

How to be a 'Real' Gay (I)

Gert Hekma

South Africa has become the most modern country in the world with regard to gay rights. Not only do same-sex couples have the same rights as heterosexual couples, as in the Netherlands, Belgium or Spain, but homosexual rights have even been anchored in the constitution. Just like in the Netherlands, those equal rights have great symbolic meaning, however within social reality the hetero standard still continues and gays and lesbians remain second-class citizens.

In South Africa, which is so much more violent than any western country, gays and lesbians are victims of violence that is sometimes specifically directed at them. Still, the legal development is promising and offers an example for many other countries in the south. For example, Supreme Court Judge Edwin Cameron, who is gay and an AIDS activist himself, went to Nepal to explain to the local judges why and how homosexual rights became part of the South African constitution. He did this as a contribution to the discussion about a new Nepalese constitution.

Reid's book is about black 'gay' men in the province of Mpumalanga (between Johannesburg and Mozambique). In their profession as hairdressers they fulfil a central role in local society, especially for other gays for whom the hairdresser huts are the only homosexual meeting places in the area, and also for the men they have sex with and for women they give the nicest hair-dos. They organise beauty contests in which gay men in travestite clothing participate, which is very popular with the real ladies. It is an interesting question why hairdressers worldwide (and fashion designers) often fulfil a central role in gay society, from South Africa and the Netherlands to the Philippines.

Another interesting theme is the identity of black gays. Globally, there seems to be a development of faggots taking on a female role, being penetrated orally or anally during sexual relations, by either hetero or gay men who are no longer unmanly and enter sexual relationships with each other in which they are both 'top' and 'bottom'. This is the case in Johannesburg, but not in places in Mpumalanga such as Ermelo, Bethal, Badplaas, Amsterdam, Standerton or Nelspruit. There, the black gay hairdressers are still faggots who do not enter relationships with each other but with real men: the 'ladies' go for 'gents', usually single young men who will switch to women at some point. They cannot imagine that gays would be with gays. Those 'gents' do it with the 'ladies' for the money and the sexual gratification such relations offer. The ladies are very much aware that the gents are unreliable lads who will at some point leave them for a wife and a family. Nonetheless, some gents do have relations with women and 'ladies' simultaneously where the latter is often a source of income for the family.



Soweto Pride 2007 - © Behind the Mask

The ladies are the real gays and the gents the passers-by in the faggot world. It is a world of unstable relationships between sex partners, while the 'ladies' can develop strong friendships amongst each other, they can also be jealous of each other because of boyfriends. In this world of black 'ladies' the new constitution that politically anchored homosexual rights came as a source of enormous support. Some faggots were so inspired that they started to organise gatherings for gay men in addition to the beauty contests. There they discussed violence against gays, religion and homosexuality and 'how to be a real gay'. This last theme especially fascinated Reid; he had expected that in a globalizing world local faggots would embrace the modern manly model of the homosexual. However, in spite of their city connections, the black gay men held on to their identities as 'ladies' and the distinction between themselves and the 'gents'. As ladies, they are the 'real gays'. Of all men involved in gay trafficking there was only one who had doubts about the distinct roles of lady and gent, but all others had a permanent place in the system of gender (sex) and sexuality. Reid views this unfamiliarity with the 'modern gay' as a signal that it is not at all certain that in a global world all gays will share the same sexual identity. All manly types that trade their sex and do not maintain a permanent role behave like the gents and the ladies. I'll keep my fingers crossed that diversity means more than a choice between hetero, homo and bisexual, and that beyond those

categories thousands of other sexual categories can flourish.

From the perspective of the modern gay, the 'ladies' of Mpumalanga are not exactly modern. They view themselves very differently, and the same is true for other residents of the towns where they run their hairdressing businesses. To the local community a gay hairdresser is signal of modernity. He gives you the hair-do that is really in fashion. The 'ladies' that the city gays look down upon as dense appear to be very modern in the countryside. But the attribute of modernity has a negative side for black gays because Mugabe and other black leaders call out loud and clear that homosexuality is a modern, western imported product, that it is very un-African and un-Christian, and that it is not an inborn identity but a fashion trend. For the faggots it is difficult to manoeuvre between being modern and being traditional, between being homosexual and homosexuality as a temporary impulse, between African roots and European degeneration.

There are good arguments against such accusations. Naturally, it has been pointed out that un-Christian and African go together very well, because christianity itself is a product imported from the West, often forced with violence onto black cultures of Africa. The black gays themselves often belong to all kinds of christian groups and fulfil an important role in those groups, for example, as singers. They even have their own church in South Africa, the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Church. Against the argument that they are a western-import product, they can cite the example of the *Sangomas* - 'ladies' like themselves who were traditional priests and healers within the black cultures in South Africa. This tradition still exists and amongst the *Sangomas* are many faggots. So certain forms of homosexuality are very African, have nothing to do with temporary fashion, and indeed have a long history that the christian West would very much have liked to end. In addition to these *Sangomas*, since the end of the nineteenth century there has been a tradition of more paedo-sexual relations between mineworkers (*Xibonda*) who lived far from their villages and boys (*Tinkonkana*) they took from home to provide them with domestic and sexual services. Such relations cannot have been new to the African culture or else they could never have developed in the mining cultures, given the European disapproval of homosexuality. The Zulu have their own words for this, such as *iqenge* and *isikhesana* (gent and lady).

All these themes are discussed in a very lively manner in *How to be a 'Real' Gay*. Reid has woven together theory, method, research results and personal observations in an attractive way. Most studies show a distinction between introduction, problem, theory and method, the result of the study and finally, its conclusions. He has broken that very boring pattern. Throughout the book he discusses and tests theories. He does not put down the great story of the history of sexuality in South Africa in a dry way in broad terms, but embeds the most important events in a story, for example, of his visit to an assembly of Zulu leaders who discuss what they think of same-sex marriages. He weaves social context into the story by describing the route he takes to his visit to a *Sangoma*, or by painting a picture of the mess in which these hairdresser huts are located. Reid tells the great story of South Africa in a very *low-key* manner based on the small-town situation of the ladies. That makes the story much earthier, livelier and more convincing. Add his loose style of writing to that and the result is a very good and vivaciously written book.

Reid offers various suggestions for the development of homosexuality. On the one hand he points out the persistence of the ladies and gents pattern despite social and sexual changes. Before the arrival of the whites there were manly men who did it with unmanly men and boys

112 and that system is still intact. In the province it is difficult to find manly gays that enter equal relationships with one another and play interchangeable sexual roles. Secondly, according to Reid, globalization does not lead to a general dominance of the modern homosexual. The example of Mpumalanga shows that the diversity of ways of being homosexual and displaying homosexual behaviour does not disappear as a result of globalization. Reid even takes it one step further and claims that the system of lady and gent is better for the black faggots because this way they do not form a separate ghetto, but live integrated into their local situation: 'The very project of gay emancipation that asserts an identity based on difference and sexual object choice rather than gender may very well produce homophobia, by radically disrupting the sex/gender system which currently offers gays and their boyfriends the possibility of integration.' (p. 154)

Time will tell if globalization goes with variant forms of homosexuality. It seems to me that those forms are dynamic and develop themselves; they are not as rigid as Reid suggests. The gender system of lady and gent is already very different from that of the mineworkers who had sexual relationships with boys who did not necessarily develop into ladies. Reid himself makes a distinction between traditional and 'millennium' *Sangomas*, where the latter are a modernised version of the first forms. On the other hand, the 'modern gay' is less stable than some authors would have you believe. In the West, a 'queer' alternative developed and there are all kinds of subgroups that sometimes meet all the norms of the modern homo (leather men, 'bears', sport fetishists) and sometimes not at all (such as modern faggots with a sense for fashion who have not disappeared, or masochists that give up their manliness with passion). The picture becomes even more muddled if we move outside of the western world where a multitude of unmanly homosexual types exists and that, without doubt, is in full development, especially around transgender themes. The modern gay may have become the standard for general homosexuality; but his position is picked at from both inside and out. We can thank Reid for offering us a beautiful example of a group of faggots who are resistant to the idea of the modern gay and still continue to develop as ladies who want to become really gay!

Dr. Gert Hekma studied anthropology at the Free University of Amsterdam and has been teaching gay/lesbian studies at the University of Amsterdam since 1984. His published works include Homoseksualiteit, een medische reputatie (Homosexuality, a medical Reputation) (1987) and Goed verkeerd (Rightly Wrong) (1989), and he edited The Pursuit of Sodomy (1989); De roze rand van donker Amsterdam (The Pink Outskirts of Gloomy Amsterdam) (1992) and Sexual Cultures in Europe (1999). In 2004, he published Homoseksualiteit in Nederland van 1730 tot de moderne tijd (Homosexuality in the Netherlands, 1730 until the Modern Times).

Notes

- (1) This is a review of: Graeme Reid, *How to be a 'real' gay. Emerging gay spaces in small town South Africa*, Dissertation University of Amsterdam, 22 June 2007, 242 pages.