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Same-Sex Couple Stir Fears of a 'Gay Agenda'

By [BARRY BEARAK](#)

BLANTYRE, Malawi — Tiwonge Chimbalanga looked like a man but said he was a woman. He helped with the cooking and dressed in feminine wraparound skirts. Steven Monjeza was a quiet, sullen man often intoxicated on sorghum beer. He said he had never been happy until he finally met the right companion.

The two celebrated their engagement — their chinkhoswe, in the Chichewa language — with a party at a lodge here in Malawi's commercial capital. It began cheerfully enough. But later, gawkers pushed their way inside, some shouting taunts, others just staring through despising eyes. Then the electricity failed. The band stopped playing, and the bride collapsed in tears.

Someone had tipped off a newspaper, The Nation, for this betrothal was extraordinary in a conservative African nation. The resulting front-page story began with the phrase "gay lovebirds," adding that the chinkhoswe was "the first recorded public activity for homosexuals in the country." Readers were reminded that homosexuality carried a sentence of 5 to 14 years in prison.

Two days later, on Dec. 28, the couple was [arrested](#) on charges of unnatural acts and gross indecency, and they have been in jail since, denied bail ostensibly to keep them safe.

Much of Malawi is riveted by the case. This is not just a matter of the state versus a same-sex couple; many here believe it is a matter of Malawi against the developed world. How else, they ask, could "gayism" have crept into a place where it never before existed?

"These immoral acts are not in our culture; they are coming from outside," said Leckford Thotho, the minister of information and civic affairs. "Otherwise, why is there all this interest from around the world? Why is money being sent?"

The clergy, especially, has accused foreigners of infecting Malawi with sexual Satanism. The Rev. Zacc Kawalala, the leader of the [Word Alive Ministry](#) and a member of the national human rights commission, said: "The West has its gay agenda. It wants to look at Africa and say, 'If you don't accept homosexuality, you are primitive.' But we're not as wicked as the West."

Of late, anti-homosexual sentiment has been intensifying in several African nations. A [law proposed in Uganda](#) would order a life sentence — and even death — for homosexuals. [In Gambia, the president demanded that gay people leave the country](#), threatening them with beheading. The [Senegalese penal code calls](#) for one to five years in prison for homosexual

behavior.

In Malawi, a deeply impoverished, landlocked nation of 14 million, some in government have called for the inclusion of gay men in the fight against AIDS. But this is but an empty gesture in a nation where homosexuality is outlawed. Gay men and lesbians hide in more than a closet: they secret themselves in a vault. There is no such thing as gay activism.

Nor would any be tolerated. On Jan. 30, the police arrested a man — Peter Sawali — for pasting up posters saying “Gay Rights Are Human Rights.”

He now faces up to four years in prison if convicted of conduct likely to disturb the peace. “You wouldn’t allow a poster that says ‘Let’s Rape the Women,’ would you?” asked a regional police spokesman, Davie Chingwalu.

[Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) and more than 40 rights groups from across the world have condemned the Malawi arrests. Some organizations have started a legal defense fund.

But in Malawi, this support is seen by many as proof of conspiracy. Some 40 percent of the government’s budget comes from foreign aid, and it is thought that homosexuality is a hidden agenda of some of the donors.

The trial of Mr. Chimbalanga and Mr. Monjeza began on Jan. 11, with hundreds gathering outside the decrepit courtroom, hooting and jeering.

Jean Kamphale, Mr. Chimbalanga’s boss at a Blantyre lodge, testified that she accepted “Auntie Tiwo” as a woman and assigned her cooking and cleaning chores. But after the article in *The Nation* appeared, she made her employee disrobe and refused to let him stop until he was naked from the waist down and “that’s where the cat was let out of the bag.”

Three days later, Mr. Chimbalanga arrived in court noticeably ill. His lawyers said he had contracted malaria in the hideously overcrowded jail, though the defendant later blamed guards for trying to beat him into a confession.

As Mr. Chimbalanga fell to the floor and began to vomit, spectators mocked him. “Auntie Tiwo is pregnant,” some called out. Mr. Chimbalanga was led away, only to return with a mop and pail to clean up the mess.

The trial has since been suspended, first to allow Mr. Chimbalanga to recover and now because of a labor strike within the judiciary.

In an interview last week, Mr. Monjeza, 26, presented himself as a model of remorse. “I have never had sexual feelings for ladies, but I had them with Tiwo,” he said, his words translated from Chichewa. “I am regretting my actions now. I want to apologize. I am no longer in love with Tiwo.”

On the other hand, Mr. Chimbalanga, 33, was simply indignant. “I have done nothing wrong but fall in love and declare this love for my husband,” he said.

He explained later: “I have male genitals, but inside I am a complete woman. Maybe I cannot give birth to a child, but I menstruate every month — or most months — and I can do any household chores a woman can do.”

Mr. Chimbalanga’s real name is Mabvuto Stoneck Kachepa. His original home is Chimbalanga in the Thyolo district — 40 miles from Blantyre, past the mammoth tea plantations and deep into the lush, soggy hills — and he adopted that surname after he was banished in his teenage years by his uncle, the village headman.

“Menstruation through his penis” had begun by then, a condition that may have some extremely rare medical cause, some experts say, but could also be the imagined claim of a gay man in a repressed society desperate to think himself a woman.

In Chimbalanga, the teenager was widely presumed to be bewitched. Villagers blamed the uncle for this hex; he denied it vigorously and decided it was better if his nephew lived elsewhere.

Mr. Chimbalanga is the fifth of six children, and older siblings often escorted him to traditional healers in hopes of finding an herbal cure.

“But he was too bewitched,” said Jairos Kachepa, his brother.

In recent years, when Mr. Chimbalanga visited his family, he dressed as a woman and did woman’s work, fetching water and grinding corn with a pestle. Villagers say they thought this strange, but he was well liked.

Now, the arrest has shocked and confounded them. In Chimbalanga, homosexuality — let alone the complexities of transgender issues — have never before merited public contemplation.

Aninsia Kachepa, Mr. Chimbalanga’s older sister, wept into her blouse at the simple mention of her jailed brother. “I have never heard of this homosexuality, and I am still not understanding,” she said.

“Tell me, how is it physically possible, one man having sex with another?”

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