

# Esteri

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## Wainaina's Africa - "I Am a Homosexual, Mum"

*Continent's first openly gay writer explains why he came out*



**"I don't feel like a gay icon.**

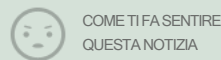
I feel part of a movement that has been fighting for its freedoms in Africa for a long time. When people can be thrown into prison on the basis of accusations about their sexual orientation, as they can under new anti-gay legislation in Nigeria, it is the basic freedoms that are undermined. And that

demanded an immediate response". Binyavanga Wainaina, one of the African cultural scene's outstanding authors, is in full spate despite the world's media clamouring for interviews since he posted his bombshell on the web.

### Wainaina has found the courage to tell a continent

what he never managed to say to his own mother. *I Am A Homosexual, Mum* is the title of his vibrant account, written on the eve of his forty-third birthday. It appeared on two African websites on Sunday in the form of a "hidden chapter" from his successful memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, published 2011 and translated in Italy last year by [66thand2nd](#). Oprah Winfrey, among others, praised its original take on Africa.

**The author explains:** "For the past year or two, I haven't wanted to go on living with this secret. I was trying to find a closer and more intimate style". Now, his coming out represents above all a "political act". Homosexuality is already illegal in thirty-seven out of fifty-five countries in Africa including Kenya, where it is punishable with fourteen years' imprisonment although arrests are rare. And the climate is worsening. Nigeria has passed new legislation making it illegal to support gay groups and the Ugandan parliament has approved a law, subsequently blocked by President Museveni, which punishes homosexuality with life imprisonment. Wainaina has backed up his campaign with a series of monologues on YouTube. In one, the Kenyan writer deploys the trademark humour he infused into *How to Write about Africa*, responding to those who claim that homosexuality does not belong to Africa and was imported from the West. "No", he spells out over the phone, "It's homophobia that has been fuelled by the West. It's spread by ministers of the Pentecostal churches, which are financed by conservative groups in the West like the American Tea Party movement. They invest money here in a battle they are losing at home". The Pentecostals are enjoying a boom in Nigeria. "One Sunday I went to one of their services. A congregation of 120,000 was packed into the church in Lagos and new ones are springing up every day".



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**Wainaina attacks the new law as an “act of political desperation”.** “President Goodluck is panicking about the next elections. He’s struggling and can’t guarantee basic services like electricity. The opposition is getting stronger and this law creates a distraction, an enemy from abroad”. Nigeria is Wainaina’s second home. He still comes and goes all the time, although he now takes more precautions. “Homophobia fuels fear. Around Lagos, any suspicion about your sexual orientation is enough to get you indicted. This Nazi-type law has turned the clock back a hundred years in a country that has produced great talents [such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka - Ed.], a wealth of literature and the cinema of Nollywood”.

**When Wainaina came out**, he was overwhelmed by public and private emails, tweets and WhatsApp messages. Many were messages of support. Some said: “I don’t agree with you but you have my support”. “My dear @BinyavangaW writes a piece that springs open the prison doors of the heart”, tweeted Wainaina’s friend Teju Cole, another key figure in the new generation of sub-Saharan writers.

**Today, homosexuality is talked about in Kenya.** “Kenya is ready to discuss it. And Nigeria will be, too”, he enthuses optimistically. “The country is moving forward, albeit more slowly”. Coming out was the last stage in the long journey of a man who admits he was unable “to utter the word gay until I was thirty-nine”. Wainaina did not have homosexual relations until eight years ago even though, as he writes, he has known he was gay since he was five.

English translation by Giles Watson

[www.watson.it](http://www.watson.it)

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Alessandra Muglia

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