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World of Diasporas: Different Perceptions on the Concept of Diaspora

Edited by

Harjinder Singh Majhail
and Sinan Doğan



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Harjinder Singh Majhail
Sinan Doğan
Editors

Gay African Refugees in Brazil: a Diaspora?

Vitor Lopes Andrade

1 Introduction

The number and the diversity of refugees and asylum seekers in Brazil have been increasing exponentially since 2010 – the average of asylum seekers raised 900 % in this period. In 2015, Brazil had 8,400 refugees and 12,668 asylum seekers. These numbers are small in comparison to Europe and to MENA (Middle East and North Africa), but they represent a great increase considering Brazil's reality: in 2010 there were 566 asylum claims and in 2013 there were 5,882 (CONARE 2015).

The first time the Brazilian government granted refugee status for someone who migrated due to sexual orientation or gender identity was in 2002 for a gay Colombian man. However, concerning the LGBRIQ refugees and asylum seekers, the Brazilian government does not publish the official figures. According to a civil society organization in São Paulo (the name of the organization will be kept in anonymity because of ethical questions), from January 2013 to February 2016, about 200 people claimed for asylum because of their sexual orientation, which represents 2 % of all the people who looked for the organization. However, it is important to take into account that these are circumstantial data, since it only reflects foreign people who claimed for asylum in the city of São Paulo and that went to this civil society organization to ask for help (note that going to this institution is not mandatory in the process of claiming for asylum in São Paulo).

About 200 people went to this civil society organization and declared they were not heterosexual, 88 % were men and 12 % women. The great majority (97 %) arrived in Brazil by themselves, with no relatives or boyfriend/girlfriend and 92 % are still waiting for the Brazilian government decision about their request. Concerning the original country, 95 % are from Africa, mostly from Nigeria (42 %) and Cameroon (17 %). 72 % of them are from 21 to 35 years old. In this sense, the general profile of the LGBRIQ asylum seekers in Brazil is: young men from African countries that come to Brazil alone and are still waiting for the decision of the Brazilian government.

Taking into account this scenario, the purpose of this research was to analyse whether gay African refugees in Brazil could be considered a diasporic

population or not. To meet this purpose, an ethnographic perspective was used. São Paulo was the focus of the research because this is the city that receives the greatest number of asylum seekers in Brazil nowadays.

The concept of "diasporic population" here refers to a community of people who perceive themselves as a cultural construction of collective membership living outside of their original countries; in other words, a feeling of belonging. Then, to analyse whether gay African refugees in Brazil could be considered a diaspora or not, we will analyse the histories of four people.

2 Gay African Refugees in Brazil

Enzi¹ is a 31-year-old Nigerian man that arrived in São Paulo in June, 2015. He had a valid visa and claimed for asylum because of his sexual orientation; he is still waiting for the answer of the Brazilian government. In Nigeria Enzi used to be an electrician.

I was homosexual while in my country. But as a result of my state of origin and my place of resident in Nigeria totally distaste such act. They started killing any homosexual in my local community where I reside. I have to leave both my businesses and investment and ran for safety with the little money still in my hand. The community heads appointed thugs that go around looking for homosexual to kill and punish.²

When I talked to him in February, 2016, he was working in a pasta factory in São Paulo. He, another Nigerian man and a black Brazilian man had the duty of lifting 50 kg flour bags and putting them inside a machine. After that, they had to mix the flour that was inside the machine. It was a very hard job, and he showed me the marks on his hands. It was the other Nigerian man who got this job for him. But Enzi and the Nigerian man were not friends, just colleagues; they did not meet each other outside the working place. This man mistreats Enzi: he always screams out and acts as if he was the boss. However, he is not the boss; he and Enzi have the same function. Enzi thinks he acts this way because he works there for a longer time and because it was him who got the job for Enzi. The Nigerian man does not know that Enzi claimed for asylum because he is gay.

¹ All the original names were modified to keep the participants' anonymity.

² Enzi, asylum seeker in Brazil, 31-year-old Nigerian man.

Enzi told me he has no Brazilian friends, just Nigerian ones. He does not go out at night, but while he lived in the city centre he went once to a straight African club (now he lives in the suburb of São Paulo). He complained he does not have many friends in Brazil. In the place he lives – a bedroom with a small kitchen and a bathroom that he rents from an old lady, who lives upstairs – he is the only foreign resident. He is not friends with his Brazilian neighbours: they just say “hello” to each other in the morning.

Enzi is a very religious person. He is Christian and likes to go to church on Sundays. He usually goes to an African church that has a ceremony in Portuguese and in English at the same time. At the church, the other people – most of them from Nigeria – do not know he is gay and that he claimed for asylum because of his sexual orientation.

Phillipe is from the Democratic Republic of Congo and arrived in Brazil in November, 2015. He is 34 years old and, as Enzi, claimed for asylum because of his sexual orientation. Phillipe is still waiting for the decision of the Brazilian government as well. When we talked in April, 2016, he had no work in Brazil. In Congo he had a very good life: he was well-educated, he worked for a company, and had a private driver and three houses.

He was married with a woman and they had a baby. But he also had a boyfriend. Once, his wife saw him with his boyfriend. She told everybody about it and they broke up. Then, he started having problems at his work place, with his family and with other people. His family did not approve his sexual practices. He fell into depression and, then, somebody suggested him to move to another country. He came to Brazil with his 2-year-old daughter and his boyfriend.

In Brazil, Phillipe lives in the suburb of São Paulo. Besides his boyfriend and his daughter, there are another woman and another man living with them. The woman is also from Congo: they got to know each other in the flight to Brazil and Phillipe accepted her to live with them because she had no place to stay. The man is from Angola and he worked with Phillipe in a temporary job in Brazil. He is living with Phillipe provisionally. The five people live in a two-room house: there is a living room (with a television, a small table and two sofas) and a bedroom with just one double bed and a bathroom.

The woman knows Phillipe is gay and that the other man from Congo is his boyfriend. The man from Angola – Phillipe told me – does not know officially about this gay relationship, but actually he knows. Other foreign people (from Angola) and Brazilians live in the same building, but they do not know that Phillipe is gay and that he lives with his boyfriend. Phillipe tells everybody that his boyfriend is his younger brother (he used to say it in Congo too). He also told me he does not want his daughter to know he is gay.

Mark is another gay asylum seeker. He arrived in Brazil in January 2016 from Sierra Leone, where he worked as an IT technician. When he arrived in Brazil he was imprisoned in the airport during two weeks because he did not have a Brazilian visa. Mark is 31 years old and he ran away from Sierra Leone with his boyfriend:

I left my country because I am gay. My boyfriend and I decided to leave our country because we do not have any civil rights in our country of origin. LGBT is not legal in Sierra Leone, so when our families got to know that we are practicing same sex, they have been trying to kill us through-out the African Juju way. The police or any human rights cannot help in Sierra Leone. If you make such a report to them they will tell what you are doing is illegal or might even get arrested. That is why we decided to leave our country and decided to stay in Brazil when we found out this is the best place on Earth for LGBT people.³

In Brazil, Mark and his boyfriend were living in an apartment with other people from Sierra Leone. Everybody in the house knew they are gay. They shared a bedroom with another man from Sierra Leone. When we talked in May 2016, he told me they did not face any type of discrimination because they were gay, but they had some problems with the other people from Sierra Leone with whom they were living because of ethnic questions. After three months living there, Mark and his boyfriend moved to another place where they could be by themselves. They do not know any gay club or bar in Brazil.

When he accepted talking to me, we agreed to meet each other at his work place. Mark fixes cell phones in a very popular street of São Paulo. When I arrived there, I found out that his boss is from Lebanon. The boss always says to Mark “you are gay!”, and Mark does not say anything – he just laughs. I asked him about it later and he said that he told nobody at the work place he is gay. After introducing myself to his boss and saying goodbye – it was past time Mark usually goes home – his boss said: “go fuck yourselves”, to Mark. I understood such phrase as a discriminating act. His boss thought we were going to have sexual relations instead of an academic interview. He thought so just because Mark is gay.

Ikenna is another man who claimed for the refugee status in Brazil because of his sexual orientation. He arrived in Brazil, from Nigeria, in 2011 and was recognized as a refugee by the Brazilian government in 2013. I do not know Ikenna

³ Mark, asylum seeker in Brazil, 31-year-old man from Sierra Leone.

personally, but UNHCR-ACNUR (The United Nations Refugee Agency) in Brazil has written a very interesting text about him.

Ikenna suffered several public reproofs: it was common to be offended at the places his sexuality was revealed. He had difficulty to find a job and, sometimes, he was physically assaulted because of his sexual orientation. To go to the police was not an option, because when he was identified as a homosexual, he was even more assaulted.⁴

Nowadays, Ikenna is 36 years old and has a small electronic accessories store in Brazil. According to UNHCR-ACNUR (2015), "here, he did not establish any affective relationship and has few friends – all Brazilians. He does not hobnob with fellow citizens and he keeps himself away from the African communities because he is afraid of them".

3 Conclusion

In the stories of Enzi, Philippe, Mark and Ikenna we can identify three different profiles concerning gay African refugees and asylum seekers in Brazil. The first profile is when the refugee keeps in touch with fellow countrymen but does not talk about his sexuality; that is, he does not "come out" of the closet. This is the most common profile and it is the case of Enzi and Philippe.

The second profile is when the refugee keeps in contact with compatriots and other foreign people and they know he is gay. In this situation, commonly the other refugees discriminate against the gay one. This can happen in very subtle – but still harmful – ways, such as in the case of Mark at his work place. However this can be very hard as well, involving cases of physical aggression.

The last profile is when the gay refugee avoids being with the fellow citizens. This is the case of Ikenna, from Nigeria, that keeps himself away from the African communities because he is afraid of them.

Then, analysing these three profiles, the conclusion is that the gay African refugees do not form a diaspora in Brazil, since the sexual cultural approach of the African diasporas does not include non-heterosexuality. Most of the time the gay African refugees hide their sexualities from the other refugees.

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