

# Behind the Mask

## Bart Luirink

Since spring 2000, the Johannesburg-based website, *Behind the Mask* (BtM), has been providing information to people about developments surrounding homosexuality in Africa. Attracting tens of thousands of visitors each month, *The Mask* has built a network of hundreds of African partners and informants over the course of several years. Soon, French-speaking people will be able to participate as well.

The symbolism cannot be missed by anyone. *Behind the Mask* is based in the offices of the Women's Gaol, the former women's prison of Johannesburg. For much of the previous century, women who had broken apartheid laws were held here, where current employees of *Behind the Mask* produce an E-zine. This interactive gay organisation is both an expression of acquired freedom as well as enduring struggle.

The prison is now a museum, like the Old Fort situated next door where men were once held. Both complexes basically embrace the newly built Constitutional Court of South Africa, the highest court in the country, which instructed its parliament in December 2005 to enact legislation legalising same-sex marriage and implement the legislation within one year. New and old buildings there shelter the official Gender Commission, The Public Prosecutor and the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), a black lesbian organisation that originates from *Behind the Mask*, combining to form Constitution Hill, situated on the outskirts of the centre.

The solitary confinement department of the women's prison contains six cells where the lights never went off. Today these are exhibition rooms that tell the stories of the women once held there. Nolundi Ntamo was a regular; she was repeatedly arrested because she didn't carry a passbook (proof of identity). Yvonne Ntonto Mhlauli was arrested at the age of 22 because she held the hand of a white man. He got a warning; she disappeared under lock and key. Sibongile Tshabala had the audacity to brew traditional beer. Liliane Keagile was charged with terrorism and was tortured several times. Albertina Sisulu was arrested with two thousand other women because they had demonstrated against apartheid. In other exhibition rooms appear the names of comrades: Barbara Hogan, Lilian Ngoyi, Winnie Mandela, Fatima Meer and Helen Joseph.

Visitors to the BtM office often enquire how they managed to acquire office space on this holy ground. It's very tempting to wear a tired face and describe exasperation over endless meetings, dozens of e-mails and telephone calls, intensive lobbying and constant pressure on the authorities; to tell how it almost went wrong because christian fundamentalist homophobes caught wind of it and the new ANC leadership (African National Congress) which had voted for a gay-friendly constitution, turned out to be less brave in taking action.

The truth is that it was arranged within half an hour over a cup of coffee with one of the directors of the Johannesburg Development Agency, which was responsible for the devel-

opment of 'Con Hill' and the rebirth of the centre once marked by crime and blight. It is likely that there was a hidden agenda and the settlement of a LGBTI organisation on the hill fitted well. It exists in an atmosphere of normality among numerous receptionists, guards, construction workers, ushers and guides. Consequently, once there, one fancies oneself in the Promised Land.

This does not mean that it's now all paid down on the nail for gays and lesbians in South Africa. But the offices of BtM and FEW do indicate a deep transition to a constitutional state that started less than one and a half decades ago. In the old apartheid South Africa, homosexuality was a mortal sin and penalised. In the new South Africa, equality is law. How much this truth has become generally accepted for homo-activists dawned on me when I noted the disappointed reaction of a BtM spokesperson to the earlier mentioned historical decree of the Constitutional Court instructing parliament to legalise marriage between people of the same sex within twelve months. 'Now we have to wait another year,' she sighed.

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South Africa's dark past seems far away. In October 1990 while I was visiting, the first Gay and Lesbian Pride March passed through the streets of Johannesburg, directed by Simon Nkoli and Beverly Ditsie. A few hundred young people, many with paper bags over their heads, exuded the optimism of the moment. In the years since then, the young gay movement increased the pressure. Its leaders took to talk shows on radio and television, and drank tea with Nelson Mandela. Using a long-kept-secret fund from more privileged, exclusively white gays and lesbians, a successful lobby was established for the different parties at the negotiation table. Their first success was a gay friendly clause in the transitional constitution. After the first democratic elections, this lobby took aim at parliament and senate, which led to the second success: in 1997, a constitution that explicitly guaranteed freedom of sexual orientation was almost unanimously voted in. It was a world first. LGBTI groups were established within the South African police, insurance companies and pension funds stopped discriminating, adoption by gay parents was allowed and finally, in December 2006, after another year of waiting, marriage between people of the same sex was legalised. Who still dares to pretend that in Africa everything always takes longer than elsewhere?

If I tell South African friends that it took forty years of discussion, and the absence of christian-democrats from government for the first time in centuries, for same-sex marriages to be legalised in the Netherlands, they look at me with astonishment. In South Africa the whole exercise didn't take more than ten years.

Meanwhile, neighbours took a completely different direction. The Zimbabwean president, Mugabe, opened the Harare book fair in 1995 with a hunt for gays in his country. In a speech he called them 'less than pigs and dogs'. The managers of the fair felt obliged to exclude the organisation, *Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ)*, which had registered for a stand for the first time. That there were gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe could not have been news to the president. His predecessor, Canaan Banana, was himself an eager lover of same-sex intercourse. The Zimbabwean AIDS activist Lynde Francis told me in 1995 that that was a public secret. 'Banana had a football team and to be admitted to the team criteria other than good performance applied.' But when GALZ announced they wanted to present a booklet about homosexuality during the book fair, the silent tolerance vanished. Mugabe was happy to have a new scapegoat: the economy of the country was showing its first cracks.

This is the African split - Zimbabwe versus South Africa. Tradition and culture versus modernity. 'Don't tell, don't ask' versus visibility, coming out and identity. The same pattern manifests itself time after time. Organisations of gays and lesbians form and the rulers reject them. An activist allows an interview. 'It's strange to our culture,' a minister calls out. The activists announce an assembly. 'Hold your tongue,' declaims the bishop, 'it is a western import'. Zimbabwe, Namibia, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon - it's the same story everywhere. During survey trips in spring 1998 for a book about the life of gays in the south of Africa, I constantly encountered the oscillation of action and reaction. But at the same time it became clear how far the genie was out of the bottle, and that reality in reactionary countries is often more complex than it seems from the outside. Gay activists in Zimbabwe were amongst the first who dared contradict the president and hence became trendsetters. Their organisation experienced a turbulent increase after president Mugabe's attack on gays in his country. Across the border in South Africa, a contrasting development was taking place. After all their successes, a substantial part of the gay movement ended up in crisis, and the leading Gay and Lesbian Equality Project fell prey to (financial) mismanagement.

A memory: It's Sunday afternoon in August 1998. The doorbell rings and Simon Nkoli, my neighbour, stands at my doorstep. 'I have all the South African participants of the Gay Games in my house. Can you come over and tell them something about Amsterdam?' Later, about fifty black boys and girls were listening breathlessly to a predictable explanation of canals, our wealth acquired from former colonies, the Reguliersdwaarsstraat, the night sauna and Vivelavie. I think it was on that Sunday that I realised what it could mean to be amongst peers for two weeks. To be part of the majority for fourteen days. And some weeks later the delegation set out for Amsterdam. No gay bar was skipped. During the debates the South Africans did most of the talking. For the first time, and for the last time, an almost entirely black delegation carried the new South African flag inside the stadium, to tumultuous applause. In 1993 Simon was told he was HIV-positive and announced he would witness the Gay Games of 1994 in San Francisco. Four years later he was in Amsterdam. Back in Johannesburg, he showed me pictures of the two weeks of celebration. Here and there stood a single Zimbabwean, a couple of Namibians and a Kenyan hidden between South Africans. 'In 2002 all African countries will be represented,' he enthused. 'We have to hold on to this moment!'

Simon died on 30 November 1998. His role in the struggle for equality of gays and lesbians is unequalled. Many publications about his life have materialized and Beverley Ditsie made a touching documentary, 'Simon and I'. A corner of Johannesburg's cosmopolitan Hillbrow area is officially named after him. Former South African Minister of Defence, Moshua Lekota, spoke at his funeral. In the eighties, together with Nkoli, he had been a member of a group of anti-apartheid fighters brought to trial on the charge of high treason. Behind prison walls, the men entered into furious discussions about homosexuality. Nkoli was confronted with prejudices and the fear of his comrades that the state would use this theme against the suspects. He won the debate, as Lekota reminisced during his funeral oration. 'During those days, an awareness grew that in the South Africa after apartheid, nobody should be excluded from equal rights. (...) When we sat down at the negotiation table it was self-evident that we would stand up for our homosexual comrades as well,' he said. In November 2006, during a parliamentary debate on same-sex marriage, Lekota called the resistance of other African leaders 'repulsive' and 'primitive'.

There is a discreet quarrel going on amongst historians about who or what influenced the ANC to choose a different direction from that of the rulers of many other post-colonial nations. Some assign a great deal of influence to the role of European anti-apartheid organisations, who put the issue on the agenda of the ANC. Others state that ANC legal experts such as Albie Sachs and Kader Asmal performed a key role. The British activist Peter Tatchell, who addressed the ANC leadership in an open letter in 1987, claims that the ANC's support for gay rights was especially due to his efforts. In his lectures about this matter not one black South African plays a role. Undoubtedly, all these factors have had an influence, but it's the contribution of black South Africans like Nkoli that turned the tide during the internal ANC debate. After all, they are the physical proof that homosexuality is not a western import, not 'un-African' and not contrary to culture or tradition.

This story is a long preamble to that of the office on the hill, on the outskirts of the Johannesburg centre, where about ten young South Africans refresh a website and maintain a sizable network of activists and friends in Africa every day. But it is a necessary introduction

to show that the *Mask* is taking root in recent South African history. An involved outsider, a Dutch journalist who was tired of being a correspondent, might have introduced the idea. The result is the expression of the desire of Africans to make themselves visible; to exchange experiences, tell stories, pose and use new technology for what you may call a liberation struggle. *Behind the Mask* has held on to the moment of which Nkoli spoke, and moulded it into a virtual variant of that delegation of fifty that entered the Amsterdam Arena in 1998. But above all, *Behind the Mask* is an African organisation. That might sound like a given but for a long time this was extraordinary within the South African landscape of LGBTI organisations that were mostly dominated by white South Africans in the nineties, and some even up to today. At assemblies and conferences I have repeatedly heard delegates of these organisations sing the praises of the necessity of ‘transformation’ after which a lamentation was started about the many pitfalls on the road to an organization with colour at all levels. One could wonder to what degree the doubts about the ability of black South Africans to set up and lead organisations is based on a fear for the loss of their own positions.

Originally, we had spoken about a newsletter. I come from a generation that filled a large part of the day with copying, stapling, stuffing, writing and stamping envelopes. Since 1999, I had had email and access to the Internet, but it didn’t occur to me that the development of a website would be an option. A good friend of mine pointed out that possibility enthusiastically. It’s not that difficult, he said. And much cheaper. The next day I awoke in cyberspace. Emmanuel d’Emilio, a Young Namibian journalism student who had lost his parents’ financial support because he was homosexual, offered the name: *Behind the Mask*. After months of pondering who could design a suitable logo, I realised that visual artist Clifford Charles lived around the corner. I had met him in The Netherlands as a guest of the Amsterdam Thami Mnyele Foundation, which runs a residence for African artists. Now very successful on the international art scene, Charles had made a trademark of androgynous masks. The assumption that it might not be possible to find a black homosexual Webmaster was rejected at a conference of the International Gay and Lesbian Association in Johannesburg in 1999. At one of the sessions I met Zanele Muholi, who described these discussions on her laptop and completed a summary before the end of the meeting. ‘What do you think?’ she asked as she put the laptop in front of me. Afterwards she told me she was taking classes in web-design. It took some time before she quit her job and became employed by *Behind the Mask*. She is a well-known photographer and filmmaker now, whose work is shown in New York, Amsterdam, Kaapstad and Toronto.

Of course, every once in a while there was a burglary and an editor-in-chief disappeared. This sounds more dramatic than it really was; there is a constant pursuit of talented black South Africans and the temptations of considerably higher salaries and more career opportunities are great. The AIDS pandemic has also had major consequences for the organisation. Some years ago, Npumi Njinge, a regular at *Behind the Mask*, passed away. This was reason to examine in the temporary BtM working group called ‘*Mpumi’s Friends*, how it was possible that the AIDS education in South Africa was almost ‘de-homosexualised’, while gay-activists such as Nkoli and Zackie Achmat had taken the lead at the beginning of the nineties. And what to do about it? (I remember the often hilarious ‘condom droppings’ in Skyline, the black gay café near ‘Nkoli Corner’.) The pandemic often took up the leisure-time of BtM staff. ‘Are you free this weekend or do you have to go to a funeral?’ I sometimes heard them say to each other.

Supported by the unprecedented coaches Nell & Shapiro, *Behind the Mask* director Thuli Madi has translated the HIV/AIDS truth of this country into 'office policies' that includes access to a non-discriminatory medical insurance. Such realities influence the functioning of the organisation and postpone developmental speed once in a while.

In February 2007, *Behind the Mask* formulated its mission statement as follows: '*Behind the Mask* is working towards a continent where lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex people have a proud and celebratory voice and information on LGBTI issues is readily available to all. Throughout Africa, human rights of everyone are recognised as indivisible and are guaranteed.' It is a clear statement that leaves room for continuous discussion, careful consideration, strategic choices and recalibration of often more, occasionally less, successful projects. How do honest journalism, the necessity to critically follow the LGBTI organisations on the continent and engagement with the broader movement for equality relate to one another? How to build bridges between African environments of activists, NGO's and students and LGBTI persons in rural areas without access to Internet or email? How does *Behind the Mask* create optimal balance in its report? Not only news from Johannesburg, but also from other parts of South Africa. Not only from South Africa, but all regions of Africa. Not only English, but also French. Not only English and French, but also Portuguese. Not only European languages, but also African languages? Not only with relevant issues for men, but also for women. Not only 'LG', but also 'BTI'. Not only for their own community, but also for curious people from the straight world. Not only activist themes, but also coming out, health, religion. Not only a website, but also other (new) technology like radio, digital video and photography, iPod and SMS. Not only new technology, but also a broad approach, where old and new media are interrelated in a broader perspective in which each plays its part. In other words: a paper edition of *BtM* can't exist without a digital edition and vice versa. Both can't do without activities such as debate, a Club *BtM*, the development of networks, etc. And last: how can the organisation, which gets financial support from Hivos, Atlantic Philanthropies, NIZA Media fund and the Astreea Foundation, generate its own income and also appeal to the South African government?

But the discussions in the 'editorial room' or the boardroom of *Behind the Mask* aren't confined to matters of the specific role the organisation plays within a broader African LGBTI movement. Consequently, the employees of *The Link* call it the networking department of *BtM*, regularly receiving questions from European or American asylum lawyers searching for information that supports their clients' interests. The requests for asylum do not always appear legitimate, that is, as long as the tenets of western asylum policy are used as the principle. How are the employees of *BtM* dealing with such questions? From time to time, information reaches reporters about dubious LGBTI groups comprising fortune hunters who seek income in the gay struggle. What do you do with information about these 'gay by day, straight by night' activists?

Or a more recent question: after two black lesbians were murdered in 2007 in Soweto, there seems to be increasing 'hate crime', so why, in the freed South Africa are more gays and lesbians assaulted and murdered than in other, more homophobic countries of Africa? It has been well over ten years since South Africa realised equal rights for gays and lesbians and the Zimbabwean president started the witch hunt on them.

It is nine years since the establishment of *Behind the Mask*. What is notable is that homo-

phobe leaders rarely deny the existence of gays and lesbians in Africa any longer. Increased visibility has effectively undermined this 'argument'. But the new visibility, to which *Behind the Mask* has provided such a big contribution, places the activists in new dilemmas.

Website: [www.mask.org.za](http://www.mask.org.za)

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