

Seeds of prejudice: The impact of British colonization on attitudes towards sexual minorities

Alexsandros Cavgias (Ghent University)
Cristian Navarro (CEMFI)

GDEC 2025

June 12, 2025

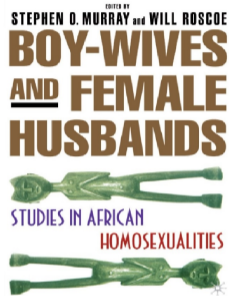
Research question:

How does **British colonization** impact **sexual prejudice** in postcolonial societies?

- **Sexual prejudice:**
 - “A negative attitude toward an individual based on her or his membership in a group defined by its members’ sexual attractions, behaviours, or orientation” (Herek and McLemore, 2013, p. 311).
- **British colonization:**
 - In our case, several institutional contrasts affect sexual prejudice *a priori*.
 - **Penal codes:** criminalizing vs not criminalizing homosexual conduct;
 - **Legal origin:** common law vs civil law;
 - **Educational systems:** missionary schools vs public schools.

MOTIVATION: REVERSAL OF BELIEFS IN AFRICA

Africa before colonization



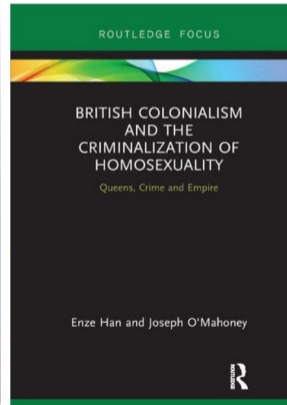
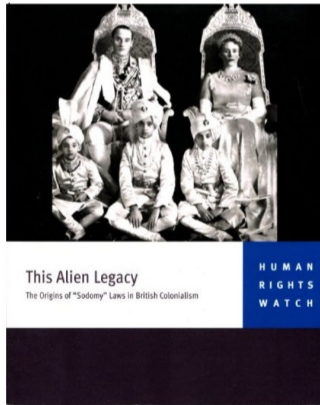
Africa after colonization



- Africa before colonization: 56 ethnic groups mentioned by Murray and Roscoe (1998) have records of pre-colonial same-sex patterns (Ananyev and Poyker, 2021)
- Africa after colonization: Around 80% of the World Value Surveys respondents display some degree of *sexual prejudice*.

MOTIVATION: DID BRITISH COLONIZATION PROMOTE SEXUAL PREJUDICE?

- *“Of the great colonial powers of Western Europe – Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain – only Britain left this legacy to its colonies. (Sanders, 2009, p. 1)”*



- **Ordinary Least Squares (OLS):**
 - Descriptive, but with high external validity.
 - Compares country averages of former British and non-British colonies **conditional on economic development.**
- **Geographical Regression Discontinuity Design (Geo-RDD):**
 - Causal, but with low external validity.
 - Restricted to locations near the boundaries separating former British and non-British colonies.
 - Compares respondents from former British colonies to those from former colonies of other European powers or countries that were never colonized.

RESULTS

- **Ordinary Least Squares:** Partial correlation between British colonial origin and contemporary sexual prejudice (**% of the outcome average**):
 - WGP global sample: +15%
 - WVS global sample: +35%
- **Geographical Regression Discontinuity Design:** Causal effect of British colonization on contemporary sexual prejudice (**% of the outcome average**):
 - South and East African sample: +56%
 - Western African sample: +0.02%, **not significant**.
 - South American sample: +31%
 - Southeast Asian sample: +65%

- **Unlikely** to explain our results:
 - different socioeconomic outcomes.
 - generalized increase in prejudice.
 - vertical transmission.
- **Likely** to explain our results:
 - persistence of colonial legislation.

Background

- **British Empire:**

- In the XIX century, while other European countries legalized private consensual same-sex acts (Hyam, 1991, p.65; Frank et al., 2010, p.878), the UK stiffened the penalties to all forms of same-sex acts (Hyam, 1991, p.67).
- **Factual information:** British colonizers systematically enforced penal codes criminalizing homosexual conduct (O'Mahoney and Han, 2018).
 - For instance, all but two British colonies in Africa adopted colonial penal codes prescribing harsh penalties for consensual same-sex acts.

- French Empire:
 - France legalized homosexual conduct in 1791 (Han and O'Mahoney, 2014).
 - **Non-factual information:** consensual same-sex acts were also accepted in its colonies (Frank et.al., 2010, p.13; Ireland, 2013, p.57).
 - In Africa, 9 out of 19 former French colonies criminalize consensual same-sex acts, but only 2 of them through legislation enacted in colonial times.

- Portuguese Empire:

- While the penal code of 1848 ignored same-sex acts (Cascais, 2016), “vice against nature” was criminalized again in Portugal by the vagrancy law of 1912 (da Costa Santos and Waites, 2019, p. 8).
- Still, such regulation was only extended to colonial territories in 1954 (da Costa Santos and Waites, 2019, p. 9), and usually not enforced.

Methodology and Results

OLS across countries

$$Prejudice_{c,t} = \alpha_t + \alpha_{s(c)} + \beta^{GB} British_c + \gamma Development_c + \epsilon_{c,t}$$

- c denotes country of residence, and t survey-year.
- $Prejudice_{c,t}$ is the share of WGP respondents stating their city or area is not a good place for gay or lesbian people.
- $British_c$ is an indicator taking value 1 when country c is a former British colony.
- $Development_c$ is the contemporary economic development of country c , as measured by the income per capita in the year 2000.
- α_t and $\theta_{s(c)}$ capture the year FEs and UN Subregion FEs, respectively.

RESULTS: OLS IN THE WGP GLOBAL SAMPLE

Table 5.1: OLS across countries in the global sample:
Former British colonies have higher sexual prejudice than the former colonies of other European countries after controlling for contemporary economic development

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
British	-0.018 [0.063]	0.139 [0.041]***	0.141 [0.041]***	0.092 [0.039]**	0.094 [0.043]**
Observations	872	872	872	872	872
Num. of clusters	87	87	87	87	87
R-squared	0.001	0.480	0.514	0.783	0.803
Outcome average	0.647	0.647	0.647	0.647	0.647
Income per capita of 2000	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
UN Subregion FEs	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
UN Subregion-Year FEs	No	No	No	No	Yes

RESULTS: OLS IN THE WGP GLOBAL SAMPLE (CONT.)

Table 5.1: OLS across countries in the global sample:
Former British colonies have higher sexual prejudice than the former colonies of other European countries after controlling for contemporary economic development

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
British	-0.018 [0.063]	0.139 [0.041]***	0.141 [0.041]***	0.092 [0.039]**	0.094 [0.043]**
Observations	872	872	872	872	872
Num. of clusters	87	87	87	87	87
R-squared	0.001	0.480	0.514	0.783	0.803
Outcome average	0.647	0.647	0.647	0.647	0.647
Income per capita of 2000	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
UN Subregion FEs	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
UN Subregion-Year FEs	No	No	No	No	Yes

Geo-RDD in the African samples

$$Prejudice_{i,c,v} = \alpha_{e(v)} + \beta^{GB} British_c + f(location_v) + \gamma_1 X_{v(i)} + \gamma_2 X_i + \epsilon_{i,c,v}$$

- i denotes respondent, c country of residence, and v village.
- $Prejudice_{c,t}$ is an indicator variable =1 if the AB respondent (strongly) dislikes having homosexual neighbors.
- $\alpha_{e(v)}$ captures ethnic location fixed effects.
- $f(location_v)$ is the RD-polynomial.
- $X_{v(i)}, X_i$ are vectors with village-level (historical and geographical) controls and individual-level exogenous controls.

▶ Data

▶ Outcome

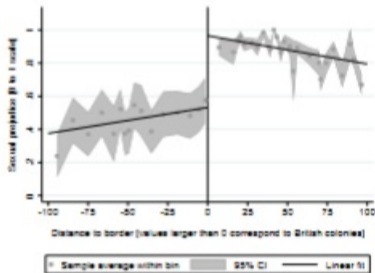
▶ Map: W Africa

▶ Map: E and S Africa

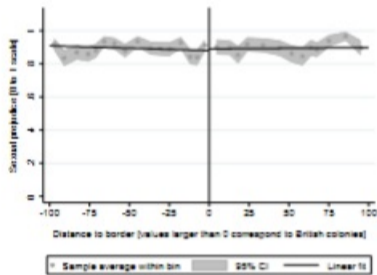
▶ Balance

RESULTS: GEO-RDD IN THE AFRICAN SAMPLES

Figure 1: Geo-RDD in the African samples



(a) Geo-RDD in the South and Eastern African sample

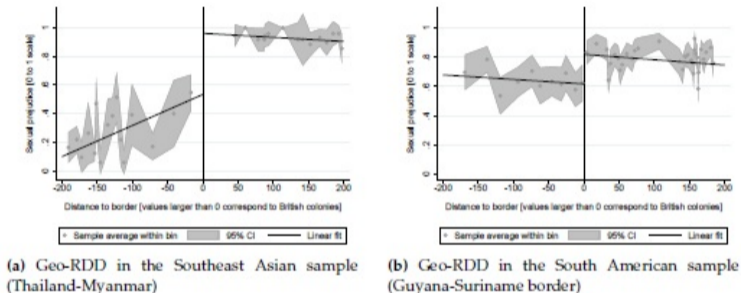


(b) Geo-RDD in Western African sample

- British colonization increases sexual prejudice by
 - 45 p.p.'s in the South and East African sample ($= .45/.81 \approx 56\%$ of the out. avg.).
 - 0 p.p.'s in the Western African sample ($= 0/.81 \approx 0\%$ of the out. avg.).

RESULTS: GEO-RDD IN THE OTHER REGIONAL SAMPLES

Figure 2: Geo-RDD in the other regional samples



- British colonization increases sexual prejudice by
 - **23 p.p.'s** in the South American sample ($= .23/.76 \approx 30\%$ of the outcome avg.).
 - **34 p.p.'s** in the Southeast Asian sample ($= .34/.55 \approx 62\%$ of the outcome avg.).

RESULTS: HETEROGENEITY

Table 5.2: Heterogeneity analysis in the WGP sample:

The positive partial correlation between British colonial origin and sexual prejudice is considerably stronger in colonies with limited Islam penetration before colonization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
British*Above p50 Muslim Pop.	-0.105 [0.061]*	0.020 [0.051]	0.023 [0.051]	0.068 [0.043]	0.069 [0.048]
British*Below p50 Muslim Pop.	-0.040 [0.135]	0.221 [0.052]***	0.222 [0.053]***	0.261 [0.031]***	0.247 [0.040]***
Observations	872	872	872	872	872
Observations (Above p50 Muslim Pop.)	532	532	532	532	532
Observations (Below p50 Muslim Pop.)	340	340	340	340	340
Num. of clusters	87	87	87	87	87
Num. of clusters (Above p50 Muslim Pop.)	56	56	56	56	56
Num. of clusters (Below p50 Muslim Pop.)	31	31	31	31	31
R-squared	0.223	0.571	0.607	0.806	0.825
Outcome average	0.647	0.647	0.647	0.647	0.647
Income per capita of 2000	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
UN Subregion FEs	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
UN Subregion-Year FEs	No	No	No	No	Yes

- The positive partial correlation between British colonization and sexual prejudice is stronger in regions where pre-colonial social norms likely did not explicitly condemn homosexual conduct.

RESULTS: MECHANISMS

Table 6.1: OLS across countries in the World Gallup Poll (WGP) sample:
The persistence of laws criminalizing same-sex acts explains most of the pronounced
association between British colonization and sexual prejudice

	(1) Sexual Prejudice	(2) Criminalize	(3) Sexual Prejudice	(4) Sexual Prejudice
British	0.141 [0.041]***	0.653 [0.068]***		0.011 [0.040]
Criminalize			0.206 [0.033]***	0.199 [0.036]***
Observations	872	872	872	872
Num. of clusters	87	87	87	87
R-squared	0.514	0.454	0.589	0.589
Outcome average	0.647	0.385	0.385	0.647
Income per capita of 2000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

- The higher likelihood of contemporary laws criminalizing homosexual conduct in former British colonies fully accounts for the positive partial correlation between British colonization and sexual prejudice.

Appendix

BACKGROUND: CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN BRITISH COLONIES)

Table 1. Former UK colonies systematically criminalized consensual homosexual conduct

Country	Legal base	Sanction	Date of adoption
Botswana	British Common Law		1885
	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 7 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1964
Gambia	Indian Penal Code	Up to 10 years of imprisonment or life imprisonment	
	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1934
Ghana	Wright's Jamaican Penal Code	Up to 3 years imprisonment	1892
Kenya	Indian Penal Code	Up to 10 years of imprisonment or life imprisonment	1897
	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1930
Lesotho	Criminal Law and Procedure Act		1938
Malawi	Indian Penal Code	Up to 10 years imprisonment or life imprisonment	1925
	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1930
Namibia	Roman-Dutch Common Law	Up to a capital sentence	
Nigeria	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1914
Sierra Leone	British Common Law	From 10 years to life imprisonment with servitude	1861
South Africa	Roman-Dutch Common Law	Up to a capital sentence	
Sudan	Indian Penal Code	No punishment for consensual same-sex acts	1899
Swaziland	British Common Law	From 10 years to life imprisonment with servitude	1906
	Criminal Law and Procedure Act		1939
Tanzania	Indian Penal Code	Up to 10 years of imprisonment or life imprisonment	1920
	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1930
Uganda	Indian Penal Code	Up to 10 years of imprisonment or life imprisonment	1902
	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1930
Zambia	Queensland Criminal Code	Up to 14 years of imprisonment with hard labour	1930
Zimbabwe	Roman-Dutch Common Law	Up to a capital sentence	1889

Notes: This table shows the legal bases used to regulate consensual same-sex acts in colonial Africa. Respectively, Columns (2), (3), and (4) list the legal base, the prescribed sanction for consensual same-sex acts, and the date of adoption of the regulation in each country listed in Column (1).

- **World Gallup Pool (WGP):**

- **Coverage:** Country-year-level data from 872 nationally representative surveys conducted in 87 former European colonies.
- **Outcome:** Share of respondents stating their city or area is not a good place for gay or lesbian people.

- **World Value Survey (WVS):**

- **Coverage:** Country-wave-level data from 152 nationally representative surveys in 50 former European colonies.
- **Outcome:** Share of WVS respondents who mention homosexuals when asked which groups they would not like as neighbors.

- **South and East African sample:**
 - **Coverage:** 6,015 respondents from similar villages in six former British colonies and one Portuguese colony.
 - **Outcome:** Indicator =1 if the Afrobarometer respondent (strongly) dislikes having homosexual neighbors.
- **Western African sample:**
 - **Coverage:** 8,658 respondents from villages near colonial borders in three former British colonies and eight former French colonies.

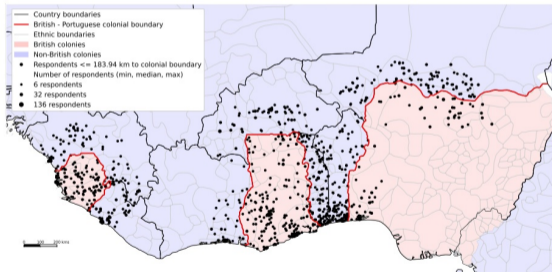
DATA: AFRICAN SAMPLES (CONT.)

- Sexual prejudice is the most salient phenomenon in Africa: the average distaste for having neighbors of the other groups is much lower.
- It also has a low correlation with other types of prejudice.

Prejud.	Hom.	Rel.	Ethn.	HIV	Imm.	Mean	Negative Attit.
Hom.	1					3.37	78.23 %
Rel.	0.030	1				1.29	11.60 %
Ethn.	-0.011	0.709	1			1.20	8.64 %
HIV	0.156	0.376	0.326	1		1.93	28.78 %
Imm.	0.046	0.445	0.512	0.373	1	1.60	18.84 %

DATA: AFRICAN SAMPLES (CONT.)

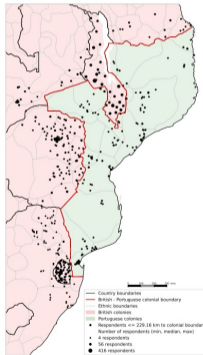
- **Western African sample:** Three former **British** colonies (Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone) and eight former **French** colonies (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo).



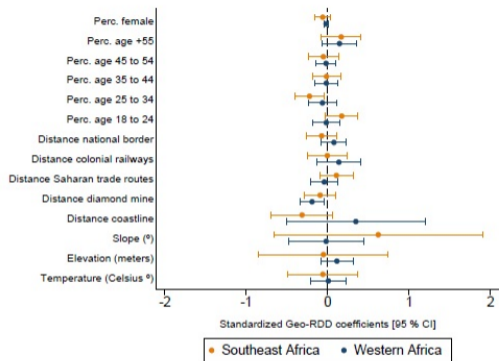
▶ Go back

DATA: AFRICAN SAMPLES (CONT.)

- **South and Eastern African sample:** Six former **British** colonies (South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania) and one former **Portuguese** colony (Mozambique).



RESULTS: GEO-RDD IN THE AFRICAN SAMPLES



- On average, the control and treatment groups exhibit similar observable characteristics, indicating balance on covariates.

DATA: REGIONAL SAMPLES (CONT.)

- **South American sample:**

- **Coverage:** 1,571 respondents near the British-Dutch colonial border dividing Guyana (British colony) and Suriname (Dutch colony).
- **Outcome:** Indicator =1 if respondent disapproves homosexuals running for public office.

- **Southeast Asian sample:**

- **Coverage:** 2,736 respondents near the colonial border between Myanmar (British colony) and Thailand (never colonized).
- **Outcome:** Indicator =1 if WVS respondent mentions homosexuals when asked which groups they would not like as neighbors.

▶ Go back

- **Legacies of colonial Empires:**
 - Contrasts with robust cross-country evidence linking the British colonial institutions with better economic outcomes (see [La Porta et al., 2008](#) for a survey).
 - Uncovers a novel and undesirable legacy of the British colonial Empire.
- **Determinants of attitudes towards sexual minorities:**
 - [Baranov et al., \(2022\)](#), [Brodeur and Haddad \(2021\)](#), and [Ananyev and Poyker \(2021\)](#) show how different **historical events** shape the distribution of attitudes towards sexual minorities over space.
 - [Corneo and Jeanne \(2009\)](#), [Aksoy et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Ofosu et al. \(2019\)](#) document how favorable legal changes reduce sexual prejudice over time.
 - We bridge the two sub-strands, demonstrating that a colonizer who systematically criminalized homosexuality led to a persistent rise in sexual prejudice.