



SOUTH AFRICA: A gay lifestyle is okay, but being gay is not

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Description: Gay communities across Africa often run into the sharp end of prejudice against their sexual orientation, yet a transvestite fraternity in the South African coastal city of Cape Town has gained a level of acceptance that allows them to publicly practice their lifestyle with minimal fear of retribution.

The rights of gays are enshrined in the country's constitution, but the murder of homosexuals and the "corrective rape" of lesbians often feature in the headlines; now, the city's "moffie culture" - a term for the mainly coloured, or mixed race, transvestites - is managing to transcend these barriers to a degree.

Excerpt:

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Marlow Valentine, deputy director of the Cape Town-based Triangle Project, a support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, told IRIN that transvestites had been living openly in the city since the early 1960s.

"The moffie subculture emerged in District Six in Cape Town during the 1940s and '50s, an inner-city area that truly reflected the idea of a 'rainbow nation', as it was home to people of different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs during the earlier days of apartheid," he said.

District Six was demolished by the apartheid government, which saw the mixed community of blacks, coloureds and whites living cheek-by-jowl as flouting the official policy of racial separation.

"Even though homosexuality was a criminal offence at the time [during apartheid], men who cross-dressed and participated in drag shows were accepted. It seems gay men who retained a level of masculinity were not accepted, but effeminate men were, as their sexual orientation was not seen as threatening," Valentine said.

"When the apartheid regime began to racially segregate communities in Cape Town, people from District Six, including the transvestites, were moved out into the coloured townships, and this was how the moffie subculture became established in the wider communities," he explained.

Valentine believes the flamboyant drag queen personas taken on by many transvestites, and the perception that they are successful business owners, have been key to transgender people's ability to integrate more successfully than the general gay population.

"Transvestites are still known for putting on drag shows in their local communities, and many straight people go to these shows because of the entertainment value, as the shows provide a level of comic relief that is affordable," he said.

"They also often run successful businesses, like hair salons and beauty parlours, which usually affords them a level of respect in their communities, because of the high unemployment that exists there. These factors have created a situation ... in which the so-called moffies, or transvestites, have become accepted rather than shunned."



The wider coloured community has become so accepting of the subculture that they have adopted Gayle, the rhyming street lingo developed in District Six so that transvestites could converse without others understanding, now spoken across Cape Town's coloured townships.

Marawaan Jumah, 30, a social worker and transvestite who lives and works in Manenberg, a township outside Cape Town, told IRIN he was widely known in his community because of his work, and people accepted his lifestyle.

"I live openly as a transgender person and most people accept me for who I am - those who do have issues with my lifestyle are more concerned about the sexual aspect of it rather than the cultural side, which involves cross-dressing and drag shows," he said.

"People who have real issues with the way I live often come from a religious background and are usually men - they seem to feel that by embracing my feminine side I have betrayed them as men, but I think that is just ignorance," Jumah commented.

When asked why African communities were less accepting of the transgender subculture than people from coloured communities, he said he thought it was linked to the morals and values of the different groups.

"I've got a lot of gay African friends who suffer jibes from their own people. It is much easier to be transgender in the coloured communities, and I think this is because our cultures are very different," Jumah said.

Valentine said although transvestites were more accepted in the coloured community, "When it comes to discussing the deeper issues around homosexuality, the same community members who accept transvestites will be openly homophobic. The broader idea of homosexuality is still not accepted by the majority of people."