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SELECTIVE OUTRAGE: WHY LGBTQIA+ AFRICANS REMAIN ON THE MARGINS OF GENOCIDE CONVERSATIONS

What is genocide—and why should it be discussed here?

In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the aftermath of the Holocaust, a collective vow from humanity to never again allow such atrocities. But for many LGBTQIA+ Africans, genocide is not a distant historical horror. It is an unfolding reality—often unnamed, unacknowledged, and rarely addressed with the urgency it demands.

The Convention defines genocide as:

“Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

Notably absent from this list are sexual orientation and gender identity. And while that exclusion reflects the era in which the Convention was written, our commitment to human rights must evolve with our understanding. If we honour the spirit of the Convention, not only its 1948 language, then we must consider whether its principles apply to those who are unmistakably being targeted for elimination, rejection, or erasure.

Let us examine, clause by clause, what genocide entails, and how these definitions resonate painfully with the lived experience of LGBTQIA+ Africans today.

...OUR COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHTS MUST EVOLVE WITH OUR UNDERSTANDING

1. “Intent to destroy, in whole or in part...”

Genocide is not only measured in body counts. Its defining feature is intent—the deliberate targeting of a group for destruction.

Across a number of African countries, this intent is expressed through policies, rhetoric, and actions. Uganda’s 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, for example, includes the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality.” That is not merely a punitive law; it signals a desire to eliminate. In Ghana, the proposed “Family Values” bill seeks to criminalise advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights. In Nigeria and Cameroon, people are arrested, not always for actions but for suspicion or expression. Vigilante lists circulate. Fear spreads.

Religious and political leaders have publicly dehumanised LGBTQIA+ persons. Such language does not merely stigmatise, it sanctions harm. The goal is not coexistence, but disappearance.

2. “...a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

Some argue that the Genocide Convention does not apply to LGBTQIA+ people because they are not included in the original list. Legally, that may be the case. But our moral obligations need not stop at the margins of old definitions.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, in its landmark Resolution 275 (2014), recognised LGBTQIA+ persons as a vulnerable minority, condemning violence and discrimination against them.

The essential question is this: when a group is targeted specifically for who they are—ostracised, excluded, or eliminated—shouldn’t that group be considered worthy of the same protections? Human dignity cannot be conditional.

3. Killing members of the group

Sadly, this happens more often than we dare to admit. From Nigeria to Senegal, from Uganda to Cameroon, LGBTQIA+ people have been killed, sometimes by mobs, sometimes by police, sometimes in silence.

In July 2013, Cameroonian activist Eric Ohena Lembembe was murdered. His case remains unresolved. In October 2023, a mob in Senegal exhumed and burned the body of Cheikh Fall, denying him dignity even in death. These are not isolated incidents—they are public messages designed to instil fear and shame.

When bodies are desecrated in public, we must ask: what kind of society does this reflect?



4. Causing serious bodily or mental harm

LGBTQIA+ persons across the continent endure physical and psychological trauma. Anal “examinations” used in Kenya, Tanzania, and Egypt are a violation of basic human rights, yet they persist under the guise of law.

In South Africa and Nigeria, so-called corrective rape is still used as a cruel, misguided attempt to “convert” individuals. Survivors are left deeply traumatised.

Beyond these horrors is the constant weight of social exclusion: the fear of being outed, rejected by one’s family, expelled from school, or subjected to religious “healing.” These are not incidental harms—they are part of a sustained system of rejection and control.

5. Deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to destroy

Genocide can also take the form of denying people the ability to live freely and safely.

LGBTQIA+ individuals are often excluded from housing, jobs, healthcare, and education.

In some countries, even seeking medical treatment can be dangerous if one is suspected of being queer.

Some flee, others are forced into silence, while others take their own lives. This is a slow, silent violence, a kind that strips people not only of their rights, but of hope.

6. Imposing measures intended to prevent births

While less visible, this form of genocide takes place in the denial of family life. Same-sex relationships are criminalised; marriage and adoption rights are non-existent. In some instances, people are pressured or forced into heterosexual unions. In extreme cases, curative rape is used to enforce “conformity.”

This is not just about reproduction—it is about denying LGBTQIA+ people a future.

7. Forcibly transferring children to another group

This clause may seem unrelated, until we consider practices like conversion therapy.

“WHEN EVEN THE DIGNITY OF THE DEAD IS DENIED—WHEN BODIES ARE BURNED, DRAGGED, AND PUBLICLY SHAMED—WE MUST ACKNOWLEDGE A CRISIS THAT HAS MOVED FAR BEYOND INTOLERANCE.

Across several African countries, young people are taken to religious institutions or psychiatric facilities for “correction.” These efforts aim to erase identity through coercion, re-education, and confinement.

In effect, it is an attempt to force individuals into an identity other than their own.

Genocide’s final frontier

When even the dignity of the dead is denied—when bodies are burned, dragged, and publicly shamed—we must

acknowledge a crisis that has moved far beyond intolerance. These acts are not just expressions of hate; they are symbolic obliterations of an entire identity.

Why does the word matter?

The word genocide is not one we should use lightly. But neither should we avoid it when the evidence aligns so painfully.

The hesitation to use it, especially when discussing the systematic targeting of LGBTQIA+ Africans, stems not from lack of proof, but from discomfort. Naming it truthfully would demand urgent action and uncomfortable accountability.

Even human rights organisations sometimes soften their language, choosing terms like “discrimination” or “intolerance.” But when people are being tortured, erased, or killed—those words fall short.

Hope—and hesitation—at the African Union

In 2014, the African Commission demonstrated rare courage in passing Resolution 275, affirming the need to protect LGBTQIA+ Africans. But four years later, the African Union’s Executive Council withdrew the observer status of the Coalition of African Lesbians, citing “African values.”

It was not a legal position. It was a political compromise. And it sent a worrying message: inclusion is conditional.

This is not Western interference

LGBTQIA+ Africans are not outsiders. They are sons and daughters of this continent, rooted in our communities, languages, and struggles.

Protecting them is not about bowing to foreign pressure. It is about affirming our commitment to African dignity and human rights.

Several African countries—Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, Gabon—have already taken meaningful steps toward inclusion.

The question is not what outsiders want, but what we value.

History will ask difficult questions

One day, we will be judged—not by what we said, but by what we allowed. Future generations will look back, just as we now view the delayed recognition of women's rights or the persecution of pioneers like Alan Turing, and ask: how could we have allowed such cruelty?

And when they ask, what will we say?

Conclusion

We must not use the word genocide carelessly. But when the facts support its use, we cannot shrink from it.

If we can mobilise outrage for Rwanda, Darfur, or Tigray, why not for Kampala or Kaolack? The principle is the same.

This is not just discrimination. It is not merely exclusion. It is a systematic and sustained effort to destroy a group for who they are.

And that, by any honest measure, demands a conversation about genocide, and, more importantly, a call to prevent it.

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