

“Gayer than a treeful of monkeys on nitrous oxide”: An introspective look at my
experience as a queer person in Tanzania

Some people might not know this about me, but I am a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community. Surprise! If you insist upon labels, I’ve identified as queer/bi/pan since I was in high-school. However, labels don’t really make sense to me-I prefer to think of sexuality as fluid or a spectrum-but I also understand that labels can increase understanding. In fact, my dislike of labels is actually a bit weird considering how my brain works – akin to a system of files or a graph – such a brain tends to like organization and labelling but in terms of human sexuality perhaps my brain concedes defeat in face of a foe that is so complex it resists convention.

As I said before, if you insist upon labels I identify as Pansexual or Bisexual (depending on who I am talking to and their level of knowledge), and no I am not sexually attracted to kitchen appliances (though have you seen a cast-iron pan...). But perhaps the most accurate descriptor of my sexuality is “I am attracted to personality rather than gender” or some variant of that. Which sounds trite but is moderately accurate. Technically speaking, I am probably more of a demisexual, aromantic, oblivious, pansexual who will never pick up on someone’s attraction to me unless they wear a sign upon their head saying “I’m flirting with you”. And even then, I might convince myself that the sign was not meant for me.

Now, I have been extremely lucky in my life. I have yet to come across someone who is overtly homophobic toward me. My family all accepted me, though my grandma steadfastly refused to believe that I could know I was into girls if I hadn’t dated a girl. I then proceeded to ask her how I would know I was into guys, if I hadn’t dated a guy and she reevaluated her preconceived, heteronormative notions and accepted me (not that she hadn’t, just that she was confused). Even my Oma was accepting of me, despite her beliefs and being a devout Christian. We may have disagreed on a lot of things but she always loved me (and prayed for me, not that I think it helped any).

I never really “came out”, it was more like a natural progression and a low-key “hey, I’m bi” at random points in my life. I’ve never really been closeted. Tanzania was the first place I have ever felt closeted.

If you don’t know, it is illegal to be gay or any derivative of it that differs from the heterosexual norm; and it’s not just one of those laws that is only a formality because they haven’t gotten around to changing it (like how in Toronto it is illegal to swear in a public park, or how in Alberta it is illegal to paint a wooden ladder). In Tanzania being gay is an offence punishable with life-imprisonment. While I am not saying that Canada is a haven for LGBTQ people (conversion therapy is still legal in parts of Canada), it is not illegal to be part of the community. It was really weird for me to visit a wonderful country in which I can be imprisoned for being myself and loving someone of the same gender. The reality of LGBTQ+ people in Tanzania was heartbreaking and it was continually a concern of mine throughout the trip. It was hard for me to censor myself. Our group would be talking about their partners and dating and I had to sit on the sides worried I would incriminate myself. I could not participate openly discussions with my peers about myself. I could not be completely honest with them, I had to lie (given a lie of omission) and I feel like that truly affected the way I interacted. One time, I unthinkingly shared my blog with a guy I met there and while I was fairly sure he would be open and accepting, I had to protect myself and be extremely careful about what I posted and refrain from talking about my sexual identity on my own blog.

However, I cannot condemn them for their intolerance. Prior to colonization, homosexuality was accepted in the majority of tribes. It was only after the Germans and the British came and forced their own beliefs, that homosexuality become taboo. So, I can't in good conscious blame them for their treatment of the LGBTQ+ community, despite how anxious and confined I felt in my time there. I needed to remain cognizant that if my ancestors had not decided that they had the "divine right" to spread their own beliefs and intolerances this most likely would not have happened. This is especially true, considering the fact that 50 years ago, homosexuality was illegal in CANADA and same-sex marriage was legalized even more recently. Hell, homosexuality was considered a mental illness by academics until well into the 70s. Progress in LGBTQ+ rights are recent in my own country and are still an issue to this day. Considering that, it is not a surprise that a recently brought in religion has engrained itself into the culture so deeply (whether through self-preservation or choice) that homosexuality is widely considered a sin in Tanzania.

While, I need to remain cognizant of the history of LGTBQ+ rights in Tanzania, that does not invalidate my experience and feelings, nor does it erase the horrors that LGTBQ+ individuals live through within Tanzania. I cannot imagine the self-hatred and disgust one must feel growing up in that environment. I was there for 4 weeks and absolutely despised the feeling of being closeted. I was continually anxious, paranoid and melancholy throughout my stay there (while also being joyous and loving the experience, it was like a sad nagging thought in the back of my head) and I am accepting and proud of my sexuality. The thought of having to experience hatred from everyone, including yourself, for being who you are is gut-wrenching. Not to mention the effect of living in a constant fearful state, worried about imprisonment or worse, simply for being yourself. Never knowing when you are safe and that if you mess up, the stakes incredibly high. It is no wonder some of the people I talked to believed that there were no LGBTQ+ people in Tanzania (or at least very few). I certainly would also not be as out and proud as I am in Canada. In fact, I would probably be drowning in internalized homophobia and overcompensating for my "unnatural desires" by acting as straight and unassuming as I could.

While I believe change is direly needed in Tanzania, I cannot advocate change from my position of privilege. If change is coming, it must come from within. People will not listen to the opinions of 'mzungus', for any change introduced will simply be dismissed as a foreigner thing. However, even though I may not share their beliefs, I believe in the wonderful people I met there and I have faith that perhaps with time their opinions may change.

PSA: If you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, there is no need to worry! Most people will simply dismiss your sexuality as a foreigner thing, you will not be in danger. HOWEVER, if you are travelling there just be cautious.

ⁱ Pratchett, Terry, and Neil Gaiman. *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch: A Novel*. Corgi Books, 2014.