

„People have realized the need for an African trans movement“

Interview with Victor Mukasa, African trans activist representing IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) and TITs Uganda (Transgenders Intersex Transsexuals Uganda), conducted by Carsten Balzer, co-editor of Liminalis

*Carsten Balzer: In the last years a very new development could be observed in Africa: the emergence of a Pan-African trans movement. The so-called Nairobi Trans Declaration, which was released during an LGBT-Conference in Kenya in 2007, and the so-called African Strategy Workshop, which was held in Cape Town, South Africa, in December 2008 played an important role in this new development. Victor, you have been involved in organizing both events. Could you please explain to us the circumstances that lead to these events and what exactly happened at these events? What is your impression on what has changed since 2007?*

**Victor Mukasa:** The emergence of the African Trans movement can be attributed to the factors that you mentioned. The Nairobi Trans Declaration 2007 was not predetermined. Just before I travelled to Nairobi for the Changing Faces, Changing Spaces Conference, I was pissed off by a lesbian activist from one of the LGBTI groups in Uganda. She was, at that time, editing a magazine in which lesbians and trans people told their personal stories. I happened to have submitted a story about my breasts, which I hate so much. I willingly gave that personal story for the sake of others who were probably in the same situation as I was. To my surprise, this activist demanded for a picture of my breasts saying, “Victor, I am not having this story printed without a picture of your breasts. It is a feature article and that means that it has to have a picture to illustrate what you are talking about”. Repeatedly, I told her that I would not give her a picture of my breasts, that I was not comfortable with it and that giving that story was ‘undressing’ enough for the reader. She insisted that she needed a picture with the story. Realizing that I was not going to do that, she decided to submit my story with a picture from some book, of a trans person binding his breasts. The leader of the organization made me aware of this. I got very furious. I called to tell the activist that I was not okay with what she had done and that if she did not withdraw the picture, there was going to be trouble. Inside me I was boiling. I felt a sense of betrayal. I felt that she had crossed the

line and that she did not respect my feelings even after I had expressed them to her. As if that was not enough, she physically crossed my path that evening. She came into my space. I confronted her and throttled her and I do not know how I got to that point. I was beyond furious. My friends intervened and saved the situation. I could not believe that she had violated me to that extent. That was very invasive. I felt that I could not stay around lest I commit a crime. I decided to go to Nairobi a week earlier than the conference. While in Nairobi, I did not want to interact with LGB people lest they say things offensive to my gender identity. I was still angry. I needed to be with my trans family and in fact I gathered them one evening, these fabulous trans people of Nairobi. That evening, I told them about my experience with the lesbian activist and how it made me feel and act. One by one they shared similar stories. Stories of how their colleagues; gay, lesbian and bisexual, at certain moments disregarded their existence, disrespected them and violated them because of their gender identity. Emotions rose and as a result, the first draft of the Nairobi Trans Declaration 2007 was made. It was basically reminding our fellow LGB activists of the existence of trans people in the movement which needs to be recognized, demanding for respect and that we were not going to beg for space in the movement. We plotted to take over one of the social events during the conference, stop everything and read the declaration out to our colleagues. A few days later the conference started and among the participants were trans activists from Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi. There was going to be a party at some point and we decided that was the event that we would stop for a moment to express ourselves. Indeed on the day of the party, I mobilized my trans colleagues, and at some point during the party, “Boo”, there we were. Proudly, hand in hand, we marched up the stage, the music was stopped and we read out the tough declaration. It was a surprise to majority at the party. It was also our moment of pride and affirmation.

This event was an awakening. It woke the LGB community of East Africa to the fact that among them, were trans people and they were not to just be used whenever the need arose. It was an energizing moment for trans people and an inspiration to organizing. The Transgenders, Intersex and Transexual Uganda (TITs Uganda), a trans and intersex organization, was born out of this.

Just recently, in December 2008, the Gender Identity Strategic Workshop took place in Cape Town, South Africa. This workshop attracted about 15 trans activists from across Eastern and

Southern Africa. Through my current employer, IGLHRC, I was able to organize this workshop with the help of Liesl Theron, from the co-sponsoring organization, Gender DynamiX as well as from various trans activists that I had already identified in the region. At this workshop, the activists were able to begin the process of defining and building the African trans movement. This workshop empowered us as trans activists and led to the emergence of trans organizations and support groups in Namibia, Zambia, Botswana and elsewhere.

However, I attribute a part of my development into a trans activist to Liesl Theron, the founder and Executive Director of the first trans organization on the continent, Gender DynamiX. She has played a big role in the development of the African Trans movement as a whole. In fact, here in Africa, we refer to her as “Mama Trans”.

*Carsten Balzer: When it comes to the issue of trans in Africa activists and researchers outside of Africa usually point to Gender DynamiX, which you already mentioned and which is also covered in the article by Thamar Klein in this Liminalis issue. In recent years one could observe the founding of some quite explicit trans organisations and groups in other African countries, among them TITs Uganda (Transgenders Intersex Transsexuals Uganda), which you founded or Trans Bantu (the former ZaGender) in Zambia. The situation in South Africa with its progressive Constitution and its well-organised advocacy with regard to trans and intersex issues differs in many ways to the situation in other African countries. Can you give us some examples of what is happening in other African countries? What impacts do these different situations have on the emergence of a Pan-African trans movement?*

**Victor Mukasa:** Throughout Africa (with the exception of South Africa), the situation has been different. Firstly, there has been complete silence and therefore ignorance around trans issues; both within the LGBTI community and the general community. Space has not been given to trans people to speak for themselves until recently when we decided that it was time to speak out. One by one we came and are still coming out and now it is a movement. Generally, all gender non-conforming people are "automatically" branded homosexuals as in most of our communities, a man who looks or has tendencies of a woman is the proper picture of a gay man. In the same way, a woman who looks like or has tendencies of a man is

declared a lesbian automatically. So in our communities, many trans people have been kept blind to gender identity issues and have themselves, many times, referred to themselves as just homosexual. Gender identity has, for a long time, just been another terminology. Myself I only came out as trans 5 years ago. Even then, my friends thought I was just copying a 'new way of living' from the West. I always referred to myself as a 'lesbian', a 'butch lesbian'. All my activist life till then, I was a lesbian activist. I never, for a moment, realized how most of my suffering came from the fact that I am trans. All I knew was that I was abused because I was a visible lesbian. Now I know it was more because of my gender identity and/or expression than my sexual orientation. Even as a leader of two LGBT organizations in Uganda, I never initiated programs for gender non-conforming members, myself being one of them. That is still the case with many LGBTI organizations across the continent.

Today this has changed. With more awareness of gender identity issues, many trans and/or gender non-conforming people are coming out. People have realized the need for an African Trans movement. Many of us are shifting from self to supporting others like us. We are seeking each other out and that has led to a movement. It is still a young movement but growing very swiftly in all aspects. As a result of different initiatives, trans organizations are springing up and some LGB groups and people are recognizing the presence of trans people in our communities. As a people, we are working hard towards educating others about our nature and issues. We are working hard towards restoring our dignity as well as breaking the walls of ignorance around trans issues in the larger movements.

*Carsten Balzer: Were the activists who participated in the African Strategy Workshop only coming from Anglophone or have there been trans activists from Francophone countries, too? Does the language barrier mean a hinderance to the emergence of a Pan-African trans movement? And what impact does the fact have that in many African countries several local languages or linguas francas like Kiswahili apart from these colonial languages are used on the organizing of an African trans community?*

**Victor Mukasa:** The workshop was for trans people from Eastern and Southern Africa. Two of the countries represented are Francophone (Rwanda and Burundi) and their language needs were met. Because of limited resources, IGLHRC and Gender DynamiX could not afford to

bring activists from all over Africa. However, we are mobilizing resources to support a similar workshop for Francophone Africa (early next year) and another for Lusophone Africa (late this year). The advantage we have with Swahili speaking Africa is that they also speak either English, French or Swahili. Language is a problem in organizing around any issue. It has been a challenge in building a Pan Africa LGBTI movement but of course with resources, these can be overcome. I already have contact with trans activists in West Africa, Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia. The movement that side is coming up slowly too.

*Carsten Balzer: During the Trans Pre Conference at the 24<sup>th</sup> ILGA World Conference in Vienna in November 2008, most Non-African activists were not only surprised to see so many trans activists from Africa, but also to see that the majority of African trans activists were FTMs or trans men. This created a strong and welcomed contrast to the delegations coming from the other World regions. Is this majority representative for the African trans activist community?*

**Victor Mukasa:** It is true that the majority of African Trans Activists at the last ILGA World Conference were FTM. However, that group was not representative of the African trans movement. We have as many MTF and others as FTM activists. Some groups are headed by MTFs. That was the first time. I believe that representation is moving towards perfect with time.

*Carsten Balzer: During the 24<sup>th</sup> ILGA World Conference the African organisation LEGABIBO from Botswana was elected as the Alternate of the ILGA Trans Secretariat, which is represented by Instituto Runa from Peru. What impact did this election have on the emergence of a Pan-African trans movement, and on the relation between the African trans movement and trans movements in other World regions?*

**Victor Mukasa:** The election of Skipper Mogapi from LEGABIBO as ILGA Trans Alternate was a pride moment for the African trans movement. At the ILGA conference before the last, I was the only trans African out of so many trans activists from across the world. You would think that there were no other trans people in Africa then. This time, we were many and

surely, why would a visible group be left out of leadership? We came knowing that we are a part of a larger movement and that our issues should be represented more closely at ILGA. We were proud to offer a candidate for the position and we gave him our full support. I am personally very grateful to ILGA for enabling a big number of African trans activists to attend that conference.

*Carsten Balzer: Thank you very much.*