The Viral Lowdown: HIVers in Hock to Homophobia

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South Africa President Thabo Mbeki's bizarre position on HIV not causing AIDS has two sources -- one legitimate, the other not. It is appropriate that he condemns the massive economic disparity between the rich white West and AIDS-stricken Africa, where mega-deaths are indeed the wages of poverty. Hatred of the West will be the result if the injustices of third-world debt and global terms of trade are not remedied quickly.

What dooms Mbeki's case, however, is the deep Africanist prejuduce against homosexuality. This has been most graphically expressed by Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe, whose response to his nation's AIDS crisis has been a violent attack on gays. In a similar manner, Winnie Mandela justified her kidnapping and assault of four youths in Soweto in 1998 (one was murdered) on the grounds of the alleged homosexuality of the priest in whose house they were staying. Before her conviction, her supporters paraded outside the court with banners stating "Homosex is not in black culture."

It is this homophobic mind-set that lurks behind Mbeki's embrace of the so-called HIV dissidents who claim, contrary to all the science, that HIV does not cause AIDS. Such a view -- with its sham biology -- endorses an Africanist myth of a pure and primal Africa contaminated by a sinful West. It is also a reversion to the racism of the apartheid state.

Given the disruption to stable sexual relationships by the migrant labor system brutally instituted by Britain, AIDS was destined to wreak havoc in South Africa. For this reason alone, it is owed recompense from the profiteering West. But by denying the reality of a virus, disease and humanity shared by Africans and Western gays, Mbeki has not made it easier for any payback to be forthcoming. As Malcolm X put it, he is part of the problem, not the solution.

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