A Rainbow Project does exist but, as far as is known, there is only one gay bar in the entire country.

NIGERIA

There are laws against "gross indecency" that call for a prison term of up to fourteen years. The northern portion of the country is ruled by Islamic law or sharia which punishes male-male sex with death, while women are lashed. However a clergyman is attempting to organize a gay pride celebration and the general non-Islamic populace seems to be more accepting.

SENEGAL

Homosexuality is illegal and punishable by one to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to 1.5 million francs. There has been a very gradual growing acceptance of the gay lifestyle, but religious groups have campaigned against it and life has become harsh for openly gay people. Many have left the country.

TANZANIA

Even for "attempting" a homosexual act a man can get up to twenty years in prison, thirty if the act has been consummated. Lesbians can receive a seven year sentence and a huge fine. There are some gay-friendly resort areas in the former Zanzibar portion of the country.

ZAMBIA

A former British colony, Zambia still has its colonial anti-sodomy laws on the books and has updated them to call for a prison term of up to fourteen years. The population is generally openly anti-gay but gay men are now included in various anti-AIDS programs.

AND THE ONE BRIGHT SPOT: SOUTH AFRICA

Gay marriage was legalized in 2006, making South Africa the only African country to do so. Although many gay and lesbian organizations exist gay life outside the big cities is still risky. Rural areas can be homophobic, especially against lesbians. Abuse, including torture, and even murder of gays is not unknown. Cape Town and Johannesburg have active gay scenes.

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1,200 March At Hong Kong's First Official Gay Pride Parade

At last it has happened. Hong Kong's first gay pride parade processed through the crowded streets of Hong Kong Island on the afternoon of December 13th. And it was a huge success. Some 1,200 men and women, young and old, mostly gay but with some straight friends too, marched for just under two hours from the assembly point outside the Causeway Bay MTR entrance in Great George Street, one of the most congested places on the face of the planet, straight along the major East-West thoroughfare of Hennessy Road to its final destination in the public Southern Playground near Wanchai's station.

While Hong Kong has held three annual marches since 2005 to commemorate International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO), this was the first official gay pride parade. Banners and flags marked the different groups who took part, making the half kilometer length of the march a rainbow colored ribbon threading its way down a main street packed with shoppers and passersby. The mood of the march was joyous, everyone chanting slogans of love and equality to the beating of drums and the applause and waves of many onlookers and the crowds that thronged the bridges crossing the road to get a glimpse of a sight never before seen in Hong Kong. The passengers of passing trams joined in with waves, cheers and shouted greetings. Though there were some bemused and indifferent faces in the crowd there were no anti-gay protesters to spoil this very happy day.

The march was all on foot. Hong Kong's police, out in force and doing a very careful job of ensuring no one got knocked down by the still passing streams of buses and cars, had ruled, sadly, that Dykes on Bikes had to leave their machines at home. The only other vehicle organizers planned to have at the parade was a bus, both to be a focus for the parade and to provide a platform for its PA system and music. The bus didn't materialize. Citybus, the company that organizers approached to rent a double-decker, informed them several days before the parade that they are unwilling to rent them a bus. According to local media reports, the bus company reportedly said that although a bus was available, they considered various factors, including the "image of our company" when they refused the booking.

It was too late to rent another one, so everybody ended up walking and the kit went in a van, but it was not too late for a demonstration to be organized several days before the Parade outside the Citybus offices, where the company was called upon to account for what seemed to all concerned a blatant case of discrimination. This issue will not be forgotten and the Hong Kong Government has already taken the step of asking the company for an explanation.

At the Parade's destination a large platform had been erected in the sports ground and a program of celebration was performed by the groups involved in the Parade to entertain the marchers and the public in the park. There were too many organizations represented in the 30 member Pride committee to list them all here, but the four principal ones coordinating the day were the Women's Coalition of the HKSAR; Rainbow of Hong Kong; Midnight Blue, the Hong Kong organization reaching out to male sex workers; and the Social Movement Resource Centre Autonomous 8A, which had organized the highly successful 'Straights for Gays' march in Kowloon around the time of IDAHO earlier in the year. All these led the marchers in a declaration and pledge based upon the Pride Parade's theme of 'Celebrate Love'.

Midnight Blue's contingent, dressed in traditional costumes, showed off their Chinese Zang dancing skills. One of their leading members, Wai, who marched through the streets with his fellows in a police uniform just enough unlike the Chinese or Hong Kong



Police's uniform to prevent his arrest for impersonation, and was a key figure in putting together the Parade's administrative back up, told me that he 'wished to show Hong Kong a happy celebration of what *tongzhi* (meaning comrade in Chinese but commonly used to refer to lesbians and gay men) meant' and hoped that the event would develop in future more and more into the kind of street party enjoyed in other major cities. He and similarly clad fellow members of Midnight Blue did their best to make this happen this time by divesting themselves of their uniforms in a Hong Kong version of 'The Full Monty' on stage. Bryan Chan, of Hong Kong's *Dimsum Magazine* (who has been known just occasionally to be seen in drag at *tongzhi* events), appeared this time as the glamorous 'Coco', but kept his clothes on, his sparkling bodice, plumed headdress and tight boots being far too splendid and difficult to remove. He belted out some old favorites from Anita Mui and Paula Tsui. No lip synching here!

Connie Chan, leading member of the Women's Coalition, and one of the Parade's coordinators, told me that she was ecstatic about the turnout. She said that the committee had planned initially for 250 people (this was, after all, the first Pride Parade in a city where it is still not easy to come out and where most find it more than hard to tell their parents, let alone to be open to their employers, about their sexual orientation). But this had rapidly become 500 then 1,000, and the numbers who came to march exceeded everyone's dreams.

Hong Kong was helped out by contingents from other Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Yunnan and Gweizhou, all of which marched under identifying banners. Representatives from Taiwan also marched. From the platform, they all said they hoped to be able to repeat Hong Kong's success with Pride Parades of their own one day.

Two events completed the Pride program. That night, just off Lang Kwai Fong in Central, at the newly opened bar Does Your Mother Know, a large number of those whose mothers did, and many whose mothers probably didn't, celebrated the day's triumph with an After Parade Party. Joint party organizers Abby Lee and Betty Grisoni, coordinators of the lesbian social salon Les Peches, told me that while the numbers of people at this first Pride were not so important as the fact of its being held at all, they were delighted that so many had had the courage to turn out. Eric Herrera of Fruits in Suits, the Hong Kong gay social network, and their fellow party host, echoed this and said that their party, a fundraiser for the parade, hoped to pay over HK\$20,000 (US\$2,580) to its funds, and was intended to end a happy day with a bang. Which it truly did.

On Sunday, 13 December, an event was held at Hong Kong's Baptist University to share the lessons of the Parade and to hold an open forum on many LGBT issues similarly affecting China, Hong Kong and Taiwan; living with AIDS, family relationships, civil rights and the use of the legal system in achieving them. The Baptist University is no stranger to hosting *tongzhi events*; Ken Zai, Rainbow Hong Kong's founder and leading member and a key figure in the organization of the Pride Parade, had appeared here the week before to celebrate his organization's 10th anniversary with a musical concert at which he personally performed a medley of popular songs, as he did again after the Parade in Southern Park.

Whilst the 30-member committee that organized the Pride Parade will dissolve after its conclusion, it will, in some form, re-assemble next year to plan 2009's Pride. The intention is make Hong Kong's Pride bigger and better as the years go by.



From the top: Hong Kong's first gay pride parade through Causeway Bay and Hennessy Road, Women's Coalition of the HKSAR, co-organizer Kenneth Cheung of Rainbow of Hong Kong, co-organizers Connie Chan and Ah Lik (left), LGBT bankers' group, Taiwanese contingent, Midnight Blue (male sex workers' support group) and Amnesty International Hong Kong



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