

"A Name my Mother did not Call Me": Queer Contestations in African Sexuality

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Whatever the contemporary reality of African queer sexuality, the history of the phenomenon has often been highly politicized. The persistent denial of an African homosexuality, or alternatively its frequent placement, or displacement, as a 'white man's thing,' has led to a search for evidence of African pre-colonial queer agency. The result is that, today, western queer histories focusing on Africa resonate with the theme of abundant toleration of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa. The absence or ambivalence of ethnographic data related to this theme has often fuelled the suspicion that African sexuality, or the associated culture, is being revisioned or re-historicised in these narratives to support 'factions' in the ideological contest playing out in western sexuality controversies. However, the evidence deserves to be examined. The distinct challenge, to African historians, anthropologists, linguists and culture workers is to re-examine the parameters of history, ethnology, language and culture that have been deployed to support the thesis of presence and toleration of queer sexuality in pre-colonial African culture. This paper proposes first that the recent search for a western/African (north-south) sexuality unity represents a significant, and interesting, paradigm shift in north-south hegemonic discourse, and second that the basis for the thesis of pre-contact tolerance of homosexuality in Africa is often not without question marks. The presence of homosexuality in Africa today is beyond denial, what seems to be in issue is its antecedents, the evidence of history, of culture, and of language..