



SEXUALITY AND CULTURAL CONSERVATIVISM IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper interrogates the concept of sexuality within the purview of an African context by evaluating the position revolving around a conception of an African sexuality as opposed to a multivariated conceptualisation of sexualities within Africa. The paper raises critical questions as regards the concepts of an African sexuality ranging from; what constitutes the grounds for a conceptualisation of African sexuality? To what extent do the viability or non-viability of such ground answer the deep challenges as it relates to alternative sexualities? How does the question of sexuality play a role in determining the ideological framework upon which intra-socio-cultural interrogations are properly built? To this end, the baseline argument of this paper, seeks to create a point of synergy between the concept of African sexuality and the dynamics of sexualities in Africa, by presenting a moderate call for the decolonization of African minds, most especially as it pertains to issues of sexuality, through an analysis of the diverse patterns within which sexuality has been conceived within the African setting. Furthermore, in reclaiming the sanctity of an African perspective, this paper argues for cultural conservatism as both a historic African phenomenon, and a more pragmatic approach towards attaining a mentally decolonized post-colonial Africa.*

KEYWORDS: Sexuality, Africanity, Post-Colonialism, Cultural Philosophy.



INTRODUCTION

In *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*, Sylvia Tamale posits that the acceptance of sexual diversity in African culture predates the emergence of such acceptance within Western societal settings. This view is much carefully redirected by Kelbessa, who asserts that African relative ignorance of gender-based restrictions along perceived binary lines, streams more out of necessity than need, and is hinged upon the Socio-Cultural makeup of tribal nationalities within Africa, further emphasised by the strict demand for conformity to a systemic cultural structure, which as a bedrock defined the individual reality for sexual lifestyle within the cultural setting.

The Nation-State in Africa has not ever been different from those in other parts of the world; Ethnic concentrated, culturally consistent, customarily sealed, and also religiously predetermined. These been the main features of any existing culture, which stems more from a desire to protect 'United ancestry,' than opening up gates of proliferation to the sanctimonious pattern of strict cultural observances. To what end Tamale observes;

As is the situation elsewhere around the world, African identities and ways of being are fundamentally influenced by the core concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. These three interrelated concepts are further complicated when they intersect with ideas relating to constructs such as race, ethnicity, nationality, age and religion. Despite this reality, most of us are not consciously aware of the subtle, multidimensional and infinite ways that coloniality shapes our understandings of these aspects of our live... The postcolonial conceptualization of "coloniality of Being" which refers to the ways that our "common sense" understandings of being and knowing reflect processes of internalized colonization (Tamale, 2020, p. 92-93).

Thus, this notion of sexuality cuts across its preudial denotation as involving just sexual acts and practices. In fact, Undie and Benaya, citing the World health organization's working document, describes sexuality as;

A central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (Undie and Benaya, 2006, p. 120-121).

However, the concern with sexuality remains very much a philosophical question too, one for which Philosophers are most eagerly driven towards proffering solution to what may be deemed; one of life's most essential feature. Soble (1998) points out that the necessity of such philosophical inquiry, helps in understanding not just conventional practices, or what society generally view as virtue, but also the 'tamed' cum restricted aspect of sexual practices which are generally considered 'Vices.' In questioning the reality of these practices and the customary norms which shapes them, a more critical analysis can be drawn into understanding these underlying ideals upon which society - and in this context 'African societies' - do live by.



The interest of this paper is on these diverse notions and permutations which surround the discourse of sexuality within an African Philosophical context. This discourse traces its root from the foundational paradigms of African culture, burrows through the episode of European colonization, and much into the Post-modern era, characterized by the dominance of Pan-African and Afrocentric ideas, and a fast spilling-off of Afropolitan dictums. The concept of sexuality within Africa, particularly 'African sexuality' - concepts of which must be differentiated for the purpose of this paper; the first of which refers to the overall framework of sexual cum gender practices within Africa, while the latter deals specifically with the underlying and preexisting mores and notions, that form an African view of sexuality - has remained a fundamental question for many scholars.

Realistically, foundational hostility to the concept stems out of a need to denounce such categorization as 'African sexuality,' with questions bordering on the validity of 'African,' as a qualifying adjective to the word 'Sexuality.' It is the purpose of this paper amongst others, to seek out; what has been the form and nature of Sexuality within the African context, as well as bring to full view those philosophical and cultural underpinnings which have shaped the notion of an 'African sexuality' (if we may use such term).

Most importantly, this paper would seek to explain how the culture of African societies, as well as the counterculture of Western imperialism have influenced the ideological development of Sexuality in Africa. Whilst the first part would explore Sylvia Tamale's notions on African sexuality, the second would seek to unravel the diverse patterns sexuality has taken within Africa. However in the third part of this paper, our gaze would be lightened on the extent to which cultural conservatism has either hampered or fostered the evolution of a more sexually diverse culture within the African context; in what respect, a huge line of difference would be drawn between what constitutes ethnocentrism and cultural conservatism alluding to the latter as being the subject within African societies. In the final section, we deal specifically with the question of alternative sexualities within Africa, and how the African society historically have responded to what Tamale reaffirms as 'Bodies in doubt' (Tamale, 2020, p. 94), as well as the non-conventional practices that may exist within the context of civilised societies, and which have ever been a part of the African traditional discourse.

TAMALE AND AFRICAN SEXUALITY

Sylvia Tamale's position on African sexuality is hinged on an argument against the presence of stereotyped gender biases in historic African culture. She places her emphasis on the presence of a third gender in certain African nationalities, and the prevalence of woman to woman marriages in more than thirty African societies (Tamale, 2020, p.102). Tamale further notes that "the Imbangala of Angola shocked English traveler Andrew Battell in the 1590s when he discovered that "they have men in women's apparel, whom they keepe among their wives"" (Tamale, 2020, p. 94). These effeminate males also known in Uganda as mudoko dako and who were allowed to marry other men marked "the limit of Being, that is, the point at which Being distorts meaning" (Tamale, 2020, p. 94). Whilst placing gender division as been Eurocentric and a product of colonialism, engendered through the influence of education and religion, Tamale asserts that a decolonial outlook of gender in Africa would bring to full view the deep gender diversities which have been a much celebrated part of traditional African culture. In her categorisation, Tamale bashes the Eurocentric distinction of gender and sexuality as been either man/woman, male/female, homosexual/heterosexual. Her assertion on this point, draws in similitude to Oyewumi, who in renouncing the usage of



Western gender denotation, especially in comparison with the Yoruba language, pointed out the difference between the word 'woman,' in the English parlance and 'Obinrin' in the Yoruba dialect.¹

In a similar move, "Julie Greenberg provides eight criteria that are typically used to determine sex, including: chromosomes (e.g., XY, XX); gonads (testes or ovaries); internal morphology (e.g., prostate or uterus); external morphology (penis or vagina); hormones (androgens or oestrogens); phenotype (e.g., facial hair, breasts); assigned sex at birth; and sexual identity" (Tamale, 2020, p. 121). To which Tamale adds, that determination must be made upon which of these categories exactly gender should be assigned. Thus the division of gender along binary lines is not only a Western construct, but also an idea which is fundamentally alien to indigenous African culture. This infers that a decolonized Africa must seek back and reclaim the beauty of a non-stereotyped sexuality which formed the 'core' of traditional African belief system. While together with Tamale, we must question the impact Science has played in aiding the division of gender along binary lines, it must be noted that science itself lacks a hegemonic supremacy over determining what exactly should constitute human gender. As Arnfred notes concerning the Scientific sanction for racism during the early era of European imperialism; "Looking into the issue took me back to the heyday of imperialism and evolutionary thinking in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the times when hierarchies of 'race' were facts of science. This makes one speculate regarding what passes as 'science' today" (Arnfred, 2004, p. 59-60). This notion is also echoed by Butler, who asserts;

Gender is a tacit project to renew a cultural history in ones own corporeal terms... If gender is a way of existing one's body, and one's body is a situation, a field of cultural possibilities both received and reinterpreted, then both gender and sexuality seem to be thoroughly cultural affairs. *Gender seems less a function of anatomy than one of its possible uses* (Butler, 1987, p.131, 134). (emphasis are mine).

Upon a much similar notion, Tamale questions; "why does non-conformity of the body raise anxiety to the extent of demands to "fix" and re-mould it to fit into the binaried gender pigeon-holes?" (Tamale, 2020, p.123) In taking her concerns further, she opines

The processes of "gendering" "racializing" "classing" "heteropatriarchy" "capitalism" and "colonialism" are interrelated; each element depends on the other in a constitutive system that works for a common purpose. The interactive system operates through power-full classifications to create fundamental relations of inequality. Physical scientists use taxonomies or classifications to map and define relationships among phenomena. This is very useful in fields such as biochemistry, astronomy and geology to facilitate theory construction and a more comprehensive understanding of natural phenomena. When the same formulation is transplanted to the social universe, the objective is very different, usually political. The "naturalized" sub-divisions of human populations are meant to facilitate the manipulation and subjugation of certain groupings. For example, human classifications such as race, gender and sexuality are based, not on biology but on arbitrary parameters linked to particular historical milieu (such as the rise of capitalism or modernity) (Tamale, 2020, p. 123-124).

¹ Oyewumi, asserts that "The word obinrin does not derive etymologically from okunrin, as 'wo-man' does from 'man.' Rin, the common suffix of okunrin and obinrin, suggests a common humanity; the prefixes obin and okun specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original type against which other variety had to be measured." Cited in Apusigah, A. A. 2006. *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 30-31.



Furthermore, Tamale presents a front for celebrating the dignity embodied in African historic gender neutrality, and her acceptance of those deemed 'bodies in doubt,' by Westernized constructs, which amplifies Butler's notion that "The history of gender may well reveal the gradual release of gender from its binary restrictions" (Butler, 1987, p. 141-142). However the presence of Western gender classification as Tamale affirms has become deeply etched into the African societal construct, so much that Africans deny the existence of non-binary gender divisions inherent in her culture. Citing the South African athlete Castor Semenya who was denied a place in competing for the Women's event of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), because of her bodily features which didn't fit into the standard binary setting of a female body - in Westernized terms - owing to her possession of certain biological elements deemed inconsistent to a categorisation as female, Tamale notes that the responses of South African leaders in defence of Semenya brought to full view the high level disconnect between Post colonial Africans and their pre-colonial cultural rooting. She opines;

It is significant that even those who spoke in support of (Semenya) were only reinforcing essentialized notions of sex, gender and sexuality For example, Leonard Chuene—the president of the ASA who fiercely defended Semenya to the Los Angeles Times, argued... "You can't say somebody's child is not a girl. You denounce my child as a boy when she's a girl? If you did that to my child, I'd shoot you..." Julius Malema, radical leader of the ANC Youth League, asked angrily, "What is hermaphrodite in Pedi? There is no such thing, hermaphrodite, in Pedi. So don't impose your hermaphrodite concept on us. In their defence of Semenya, these... South African political elites invoked the nation and its culture. Through anti-Western rhetoric they wished to create a sense of ontological security. The contours of the nationalist imaginaries were drawn by sports patriotism. But in the process, each of them reinforced not only the coloniality of the fixed gender binary, but also paternalistic and dominant-oriented attitudes... Several elders subsequently educated Malema by telling him the sePedi term for intersex. However, Malema's words of support cannot be read at face value; for a coherent understanding we must read in, under and behind the text. South African scholar Zine Magubane did exactly this when she saw Malema's comment as "an invitation to question what role race and imperial history have played in rendering intersex visible or invisible (Tamale, 2020, p. 115-116).

This pattern of 'denial' in defence of an African notion of sexuality stems from the totally colonized structure to which Africans have been subjected, which have fundamentally led to a disconnect with the true African spirit of inclusion and non-gender discrimination, cum non-biased approach to the question of Sexuality within Africa. This brings to bear the necessity of African reconnection to her roots, which in Tamale's term is hinged on total decolonization; portending an astute discarding of Western Eurocentric biases based on Law, Religion, and colonized education without any African input, which have completely confounded 'Africanity.' To Tamale, society governed by coloniality works to fit us all into the two boxes labelled 'Male' and 'Female'(Tamale, 2020, p. 137) which is fundamentally alien to traditional African conceptualization of 'Being,' a most pertinent fact that raises the question as to; 'what particular framework shapes African notion of sexuality?' And to what end has this notion influenced an African view of being? An analysis of this sort, Workineh Kelbessa extensively examines.



KELBESSA AND THE PATTERNS OF SEXUALITY IN AFRICA

In his paper on 'Africa and the Philosophy of Sexuality,' Workineh Kelbessa dwells on the question of Love and sex in African societies, placing an emphasis on the patterns of Sexuality in Africa, much more than the preconditions for sexual orientations. Seeming to agree with the prevalent view of categorizing African sexuality within the eye lenses of an African worldview, Kelbessa examines the derogatory denotation of Africans by Western culture as being nymphomaniac, bestial, uncivilized and animalistic in sexual matters, with the possession of excessive libidos and large genitalia. The question of race and White supremacy being an overwhelming part of his entire piece, and persistent in several Western literature of precolonial times, described Africa in derogatory ways such as the dark continent, virgin lands etcetera, which as Arnfred assert were in similitude with the Western conceptualization of the female as being submissive, waiting for initiation into marital life by her husband (Arnfred, 2004, p. 62). However, "According to 'the great chain of being' established by evolutionary theory, white man was at the top and black man at the bottom, with various other races in between. Since women in general were perceived as lower, less civilized and more animal-like than men, black women were even further down than were black men. Evolutionary theory had given white man a prime position (of course) but also a savage inheritance by linking civilized whites to apes, and to uncivilized blacks in the hierarchy of stages in evolutionary development" (Arnfred, 2004, p. 63). Thus this Paramount notion remained that Africans been at the bottom of the evolutionary chain, possessed raw and untamed animalistic traits which the white men (had already tamed). This notion viewed Africans as being a symbolic prototype of sexual aggressiveness and irrationality, which as Kelbessa outlined led to the widespread notion of a black 'super penis'² which was intended to affirm the assertion that African men possessed organs of unimaginable sizes, totally larger than their Western counterparts. "J. Philippe Rushton, a British-born Canadian (1943–2012) psychology professor at the University of Western Ontario, is an example of such a writer who claimed that larger genitals and smaller brains belong to blacks rather than to whites or Asians. He asserted that penis size and brain power are inversely related. "It's a trade-off. More brain or more penis. You can't have both"" (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 373). The absurdity of these Western permutations have led to a much obvious necessity for detailed inquiry into what exact notions and ideals constituted sexuality for Africans.

Kelbessa rather notes that within Africa, the emphasis on the genitalia were Life-affirming than the Indian culture espoused by Buddhism and Hinduism which exalted celibacy above the satisfaction of sexual pleasures, a point to which Cunnaih affirms in his categorisation of women in Hinduism as possessing a dual significance, one of reverence and the other of disgust and shame as the cause of humanity's problem (Cunnaih, 2010, p. 11). Kelbessa further outlines that though the discourse on sex itself seemed like a taboo subject, yet within African customs, the culture placed emphasis on the satisfaction of sexual desires which was usually passed through love-sex songs, folklores, dances etcetera, and further amplified through the various initiation rites within the African culture.

² This notion of a black 'super penis,' was scientifically verified and accepted by several Western scholars, after a research confirmed its validity. The research was conducted on 177 Black, and 4,694 White Students. See also; Kelbessa, W. 2017. "Africa and the Philosophy of Sexuality," in *Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, 372-373.



In constructing a proper view of African sexuality, reality must be kept off the lines of what may seem an 'absurdity;' which fundamentally is a process of visible lapse in understanding about the ideals surrounding each customary idea. What is misunderstood remain unappreciated. To what end, emphasis must be laid on the importance of getting back to the roots and trying to deconstruct the falsified Western narratives by reconstructing those realities which formed the baseline of each individual cultural standard within the African system. Although it may seem a difficult task; making generalities about African sexualities on the basis of few inquiry; the job of a Philosopher, lies more in questioning and seeking to unravel those fundamental permutations, symbols or taboos, which formed the baseline discourse, about what could be generally accepted as being in conformity to the dictates of cultural practices. To this end Kelbessa notes;

Some cultural groups in Africa had the concept of sexual rights long before the emergence of contemporary feminism. Both men and women have the right to sexual pleasure. Body or genitalia sculpting, labia stretching, local cloth such as local kanga cloth that Tanzanian women wrap loosely around their waists, and the indigenous sexual initiation institution of Ssenga among the Baganda of Uganda (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 375).

Amongst the Oromo's of Ethiopia, Kelbessa argues that these gender roles were equally divided, giving no one particular supremacy over the other. While he fails to mention specific cases for the existence of non male/female gender stereotypes, Kelbessa dwells on an affirmation that African Cultural patterns before the Advent of Western religious and colonial paradigms were entirely harmonious and protected the rights and duties of each gender. Under this system, the place of an African woman was exalted to indicate her four distinct roles as;

“1. the divine equal of man in essence, 2. a Daughter, 3. a Mother, and 4. a Wife.” However, the dual-sex system of sociopolitical power was challenged by European/Arab encroachment. The “foreign” European/Arabian male-centered systems of authority and governance destroyed and completely eliminated the female lines of authority and sociopolitical power by de-womanising African womanhood. Consequently, the woman lost three of the four realities of African womanhood and is left with the prominence of her reality as a wife (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 382).

However in examining the distinct features of sexuality within the African context, the prevalent notion of Chastity existed in different concepts through various dynamic patterns within several African cultures upheld by traditional mores and norms which held distinctive meaning to each individual. For instance while pre-marital sex was seen as a taboo in certain African Cultural systems, like the Somali's who practiced "infibulations in order to provide “visual proof that an unmarried female is virgin” and to increase her value in the marriage transaction" (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 381). Virginity was celebrated as a virtue and an asset of great worth for the females, while great negativities and even stigma were usually associated with those who loosed theirs before marriage. Contrastingly, 'ukusoma' (nonpenetrative thigh sex) was permissible in Kwa-Zulu Natal (South Africa), because it did not lead to pregnancy, although these permissive practices were followed by a process of long sexual education and the emplacement of several taboos and prohibition, in ensuring strict moral conduct as evidenced amongst the Kikuyu of Kenya (Undie and Benanya, 2006, p. 134-135). Kelbessa further notes;



In contrast to the above mentioned groups, the Hamar people in south Ethiopia do not give any value to virginity. A girl in Hamar is not expected to be virgin. If she were found to be a virgin, she would be considered as an ugly unwanted girl. Thus, in Hamar society, local custom expects girls to have had sex to become desirable marriage partners. During the traditional ceremony called *evangadi*, unmarried boys and girls come together to dance and spend the night together. If they like each other, they will continue to see each other in the future and get married. If not, they look for another person. Having sex with multiple partners is praised as a source of experience. *Evangadi* or the dancing night is not a seasonal ceremony, but rather it is held throughout the year continuously. It takes place sometimes daily or twice a week. Tourists can also participate in the ceremony and can spend a night with girls. But after marriage, ladies are not allowed to participate in *evangadi* ceremony and have love affairs with other men. On the other hand, men can participate in this ceremony throughout their life (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 381).

Whilst understanding the underlying factors within each cultural practice, the idea of conformity has ever remained embedded in 'a respect' for these cultural patterns. These patterns were not in any way binary nor rigid. The fluidity and flexibility within African culture held up its essence as fundamentally a product of Local worldview. Although a majority of indigenous African cultures were patrilineal, there existed significant matrilineal structures in several African socio-cultural polities, a pattern of which, gave women relative sexual freedom. It is on this premise, Kelbessa again notes;

Matrilineal societies recognize the sexual rights of both men and women. In parts of Zimbabwe, women are still free to have sexual affairs with lovers in the absence of their husbands at home. Arnfred reports, “[i]n Zimbabwe, in the mid-1990s, I was told about a rule demanding that a man, who has been away for a while and who unexpectedly returns to his homestead, must whistle when approaching his house in order to alert his coming—making sure he will not catch her in an embarrassing situation... In colonial Zululand, married women had secret lovers called *isidikiselo*, described as the top of the pot that supplemented women’s husbands, their *ibbodwe*, the main pot. The top of the pot symbolizes pleasure and good things. Moreover, in Lele society in Congo, women used to have power over their husbands (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 383).

While in the present, a majority of these practices have either become obsolete or changed with the changing times, the emphasis on African sexual patterns are best understood as Kelbessa notes; when studied within the framework of an African worldview, in what way inquirers can come to appreciate the beauty embodied in pre-westernised African culture, especially as regards sexuality. However the present categorisation of Africa seem not entirely distinct from its past, although the question as to how Africa have adjusted to the changing demand of its present remain ever potent, the idea of an 'Afrocentric Africa,' raises the question on whether ethnocentrism have taken deep roots in African culture; or the idea of protectionism found within her cultural patterns should rather be linked to notions of cultural conservatism? A perspective to which this paper actively examines in the succeeding section.



ETHNOCENTRISM AND CULTURAL CONSERVATISM

The accusation of ethnocentrism labelled against Africans especially as regards the desire to re-coin a definition for basic African ideas, Philosophies and Sexuality – as a theme this paper is basically concerned with – stems more from a lack of understanding of the perceived notions which govern African love for her culture. If ethnocentrism depicts an "inability to understand other countries except through the lens of one's own country's culture, customs, values, and institutions" (Wiarda and Norton, 2006, p. 525), then the question of guilt must be reversed and replaced by a more practical notion which pragmatically reflect the perspective of African ideas which is one of cultural conservatism.

By the term cultural conservatism, we refer to an outlook of cultural change from the background not of a radical import that characterise liberal changes but from a reason-based approach, which looks 'within', to effect its gradual reformations coupled with a form of regard for the foothold of the existing cultural pattern. Thus a cultural conservative is one who will not change his culture for anything, but is open to the modification of such culture on reasonable grounds. This modification could in the long run lead to the entire overhauling of his cultural ideas, biases, notions and permutations; but the cornerstone and centrepiece of this overhauling must be himself. On this note, the cultural conservative is almost like an egoist, who, unless sufficiently convinced on the likelihood of achieving better through an exposure to another culture, remains adamant and even hostile to any of such cultural infiltrations. This must be distinguished from the culturally liberal who on the other hand is totally open to forms of deculturation and acculturation, even though he professes love for his culture.

The argument that several segments of African social climes are culturally conservative can be seen in Africa's own history, especially during the colonial era, where in British west African territories, the Britons had to adopt a system of indirect rule, accepting the prevalent African culture, and from within offering the ideas of their culture, from a perspective of what we should all come to; which even though it saw hostilities from some quarters, in the long-run came to be accepted as necessary for indigenous interaction amongst the different existing African cultures (Daannaa, 1994; Letsa & Wilfahrt, 2020). On the contrary, when the French introduced the policy of Assimilation into French west African territories, which was a policy meant to turn African men to Frenchmen, and contained within it a disdain for African cultures, the hostilities with which these policies were met led to its truncation, and a subsequent introduction of the policy of Association, which contained within its tenet, a basic respect for African cultural patterns and practices (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012; Kamalu, 2019).

It must be noted, that the basic question of an 'Ethnocentric Africa' arises more in connection with these collective resistance to Western colonization, most especially the colonization of thought and language. Smith asserts;

European imperialism and colonialism sparked immediate response from the Africans. This response varied between the acceptance of, collaboration with, and opposition to the new foreign rulers of the continent. The initial opposition came mainly from the traditional leaders, and *took place in the ethnic or tribal context*. Older interpretations of these reactions characterised them as the misplaced actions of disillusioned rulers, acting under the influence of superstition and witchcraft (Smith, 1993). (emphasis are mine)



These actions continued at their pace under different garbs and pretexts, as Tamale notes "Eurocentred colonialism was replaced with Eurocentred coloniality" (Tamale, 2020, p. 93), A point to which Senghor further emphasizes in the following lines of his poem;

Lord forgive white Europe.

It is true Lord, that for four enlightened centuries, she has scattered the baying and slaver of her mastiffs over my lands...

The powder has crumbled in a flash the pride of tatas and hills...

They have fired the intangible woods like hunting grounds, dragged out Ancestors and spirits by their peaceable beards,

And turned their mystery into Sunday distraction for somnambulant bourgeois (Senghor, 1986).

Fundamentally, the resistance to Eurocentric imperialism was a battle to decolonize the land and then the mind; this approach which certain derogatorily refer as 'African Ethnocentrism,' portended a more rational reaction to Eurocentric imperialism. Although "almost every insular community is embedded with ethno-cultural myths which are often made up clichés used to keep a state of status quo throughout patriarchy" (Cunniah, 2010, p. 11), the peculiarity of African culture was reinforced by its maintenance of a Cultural lag, which portends an interval between the introduction of an innovation and the time people begin to accept it. This cultural lag was an immediate result of the perceived social change. Nominally "When social change occurs, social problem always arises no matter how good or bad the changes are" (Aguene, 2005, p. 16-17). African insulation to these changes was - and has continually being - based on a Philosophy of cultural conservatism, which realistically have been on display from the Pan-African ideology to Afrocentrism, and even the Post modern Afropolitanism. The notion of cultural conservatism within the African spectrum is predicated on the "self-conscious affirmation of (a) disposition – to preserve what one has attained, received, or inherited, and to defend against the losses that inevitably befall human beings in our time-bound existence – with a self-conscious expression of resistance to the alternative, *which welcomes change*, by premeditated design, to the environment in which one finds oneself" (Fuller, 2011, p. 301). This basic idea has ever remained on display amidst each echelon of African cultural periodization, and most practically in the development of African sexuality. On this point Helle-Valle (2004, p. 203-204) outlines;

Of course, every social reality contains contradictory elements but contemporary African sociality is probably special in this respect. Old and indigenous practice and ideology exist alongside modern ones, and it is up to each and every member of society to 'reconcile' these conflicting socio-cultural elements—to integrate them into their life-projects in ways that are existentially and practically acceptable. On a personal, individual level this involves both frustrations and ambivalence—ambivalence because a person's individual qualities forces her/him to strive for a wholeness that social reality does not easily provide, and frustrations because being able to succeed in this wholeness-project requires not only skill but also power—something he/she will often lack. Hence, that outcomes are often dramatic is not difficult to see.



The argument that this reflection of cultural conservatism within the armbits of a culturally flexible pattern, easily adaptable to change, realistically reflected in the dimensions of sexuality within Africa, is contained in Helle-Valle's further position, on what grounds;

African sexuality is not as plain and straightforward an affair as some has claimed... Different social contexts involve different rules and taboos associated with sex, i.e. different sexual mores and practices. It is therefore not appropriate to talk of one (African) sexuality, rather there are several sexualities linked to different contexts and hence different dividualities. But in the daily life and the pragmatic ways of much African sociality this sexual multiplicity is not seen, and often not reflected on by the participants themselves... By framing different practices in different settings people manage to live lives that appear as rather ordinary and uncomplicated but which owe their smoothness to the extent the participants manage to frame sociality in practical ways (Helle-Valle, 2004, p. 201).

This brings to mind a most fundamental question; in what ways exactly were these multiple sexualities, or different dividualities reflected within the African context? What exactly were these dynamic sexual dimensions? And to what extent did they shape an African denotation of 'Being'?

ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES

The question of alternative sexualities within the African context have remained extremely crucial to a more detailed explication surrounding the arguments on the actual nature of African sexuality. This perspective from which African sexuality is viewed though seeming independently nurtured cannot for long remain insulated from the Western ideas of non-heterosexual sexual practices which have dominated the public space for over a decade. Realistically Africa has become a most fertile battleground for the range of intellectual conundrum and apoplectic dexterity revolving around this subject. As have been maintained throughout this paper, the question of African sexuality must be addressed within the context of an African worldview, within which; Eurocentric categorisation of gender along stereotyped binary lines hold no weight. On such grounds, Tamale argues that;

“Bodies in doubt” have always existed in every part of the world; they are part of a diverse humanity. However, their medicalization and construction as a disorder started in Europe in the nineteenth century. Africa's history of slavery and colonialism is entangled in the exposure of a Black woman's body to various technologies of violence. Antje Schuhmann correctly points out that “the power of definition and classification, linked to a penetrating and curious gaze regime, [is] deeply involved in hegemonic politics of otherness.” Intersexuality has a long and painful history that is closely tied to colonial homophobic discourses and practices (Tamale, 2020, p. 118).

While one may question the overtly specific position of Tamale in the designation of presumed 'sexuality disorder' as a European Phenomenon, it appears critical that Tamale synches herself to extant historico-medical literature which points to European social construction as being the point for the conceptualisation of a rejection of bodies in doubt, while at the same time ignoring the extant historico-cultural cum historico-religious documents, which gives specific grounds for similar rejection. However, amidst the presumed culture of acceptance –which as Tamale attempts to build, although extant historical documents in Africa queries this idea– formed the baseline for pre-colonial African cultural



conservatism, the presence of an inclusion of non-binary gender stereotypes, and non-stereotyped sexualities, remained quite present amongst several indigenous African societies. Although this seeming acceptance was hinged on the premise that what seemed inexplicable remains rather undisclosed, however, the intrusion of Western ideas as Tamale argues, introduced cracks and rifts into these unquestioned practices. An argument of such sort designates colonial laws as being the foundation for discrimination against unorthodox sexual practices within Africa, while also pointing the role of religion as its extant guardrail. Similarly, as Klinken (2007, p. 14) argues, the position put forward by African queer political agenda cuts across a reaction to what it has termed "'oppressive-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks' thus underlying the interconnections between capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity."

But to what end have Africa been historically permissive of alternative sexual patterns? The challenge of beginning interrogations on sexuality in Africa from the framework of Africa's colonial past, to a large extent either ignores or does little to incorporate the vast pre colonial historical trends which have been influenced both by African traditional religious practices, as well as elements from Judeo-Christian and Arab/Islamic worldview, prior to colonialism. Similarly, the role of the political in defining sexuality in Africa is more of a recent phenomenon, as historical African past, dwelt on the level of a collective social acceptance of certain designated practices, and an ignoble view of certain others. The very presence of such ignoble view did not in any way designate the absence of such practices, but rather the absence of a collective system of political-based reaction to such practices. The collective social abhorrence of such practices on the basis of 'taboos' – where taboos are seen more as a social and religious evil and its rejection was mostly void of the weights of any form of political punishment – to a large extent serves as a framework for understanding African approach both to alternative sexualities and bodies in doubt. A basic point of departure from this position is the fact that the presence of disparate pre-colonial African polities, meant the presence of disparate approaches by each polity within the framework of its own socio-cultural 'taboos'. On what note, it becomes difficult to emphasise that practices found in five or even ten African polities could be used as a yardstick for measuring the reaction to the same practices in other African polities. A basic viewpoint to this can be taken-off from Kelbessa's position. For example, while Kelbessa's position can be said to be in synchrony with Tamale in affirming the presence of woman to woman marriages within certain African culture climes, a thin line is immediately drawn in describing what exactly constituted such marital patterns. Here Kelbessa outlines within the Igbo cultural society in Eastern Nigeria that;

Nzegwu is of the opinion that Western definition of women as the negative image of men is incompatible with the Igbo perception of women. The former characterized women as weak, emotional, and subordinate, and men as strong, taciturn, and masters. She states that in Igboland females can be both wives and husbands at the same time. *Some women can marry their wife with no sexual relationship.* "Females-as-daughters always stand in a husband relationship to the females who are wives in their family lineage." So the term husband does not necessarily mean male (Kelbassa, 2017, p. 384). (Emphasis are mine)

An extension of this position remains rampant in cultural climes around the South-South region of Nigeria, where a woman married into a family views all the members of the family into which she is married as her 'husband', whether or not the members are male or female, old or young. In the same vein terms like 'iyawo'; as used, for example in the Urhobo/Isoko



socio-cultural dialect, when translated (not transliterated) within the same socio-cultural enclave, meant 'our wife'. On such note, every member of the family into which a woman is married, designates her within such cultural clime as being their wife; where the term 'wife' do not in any way include any form of sexual relationship. In a much similar vein, Arnfred (2004, P.73), describing the practice of same-sex relations in Lesotho posits;

Kathryn Kendall (1999) reports from work in Lesotho that women she interviewed who engaged in what seen with Western eyes would be same-sex practices did not see this behaviour as sexual at all. To them sexuality had to do with penetration. From their point of view "you cannot have sex unless somebody has a koai (penis)." Thus: No koai, no sex. "No koai, no sex means that women's ways of expressing love, lust, passion, or joy in each other are neither immoral nor suspect."

This categorisation is immediately backed up by a 'culture of silence,' of which "one type of silence has to do with the fact that some important ways of structuring sexuality takes place through proceedings that are often performative rather than discursive" (Arnfred, 2004, p. 74). Furthermore, as a balance to this culture of silence, is the 'rule of discretion,' which as Arnfred (2004) explains involves passing over seeming controversially negative actions of others most especially near kins, in order to protect them from the shame, embarrassment, or punishment which could be melted out on such acts. This does not imply the social acceptance of such act, but rather a process of avoiding shared or collective disgrace, on the grounds that the communalistic nature upon which most African societies were built sometimes disgraced an entire family for a 'taboo' committed by one of its members.

On this note, as Helle-Velle (2004, p. 198) quoting Butler, affirms "My impression is that discretion usually wins over ideas about blood and sex", where the win accredited to discretion is a collective win founded on an individual's desire to protect the name of a family from communal disgrace by passing over conducts which in being a part of societal taboos could occasion such disgrace. However, Undie and Benaya, invokes Blankson Ikpe in making a decisive argument on this point;

Bonding between same sex as close friends should not be confused with homosexuality or lesbianism. Douglas seemed to have made that mistake when she assessed the oral evidence collected by Lorde from an Efik-Ibibio woman as a confession to lesbianism. According to the woman: 'I had a woman friend to whom I revealed my secrets. She was very fond of keeping secrets to herself. We acted as husband and wife. We always moved hand in glove and my husband and hers knew about our relationship. The villagers nicknamed us twin sisters (Lorde 1984: 49-50, quoted in Douglas 1999: 99). To a European a confession of going hand in glove and acting as husband and wife is a clear indication of lesbianism. *But this sort of behaviour is normal in these parts* between 'bosom friends.' Although there is an expression of love, it does not necessarily connote sex. Indeed if they were engaged in lesbianism, the villagers would have found another name for them instead of 'twin sisters' (Undie and Benaya, 2006, p. 143-144).

Upon these premises, the baseline approach earlier designated as 'acceptance' must find its proper interpretation. The argument remains that whereas indigenous African cultures most notably incorporated within herself a majority of diverse cultural systems interlaced with disparate conducts, interpretations and 'taboos', prior to Western imperialism, such



difference in the socio-cultural arrangement of pre-colonial indigenous African polities most noticeably served as an appendage to a culture of diversity, as being dependent, firstly on the extant socio-cultural climate being interrogated, and secondly on the agency of cultural conservatism, as being the prevalent ideological position locked within indigenous African societies. On such premise, the interlacing of the 'doctrine of silence' and the 'rule of discretion' becomes a more explicable ground from whence pockets of modern juxtapositions of a principle of pre-colonial 'acceptance' can more properly be redirected. This further infers that a careful re-interrogation of the rudiments which permeated pre-colonial African societies will bring to bear a conglomeration of societies with disparate cultural patterns and its attendant taboos, but whose inherent presupposition on sexuality was governed by an informal acceptance of a 'doctrine of silence' and 'rule of discretion', in handling issues of alternative sexualities and sexual patterns, rather than an acceptance of the alternative sexualities cum sexual patterns in themselves.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to bring to limelight the diverse cultural patterns inherent in African sexuality by drawing a decisive line between pre-colonial Africa and Eurocentric imperialism. The notion of an independent Africa has been portrayed as being increasingly relevant to the discourse surrounding the idea of an African sexuality. While emphasizing the prevalence of a culturally conservative Africa, this paper has presented the reality of such idea as existing within the framework of a more inclusive decolonized identity. On such note, the main Crux of argument within this paper has remained 'the impossibility of coming to terms with an African sexuality; without first understanding the worldview from whence such conceptualisation is drawn, as well as the disparities; both historical and socio-cultural which has shaped the ideological dimensions of the same phenomenon.' Thus, African sexuality as argued within this paper must be viewed from within the lenses of an African worldview, wherein, its interrogation is seen as a confluence and conglomeration of the diverse socio-cultural positions upon which it – both pre-colonially and post-colonially – has been defined.

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