

A name my mother did not call me: Queer contestations in African Sexualities

- Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju¹

ABSTRACT

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. The paper attempts to disambiguate the language of the relevant queer discourse.

Introduction:

Colonial continuities and the politics of representation

In *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa* (Arnfred 2004), the term “African Sexuality” is mostly encased in single (scare) quotes by contributors, as if to cast an instant doubt on the existence of any such monstrosity as an “African” sexuality. The contribution by Helle-Velle titled “Understanding Sexuality in Africa: Diversity and Contextualised Dividuality” poses the question somewhat tendentiously: “Is it at all reasonable to speak of an ‘African sexuality’?” (p. 195). The ambivalence of her own position, which she tucks “somewhere between” the absolute “yes” and heated “no” of sundry contributions to the debate, demonstrates the continuing discomfiture of commentators on the issue. Like many other contributors to the volume, Helle-Velle, weighs in against any notion that African sexuality could be construed differently from that of other races or regions; however, she simultaneously acknowledges sundry evidence of “certain aspects of sexual practices and ideology [which] were widely shared among Africans (in

¹ Senior Lecturer, Department of English, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. <ttobaoju@unilorin.edu.ng>; <ttaiwoju@yahoo.com>

contrast to other regions of the world)” (her parenthesis). For her, the simultaneous presence of “such diversity” in African sexuality implies that “simple and conclusive statements about an ‘African sexuality’ must by necessity be oversimplifications and essentialisations” (p. 195). Even so, her eventual conclusion does appear to contribute in a way to the much dreaded essentialism by repeating the acknowledgment, albeit again in parenthesis, that: “(This [...] however, does not necessarily preclude the idea that there are regional differences)”! (p. 206).

The dilemma here is obvious, and representative. Every new discussion of African sexuality tends to follow the same pattern, instantly exhuming the interesting question of the intersection between ethnicity and sexuality – whether it is appropriate or valid to construct sexuality at all in regional or ethnic terms, in view of the universal dimensions of sexuality – but ending with more questions than answers.

However this dilemma is ultimately resolved, and one suspects that it may not be resolved with any sense of finality in the foreseeable future, a profound irony is evident in the new discursive direction to find no difference or no essential difference in various forms of African sexuality compared with the west. This is because, for centuries, the objective of the *dark colonial narratives* on Africa (my preferred term for the more common usage ‘dark continent narratives’) was to establish the precise opposite of the new trajectory, to wit an essential African sexual orientation, philosophy and practice. African sexuality was strenuously othered within the narratives, differentiated from Eurasian models and demonised in stories and commentaries whose purport was precisely to map out sexual thickets apparently peculiar to the African ‘heart of darkness.’ Ostensibly “in the name of science” (Willis and Williams 2002), major western academies with massive colonial funding advanced grotesque images of African physiology, mentality and sexuality, considered essentially African and valid for all of Africa south of the Sahara. The orchestrated image was of an unmitigated ugliness of the African body, compounded by pervasive moral dirt – hence, “debased drudges,” “lascivious” (Bush 1990: 13); “natural born promiscuous carrier of germs” (Mbeki 2001), etc. Forms of nudity encountered in many African settings suggested unbridled sexuality (Gilman 1985), as well as excessive fecundity and unrestrained procreation (Alloula 1986). Colonial accounts additionally credited the African woman with dexterity in the ‘arts and wiles’ of the erotic (Gill 1995). African male physiology, complete with ‘scientific’ penile measurements that prompted comparison with horses, also helped to conjoin the African male with ‘animal’ in popular Euro-American imaginary, establishing him as apparently the quintessential ‘homo erectus’ of all homo sapiens (Olorunfoba-Oju, 2007).

Against such background, a new discursive orientation to find “no difference” in African sexuality or African expressions of sexuality might have been a salutary counterpoise to the earlier dark colonial narratives,² were the discourse itself not occurring so frequently within a context apt to be described as the politics of race and culture. The sense of ‘politics’ and the

² The occasional resurgence of slurs on the African body and mind does occur to this day at various levels of ‘scholarship,’ as evident in Satoshi Kanazawa’s recent ‘study’ which declared the African female as the ugliest of the human species, and of course James Watson’s recent reiteration of the slur that the black race possesses inferior intellect. As pointed out elsewhere (Olorunfoba-Oju 2008), such negative othering is also evident in contemporary Applied Language Studies and the methodologies of such studies themselves are usually informed by hegemonist thinking *a priori*.

consequent ideological contestation is exacerbated by a number of factors, not least the perception that narrativised representations of African bodies, sexualities and cultural images have constantly been deployed in furtherance of western cultural hegemonic interests, or otherwise as a pawn in the chess game of western cultural and sexual politics. Oyewumi's (2001b) phrasing of this suspicion is succinct and it bears repeating:

Whatever the realities of Africa and African bodies, they are liable to be exhibited to soothe the Western mind/body of its sexual predilections du jour.

Unfavourable African response to contemporary western discourse on African sexuality would seem activated by the contention that many “outsider” narratives of African sexual bodies and sexualities appear to bear little resemblance to the realities perceived and expressed by those living close to the narrated situations. As will be exemplified below, western research literature is replete with scenarios represented as ‘facts’ but which indigenous peoples of the continent dispute as being alien to their lived realities and identities. Also activating unfavourable African response is the frequent discussion of African sexualities within the context of sex and sexuality negativities such as rape, child rape, Aids, transactional sex, female genital mutilation, etc. This and sundry imputations of an ‘African’ sexuality exotic (for example terms like “multiplicitious sexuality” (Wekker 1999), “polyandrous motherhood” (Guyer 1994; Haram 2004), “contextualized dividuality” (Helle-Valle 2004), etc, which have been applied in neo-anthropological vein to African contexts, inevitably evoke echoes of colonial narratives and slurs on African sexuality, thus heightening the sense of politics of representation of African sexuality. The problem with such terms is not only that they can be applied with equal validity to non-African contexts but also that they often describe choices that many women may be constrained to make in the throes of modern socio-economic vicissitudes and the attendant collapse of traditional welfare institutions, rather than as a manifestation of racial, ethnic or regional sexual proclivities.

The sense of ‘politics’ is compounded by an apparent fixation with colonial continuities in the discussion of African sexualities, which tends to blot out indigenous perspectives and also blur potential distinctions between pre-colonial and post-contact African sexual practices and identities. In a representative observation, Becker (2004: 36 – 37) contends for example that, “sexuality and gender are prominent among a plurality of contested arenas where it would be inappropriate to assume a break between the colonial past and postcolonial present.” Such statements are symptomatic of the potential blurring of distinctions between cultural and sexual practices in pre-colonial, colonial and ‘postcolonial’ Africa.

Nor is this approach of focusing on colonial continuities and postcolonial phenomena at the expense of indigenous paradigms in the discussion of African sexualities always restricted to western commentators. A Nigerian commentator recently proposed four “orders” of female sexuality in Nigeria: “[1] the post-colonial nationalist order of sexuality which takes its impetus and its ideological muscle from the very fount of colonialism; [2] the regime of sexuality fostered by the Sharia legal code; [3] the regime fostered by various Christian denomination – orthodox and Pentecostal; and [4] a global secularised regime of sexuality” (Osha 2004; my numbering). A close look at these ‘orders’ shows African sexuality again represented exclusively from the prism of colonial factors; with frames of reference drawn directly from the twin axis of

African colonisation – the western/Christian and Middle Eastern/Islamic axes – with an additional ‘global secular’ order that merely gives Europe and America a second slot within the typology. Here again, we have an example of how an accustomed west-oriented gaze on colonial continuities tends to blot out possible indigenous pre-colonial and any continuing traditional perspectives on ‘orders’ of sexuality. While focus on colonial continuities is educative within the appropriate discursive space, it has often produced a state of ‘knowledge’ in which sexuality categories encountered within the framework of colonial continuities are foregrounded as authentic or ancient examples of African sexualities. Worse still, fictive representations by Africans long after colonial contact are frequently interpreted as furtive pointers to a pre-colonial sexuality condition amongst Africans (see, among others, Vignel 1983; Dunton 1989; Dunton and Palmberg 1997; Desai 1997, 2000; Murray 2004, ed; Epprecht 2008).

Queer Contestations

The field of queer enquiry has proved the hottest site of contestation within the general discourse on African sexuality. The crux of the contestation has been whether homosexuality existed or was prevalent in pre-contact Africa south of the Sahara or not, and also whether any such occurrence was tolerated and to what degree. Mainstream African contention, notably enunciated by statesmen such as the late Nwalimu Julius Nyerere and Mugabe (see Dunton and Palmberg 1997 for an elaboration of their views), as well as feminists/womanists cum literary theorists (Amadiume 1987, Kolawole 1997, Oyewumi, 2000, Achebe, 2000), and mainstream religious leaders (most stridently within the Anglican communion), is that homosexual practices were a foreign imposition and at any rate were not tolerated within African cultures prior to European contact. Western narratives on the other hand dismiss African mainstream contention as a “myth,” insisting that homosexuality was not only prevalent in pre-contact Africa, but was also largely tolerated: “Indeed, the evidence suggests that in many cases, homosexual behaviours, while not always explicitly discussed or identified as such in the larger public sphere, were often tolerated in pre-colonial Africa than in Africa after the colonial period” (Desai 1997; 2000).

The main contestation, then, the issue on which western and African scholars strenuously differ, is what the “evidence” really says and, indeed, whose evidence. The latter question is particularly germane in view of the generally agreed absence of reliable pre-contact ethnographic data on the issue (a situation frequently attributed in western discourse to African cultural ‘discretion’ or ‘silence,’ or to anthropologist oversight on the issue).

Viewed from the mainstream African perspectives noted above, the search for a north-south and especially Euro-American/African queer ‘unity’ would appear powered by a desire to theorize homosexuality as a universal and natural practice rather than as race specific or as an incidental consequence of modernity, as antagonists of the ‘sexual unity’ theory would often represent it. Africa, apparently a perpetual ‘jungle’ in western imaginary, would provide ‘natural’ grounds for the establishment of the gay universalism theory, to wit, if it is found to happen in Africa then it must be, Africa being ‘primitive,’ a natural phenomenon. Where African theorists are categorical in the assertion that such representations of Africa, for example as “a paradise in which lesbianism is not only accepted, but is institutionalized in women’s everyday relationships” (Oyewumi 2001), are only a way of “underwriting” western sexual predilections, a nobler motive

is generally insisted upon in western narratives. For example, Epprecht (2006) observes that western interest in African same-sex research is borne of a desire to “develop strategies to humanize capitalism in a global sense” (p. 11).³

Whatever the motive, a general perception in African scholarly circles is that hegemony is writ large on the associated western discourse. The discourse seeks ultimately to overwrite indigenous African identity formation processes, often by brushing aside the known and expressed realities of the indigenous populations.

Whether western narrative is right to seek to overwrite Africa people’s sense of self-definition in this matter or not is not yet the issue here. What is in issue is the nature of the ‘evidence’ on which the theory of pre-contact toleration of homosexuality in Africa is often based, and whether this ‘evidence’ does indeed justify the contention. On close examination, there would appear very little basis for some of the conclusions reached in some of the recent better known histories of queer sexuality in Africa, which include works such as Lorde (1983); Dunton and Palmberg (1997); Murray and Roscoe (1998); Epprecht (2006), Newell (2007). Some of the queer claims (pun intended) of these histories may at best be ascribed to outsider misconception regarding some emerging ethnographic details in some of the African settings discussed in them and, at worst, to sheer hegemonic manipulation. In this discussion, I will dwell mainly, but not exclusively, on the representations made by Stephanie Newell in her book, *The Forger’s Tale: The Search for Odeziaku* (2007) in which she also tries to account for information gaps or “omissions” in earlier such histories.⁴

Displacement and Hegemony

A prominent example of the hegemonic orientation of western narratives on African queer sexuality is the persistent and deliberate (mis)interpretation of the phenomenon of “female husbands” in parts of Africa as an example of institutionalized homosexuality and ‘tolerance’ of homosexual practices on the continent. African researchers who have not only lived most of their lives amongst indigenous populations but have also researched into this phenomenon (for example, Amadiume 1987, Ekejiuba, 1995; Oyewumi 2001, among others) have also protested that the relation of the “female husband” to the “female wife” has only social but no sexual content. Women of means who constitute the class of “female husbands” simply “marry” female wives as a means of producing heirs for themselves or their paternal lineage through surrogate sexual liaisons between the “wives” and the anonymous men who impregnate them on behalf of the female “husband.” The anonymous men disappear afterwards and have neither jural rights on the women nor paternal claims to the children resulting from the liaison. This practice has close equivalents in the sundry anonymous procreation practices in the western world, including the

³ There is no concrete explanation or substantiation beyond this assertion. The suggestive fact that some of the important queer researches are conducted under the auspices of or in active collaboration with queer rights organizations is also left unstated.

⁴ In a recent review, Oloruntoba-Oju (2009), made a few tentative remarks on this book by Newell and, among others, praised the author’s “intellectual honesty in not suppressing counter-examples.” One would argue in this paper that the data provided in Newell’s book nonetheless provides a basis for questioning the interpretive strategies of this and some other western narratives and the premises on which some of their more startling conclusions on an African queer history have been based.

now well established institution of surrogate motherhood, sperm donation and the like. However, western narratives would continue to represent the relationship between the “female husbands” and their “wives” as homosexual in nature, and homosexuality itself as “accepted” among the respective African populations (Murray and Roscoe 1998) or as at least creating an environment conducive to the expression of queer sexuality in Africa (Newell 2007: 13).

Claims such as above are often rendered in the language of surmise in western queer narratives, which tends to limit their contestant value.⁵ However, the narratives, no less than their derivative critiques, invariably leap to conclusions that disregard the speculative nature of the data. To return to Desai’s representative claim quoted above, the sweeping assertion of ‘prevalence’ and ‘tolerance’ of homosexual practices in pre-contact Africa is based on nothing more exact than a passing reference in the quoted article to “Azande homosexuality,” whose origin the original author had couched in the language of uncertainty (“there is no reason to suppose it was introduced by the Arabs,” note 4). The speculative nature of this original “finding” is displaced in the assertive leap of Desai’s and such derivative critiques; the localized original reference is also displaced in favour of an unsubstantiated generalization.

Displacement of actualities, then, whether of contemporary facts or of historical records, is a constant strategy of western hegemonic discourse on African queer sexuality. The emphasis on African pre-contact “toleration” is meant to displace actual contemporary attitude curves.⁶ It would seem then that the way western narratives propose to “correct” the actual low toleration levels among Africans and African Americans is to show that homosexual behaviour was “prevalent” amongst or at least was well tolerated by their apparently revered ancestors living in the jungle hundreds of years ago. Actual historical record that does not support this thesis is often made a casualty of this strategy of displacement.⁷

⁵ A few samples: “although the origin of the *mati* work is often associated with the departure of men to do migrant labor, from my perspective, *there is no good reason to suppose* that *mati* work was not already present in West Africa.” (Wekker 1997, p. 338, qtd in Oyewumi, 2001a); “*there is no reason to suppose (alleged Zande homosexuality) was introduced by the Arabs*” (Evans-Pritchard, 1971, p. 1429, qtd in Oyewumi, 2001a); “woman-woman relationships in Lesotho *seem to have* an erotic component” (Judy Gay and Limakatso qtd in Dunton and Palmberg 1997, p. 34.); “*There is, of necessity, some speculation:* for instance, that the great Zulu chief Shaka, who formed a vast empire during his rule (1816–1828), *may have been* homosexual, since he had no wives, fathered no children, and preferred the company of an elite regiment of warrior bachelors” (Gibson 2006, reviewing Epprecht 2006); “In the ritual arts, *some homosexuality seems to have taken place, although this is extremely difficult to document*, given the severe secrecy governing most of African ritual” (Murray 2004 ed); “Igbo gender flexibility *would have eased* the intense anxiety of [European] men such as Stuart-Young about their own [homo]sexuality” (Newell 2007: 13) etc.

⁶ For example, the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Project posts a low 1% - 4% tolerance level for much of Africa south of the Sahara (with the South African sub-region as a notable exception), as against 83% for Germany, 77% for the UK, 69% for Canada, and 51% for the US (with much lower levels recorded internally for African American populations within the US).

⁷ As an example, Epprecht (2006) refers to the colonial “Confidential Enquiry into Alleged Prevalence of Unnatural Vice amongst Natives in Mine Compounds on the Witwatersrand” (South Africa, 1907) but brushes it aside as a biased reportage by colonial masters. While the report definitively observes that the alleged homosexual behaviour in the mines was a carry over from Portuguese and Arab contact, it is dismissed in Epprecht’s narrative as no more than the antics of colonizers keen on justifying their forced occupation and suzerainty over the apparently babyish natives.

Perhaps the highest point of displacement of findings that may support the African perspective in western narratives is in regard to adult egalitarian homosexuality. The consensus amongst major voices in contemporary queer research is that most examples of homosexual practice apparently discovered in African settings were of a situational, functionalist/cultic or otherwise non-essential nature. On the other hand, adult egalitarian love, being a mark of essential, natural or biologically based homosexuality, and being the homosexuality ideal, was hardly in evidence in African settings, and at any rate was not considered natural. Murray (2004, ed.) notes that: “egalitarian homosexuality covers the familiar category of adolescent sexual exploration between member of the same gender, which is viewed as natural and acceptable for that stage of life but not usually sanctioned in adulthood.”⁸ Epprecht (2006: 129) also notes with regard to the South African situation which he studied extensively that adult egalitarian love was “rare before colonial rule but became common soon after.” Similarly, Desai (2004: 3) notes, albeit with a touch of Freudian discomfiture, that the egalitarian “type of relationship is arguably more recent and in fact its detractors are right to point to its dependence on colonial and postcolonial conditions of modernity.” This significant detail which has the potential to support if not clinch the African argument is nonetheless typically discounted in western narratives,⁹ and sometimes with characteristic hegemonic arrogance:

But along with the other fruits of modernity – technology, industrialization, growth of literacy, the expansion of public sphere and so on – the formulation of newer forms of sexual identities is a challenge that contemporary Africa must face (Desai 2004: 4).

In displacing actualities, most of the histories referred to in the foregoing also devote considerable focus to non-historical evidence, especially to fictional representations of gay behaviour in works by contemporary African authors. While fictional representations may certainly offer a guide, they do not have the value of historical certitude. Nor would it be appropriate even in sympathetic criticism to read more into them than the relevant texts would honestly permit. However, such substitution of objective readings with ideologically motivated ones is often a stated objective in western narratives on the issue.¹⁰ African commentators

⁸ The term “not sanctioned” here is two-ways ambiguous and could mean “not approved” or “not punished.” The former is however the meaning suggested by the earlier part of the sentence, from which one may infer that the conduct, being considered “natural and acceptable” for adolescents, is not considered so for adults, hence not sanctioned. Incidentally, this meaning (“not considered natural or acceptable for adults”) would hold even if “not sanctioned” is taken to mean not punished. The two quotes immediately following are fortunately not at all ambiguous.

⁹ Gibson (2006) in a review of Epprecht (2006) roundly upbraids him for “bizarrely and vaguely undercut[ing]” his own submission by what he called Epprecht’s “concluding, digressive remark that adult male-male sexual behavior was probably” rare in the African setting. Epprecht’s basis for arriving at that conclusion appeared immaterial to this reviewer.

¹⁰ Again, Desai (2004), after acknowledging that “the great majority of African literary representations of same-sex desire – both male and female – have historically been negative” serves notice of the critical project to “re-read [reinterpret] canonical texts that previously seemed entirely monothematic,” with the predictable result that “these re-readings show that even texts that have been traditionally read by critics as anti-homosexual display textual ambiguities and ironies surrounding the issue of sexuality” (p. 7). Epprecht (2008) also goes oxymoronic regarding the evidential value of African literary representations (“African fiction, plays and videos”) of homosexuality, admitting on the one hand that “[t]hey cannot be taken as realistic in an empirical and objective sense,” but contending simultaneously that they “almost certainly convey, in a figurative and subjective sense, more realistic representation of society than dogmatic or ideological silence,” and further that African artists may be a “more

including this writer have also often expressed a willingness to extract sympathetic readings, including the idea of toleration, increased awareness and the like from textual ambiguities and even from clearly hostile representations. Still it must be pointed out in the present context that such readings are often a short step to jettisoning the attitudinal actualities represented by the texts. It is not unknown for some contemporary authors and film-makers to express shock at such readings of their works. Hegemonic ideological readings superimposed on objective realities of texts may well further exacerbate the feeling in African circles that mainstream western discussion of sex and sexuality in Africa is lubricated more by the politics of culture than the actualities of sex and sexuality on the continent.

Also frequently displaced in western narratives is the logical and real reason for African denial of homosexuality as identity, and indeed the low toleration of homosexuality practices in Africa. The ascribed reasons range from continued reaction to colonialism (Desai 2004), to missionary imposition (Dunton and Palmberg 1997; Murray 2004; Epprecht 2006), western literary cultural influences (Epprecht 2006), and the like. Desai (2004) contends that “African denial of homosexuality or ‘negative’ reaction to queer discourse may be seen to be the direct result of the psychological and cultural wounds imposed by the colonial encounter itself.” Epprecht contends that homophobia was introduced to South Africa by zealous Christian missionaries as well as by cultural influences arising out of European discourses around sexual morality” (p. 154). Implicit in some of these queer ascriptions is a continuing western slur.¹¹ However, to the Africans themselves the real reason is not so far-fetched, as elaborated below.

The real and logical reason put forward by Africans for the denial of homosexuality as identity and indeed for the low toleration of homosexuality practices is quite discernible from African narratives as noted in the foregoing. As Modupe Kolawole (1997: 15) puts it, homosexuality is “a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their [African] world view.” While the term “completely strange” may sound like an exaggeration, and while the picture is certainly changing, it is true that even in contemporary times, a good number of Africans go through an entire lifetime without coming into contact with gay behaviour either in the rural areas or even after having passed through such ‘high risk’ urban locales such as boarding school, night clubs and other same sex enclosures such as prisons.¹² Many may have “heard stories” but these are mostly about gayness being a ‘foreign import’ and occurring in proximal geographical locations where foreign contact has occurred over the centuries. And often those who hear these stories

reliable guide” than African scientists on the issue of homosexuality (p. 27). Such “not realistic but more realistic,” “not reliable but more reliable” conundrums certainly give rhetoricians, stylisticians and linguists a hard job of labeling to do! It is important to recall that this eventual “reliability” of African literary works on the issue usually comes after a laborious “re-reading,” or queering, of the relevant texts vis-à-vis the ‘Desaic’ methodology noted above.

¹¹ The ascriptions tend to advance the old colonial image of an African people quite so dense, pretty much like their jungles, that they could not by themselves recognize queer sexual behaviour if it happened amongst them, let alone post an independent moral or other cultural attitude to it, until same was put to them by missionaries or European cultural imports such as, as suggested by Epprecht (2006), the gay bashing Hollywood films that possibly only a handful of Africans got to see in the late fifties.

¹² A colleague reading this article recently drew my attention to a forum observation by an apparently gay white fellow who had been in Nigeria and had noticed that straight Nigerians apparently do not have what he called a ‘gaydar,’ hence a lot of gay sex does take place without them being aware. If this observation is true it may well be a further curiosity that these Africans seem not to have developed a gay sensitivity over the centuries.

discuss them and marvel. Otherwise, in most cases the practice may not have been sufficiently remarkable as to come into social reckoning, and, for most, the phenomenon truly does not exist. Against such a background, the imputation of homosexuality as an African identity¹³ must of necessity generate antagonistic, not necessarily homophobic, feelings – searching for exotic other reasons where a logical one conspicuously exists can seem diversionary and, worse, political.¹⁴ To Africans generally speaking, the politics of culture is tied up with the politics of naming. Good or bad, they tend to resist what in Yoruba traditional parlance is called *orúko tí'ya mi ò sọ mí, tí mi o sì sọ ara mi* (“a name my mother did not call me (read “christen”), and which I did call myself”). As Chinua Achebe recently puts it in a different context, “we know we have a story and should wage war when someone wants to tell our story, the way that is not true.”¹⁵

Outsider Blues

Some allowance must certainly be made for genuine outsider interpretive discomfiture. Murray (2004, ed.) notes for example that “the appearance of homosexuality in African art is often the result of a misunderstanding of complex symbolic codes” and also that “the seeming absence of clear imagery throughout African art may be due to our inability to interpret more abstract conventions, or due to the inherent “left-handedness or secrecy of homosexual acts.”

Indeed, three problems relating to ethnographic/anthropological data have been connected specifically to homosexuality research. One is that western anthropological researchers, and sometimes their informants, may well be confused between cultural data that indeed have pre-colonial origins and those that constitute what Norton (2002) describes in a related context as a mere “rigidification of [identities] into modern, remembered, times”. Such retrodiction, leading to a retrospective ascription of modern identities and related phenomena to pre-modern times, necessitates a thorough and honest sifting of presumed ethnographic/anthropological data to verify their authenticity. A second problem is the absence of many biographies of specific European identified homosexuals who came in contact with African natives, and more specifically the absence of information about the actual sexual orientation or ‘motivations’ of the Africans that they had sexual dealings with. It is this gap that a narrative like Newell’s *The Forger’s Tale: The Search for Odeziaku*, referred to earlier, seeks to bridge.

¹³ The generalization of homosexual practice apparently found in some African settings as constituting continent wide “patterns of identity formation” (Desai, above) is common in western narratives. In a more recent and rather fawning review of Murray and Roscoe (1998), Jim Clark (2006) would claim that the book’s focus on same-sex experience “provided an evocative entry to understanding *the entire continent* from the defining perspective of human intimacy” (italics added).

¹⁴ It is agonizing that disputation about the status of homosexuality in Africa is often equated with ‘homophobia,’ even when some of the disputants have close and friendly relations with known homosexuals.

¹⁵ Chinua Achebe, “Igbo Intellectualism and Development.” 24th Ahajioku Lectures, Owerri, Nigeria (January 23, 2009). See: http://www.nguardiannews.com/news/article03//indexn2_html?pdate=240109

The third problem is the legendary, alleged, ‘silence’ or ‘discretion’ of African ‘natives’ on the issue. However, this allegation is countered by the fact that early European narratives on Africa were relentlessly eloquent on the sexual lives of the Africans. They presented the ‘natives’ as savages and sexual animals with debased moralities etc, but connected this slur only to heterosexuality (McClintock 1995, Newell 2006). The question here is that, if cultural and linguistic ‘discretion’ or ‘silence’ has subsequently been blamed for the absence of information on African pre-contact homosexuality, why should this peculiarly African characteristic of ‘silence’ also have so uniformly affected the Euro-American voyagers and ethnographers who otherwise wrote so openly and so extensively about the sexual life of the Africans they came in contact with! The two-sided nature of this “silence” is obviously mysterious and begs elucidation. Murray (2004, ed.) does offer the position that “the lack of extensive and reliable data on homosexuality in African cultures in the literature of anthropology is due to factors ranging from a true absence of the phenomenon in the culture under study [(!)] to informant awareness of the disapproval with which the researcher's culture viewed same-gender relationships.” The former half of this explanation sounds pretty much like a true Freudian insertion, given the general thrust of Murray’s narrative; the latter half rings hollow: one can almost picture the presumably naïve researcher saying to the presumably dense native: “oh we disapprove of homosexuality back home; what is the situation in your jungle here?” and the native thinking: “oh, this dense European thinks I am naïve enough to let him know so that he can clamp me into jail”! The confusion here is not helped by the suggestion by Murray (2004, ed.) noted earlier on that anthropologists back then may all have forgotten to ask some of the key questions relating to homosexual practices. It seems quite apt amidst all this that Murray and Roscoe (1998) should preface their book on African queer sexuality with the tell-tale title: “All so confusing!”

In Stephanie Newell’s own recent work (2006), which I would now engage in some detail, she again observed how “immensely difficult [it is] to recover instances of indigenous [queer] agency from colonial archives,” recalling cryptic references to “unnatural vices,”¹⁶ what she called “vague references” to ‘licentious character’ and ‘real vulgarity and indecency’ of certain ceremonies and images’ (pp. 13 – 14). Nonetheless, Newell also makes a note of the apparent inadequacy of similar works, including Robert Aldrich’s *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. This is notwithstanding Aldrich’s aim “to provide the context in which local men, for whatever motivation, contracted intimate relationships with foreigners” (p. 5). For Newell, the inadequacy of Aldrich’s approach consists in the fact that the ‘motivations’ of those African men remain hidden in the maze of ‘context’ that excluded ethnographic information that may lead to the construction of an African queer agency. She considers this approach another form of “silencing and disavowal.” Nor is she impressed by Aldrich’s contention that local men’s motivation was unknowable because the indigenous point of view was not available to, or could not be adopted by, the western researcher. Similarly, Newell criticizes other empire and sexuality works such as Hyam (1991), Bristow (1991; 1995), and Lane (1995), which “also refuse to speculate about how homosexual Europeans were perceived and remembered by the specific communities in which

¹⁶ Reference here is to Achmat’s (1993) description of situational contexts in South Africa prisons and compounds from 1890 – 1920. The described events were at any rate occurring fairly deep into post-contact times and could not have been a reliable index of an African, *pre-contact*, queer history. Furthermore, as noted earlier in another context, extant colonial reports of the period categorically blame the alleged phenomenon on earlier colonial contact with the Portuguese and the Arabs.

they fulfilled their desires in the colonial period.” Newell’s book, in attempting to bridge this ‘information gap’ follows the life, career and sexuality of a British poet and pederast, John Moray Stuart Young, who lived most of his adult life in the West Africa sub-region of Nigeria. In the book she establishes her own resolve to correct the “omissions” in these works that ‘silence the “other” partner in the male homosexual relationship and render him nothing more than “a passive recipient of the white man’s desires” (p. 6). Newell then proceeds to critique the comments of African anthropologists and critics (her examples are Ifi Amadiume and Nwando Achebe) who have expressed skepticism about the existence or prevalence, let alone toleration, of queer sexualities in pre-colonial Africa south of the Sahara.

My point here is that Newell’s undoubtedly well-intentioned narrative (which as noted earlier has also been described elsewhere as a tribute to intellectual honesty in not suppressing counter-examples) does not manage to dissolve such skepticism either, nor does she manage to surmount the interpretive and evaluative hurdles that the previous works she criticizes advisedly chose to avoid. If anything, the plunder and queering of Africa as a feature of colonial dominion constitutes a distinct if unintended subtext in her narrative. The picture that emerges, and aptly too, is that of an Africa that was as ruthlessly vanquished by formal colonialism as by an informal colonialism whose agents are precisely Europeans like Stuart-Young who were tagged ‘palm-oil ruffians.’ The ‘ruffians’ engaged in a ruthless commercial exploitation of the environment and, as in the case of Stuart-Young, also ravished innocent prepubescent boys along the shores. Newell’s narrative confirmed that valuable African products were obtained mostly through exploitative barter and often through coercive tactics that sometimes included “the lure of rum” and, where such failed, “kidnappings with ransom demands and punitive raids on villages” (p. 41). More succinctly, the well established fact that the colonies served as grounds for the unchallenged expression of queer sexualities by Europeans desirous to escape homophobic sentiments back home is reiterated by Newell. Her narrative also refers to many other commentaries of “ways in which the extensive empire allowed European men to experiment sexually with forms of desire that were irregular back home” (p. 77).

On the other hand, and this is crucial, any insinuation of reciprocal African homoerotic sexualities or genuine accommodation of homosexuality is neutralized by the coercive and non-egalitarian nature of the homosexual contacts, as reported by Stuart-Young’s acquaintances in Nigeria and as elaborated upon by Newell’s own interventions in the book. The “most common homosexual couplet,” Newell confirms, was that of the “adult white man and favorite local adolescent boy” (p. 78). Stuart-Young himself kept prepubescent ‘boy-lovers’ largely under the guise of philanthropy, which revelation foregrounds the ruthless exploitation of the pervasive poverty in the region and the transactional nature of the relationships. The only recorded reports from these boys are descriptions of the coercive context of the contact (p. 81), expression of fright, distaste and victimhood (p. 82), and sundry denial of consensus. Newell would wonder why any of these coerced and scandalized boys should continue to show much admiration for Stuart-Young even into adulthood, insinuating that the boys would have grown into continued homosexual practice. However, Newell herself puts the non-reciprocity of any such practice beyond doubt at many points in the narrative. Most remarkably she notes as follows:

The asymmetrical power relationship that is the very essence of European colonialism would have given rise to coercive and non-consensual sexual

contact with the colonized. Whether as a trader, administrator, missionary, military officer, or tourist, the European man possessed a considerable economic advantage over his love object, supported in large part by the colonial regime. [...] The political and economic disparities conferred enormous power on the European, especially in the most common colonial homosexual couplet of adult white man and favourite local adolescent 'boy' (p. 78).

This reportage by Newell obviously does not disprove earlier ethnographic information that the "other" partner in European-African homosexual relationships was little more than "a passive recipient of the white man's desires" under circumstances of political and economic coercion. In this regard, Newell's 'accommodation' or 'toleration' theory certainly runs against the grain of her own reportage.

However, there is an important piece of ethnographic data that appeared 'puzzling' to Newell and on which she would largely rest her thesis of a pervasive accommodation of homosexuality in colonial Nigeria. It is necessary to dwell a bit on this 'puzzle' that forms the basis of some of her major conclusions in this book, for it is here that some allowance may well be made for what I referred to earlier as outsider (interpretive) discomfiture.

At the time of his death, John Moray Stuart-Young or Odeziaku was given a funeral unprecedented for a European, an unconventional European at that. Newell wonders "how it was possible for this unconventional boy-loving Englishman to earn such a majestic traditional funeral ... where few Europeans achieved such prestige among the local population" (p. 3). She then proceeds to interpret this situation as evidence of African accommodation of homosexuality, apparently in contrast to the evident homophobia of the then British society. However, on close examination of the relevant facts, the actual puzzle is that Newell is 'puzzled' by this elaborate funeral. She herself had through her incisive narrative highlighted several other, and major, instances of African 'accommodation.' These include the accommodation of Stuart-Young's forgery credentials (for which he had been ostracized in his home country), as well as what Newell herself would describe as 'the strange toleration of Stuart-Young in the African-owned press.' Indeed the toleration of Stuart-Young's 'racially derogatory views' (p. 108), which included such unsavoury comments at "[The African] is like a little dog that comes waddling towards you with both tail and rump eagerly squirming, in an earnest desire for recognition" (p. 109, Newell's parenthesis) is a phenomenon to which Newell devotes an entire chapter of her book. It is obvious enough but must be restated within this context that this 'toleration' or 'accommodation' was also occurring within the broader coerced "accommodation" by Africa of the white *massa's* dominion, his trading terms, his religion, his way of life and of course his sexual predilections. The real puzzle therefore is why, against the background of such 'accommodations,' the apparent accommodation of Stuart-Young's sexuality should be specially regarded in the circumstance. Indeed, why should it be insinuated in the circumstance that such 'accommodation' is tantamount to an approval of queer sexuality by African communities? It is like insinuating that the 'accommodation' of Stuart-Young's racially derogatory views (which include several white on black slurs) is tantamount to an approval of such slurs.

What makes Newell's insinuation of African 'accommodation' of homosexuality in Stuart-Young's history more intriguing is that indigenous reports recorded in the same narrative suggest extensive censure. One of Stuart-Young's protégés and presumed lovers reported in his broken English that, "people begin to be anxious" about Stuart-Young's sexual orientation, and there were "so many gossips" (p. 81). Furthermore, Stuart-Young was given the nickname, *Eke*, which literally means "boa constrictor," with insinuations that are less than salutary. "In every home in Onitsha [the name, Eke] was a great watchword," continued this revealing report by Stuart-Young's protégé. Newell herself explains that this name "would have offered a word of warning and foreknowledge about the trader's [sexual] proclivities" and would specifically have "required local residents to be attentive to the trader's movement around youths" (pp. 98-99). Within African cultural contexts there can be no greater censure, and it is queer that, being in possession of this information, the author should continue to interpret the environment in which Stuart-Young lived as one that was willingly accommodative of his queer sexuality. To all intents and purposes the reported 'accommodation' of Stuart-Young's sexual proclivities by the local population was not without qualification.

Another piece of ethnographic data on which Newell's puzzle appears to be further anchored ought to be examined. In indigenous Onitsha African custom, antagonistic groups would ordinarily exploit funeral performances to insert "grammars of disapproval or contempt" into praise songs rendered at the funeral of an "aberrant citizen" (pp. 1-2). This apparently did not take place during Stuart-Young's funeral, thus further fuelling Newell's queer 'accommodation' theory. It must be noted first of all that, though insinuated, there is no categorical indication by Newell that such insertions, which in any case would have been rendered in indigenous African language, were absolutely absent at the funeral. More importantly, however, it is clear from the narrative that the throng at Stuart-Young's funeral comprised largely hundreds who had benefited in personal ways from his wealth and his (both genuine and transactional) philanthropy over the three decades that he lived in the environment. To his credit and reciprocal benefit, Stuart-Young had offered "fair prices for his palm oil and kernels," which "attracted many Africans to his factories" (103). He had also spent lavishly on his protégés (and their families), some of whom expected to inherit his property, and some who actually did. Stuart-Young had also acquired enormous status and influence amongst the larger Nigerian and even West African elite as poet, newspaper critic and more importantly defender of African rights to self determination, which latter in Newell's own analysis accounted in part for the apparent accommodation or forgiveness of his racially derogatory comments. Against such a background we really do not have to look too far for reasons why this man who so profoundly touched the lives of thousands at personal and social levels should have been accorded such a rousing funeral by an appreciative community. Interestingly, Newell's first sentence in her book highlights the presence of some "200 senior and influential Igbo women" at Stuart-Young's funeral. The women, obviously traders who have had beneficial trading relationship with this man, "controlled the large market in Onitsha." The funeral itself was conducted under their powerful auspices. The accompanying panegyrics, songs and dances commenced "[a]t a signal from the women's leader." Surely this was power, influence and atmosphere enough to suppress any contradictory articulation.

Viewed from another perspective, it is also true that censorious comments on deceased persons at their own funerals are only optional within African cultures, and that the absence of such

intervention in instances where it might have been expected is not unknown in real life as in fictional representations. Such absence may sometimes be a reflection of a metaphysical perspective, familiar to many African culture insiders, which precludes “speaking ill of the dead.” This taboo is hardly broken in many African cultures, except perhaps in cases of unmitigated and pervasive evil involving the dead person while alive. As noted above, the absence of such censure may also be a reflection of prevailing sentiments about the dead person’s overall contribution to society, or of his/her relative power holding in society. A combination of these is applicable in the case of Stuart-Young.

Ironically, the muting of deserved censure at the funerals of aberrant citizens is easily explained by a theory that recurs within the discursive space of Newell’s *The Forger’s Tale*, but which is strangely muted at this critical point. I refer again to the theory of “silences” to which is frequently attributed the absence of ethnographic information on African sexual proclivities. If this theory is true, could the silence at Odeziaku’s funeral also be a manifestation? Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965) contains an interesting example of an appropriate deployment of this theory in a similar circumstance. The relevant segment tells of a judge who is so corrupt that in his lifetime he is nicknamed *The Morgue*. However, at his funeral “the orator read his panegyric to a thousand heavy mourners.” The praises include such unexpected adulation as “... his life our inspiration, his idealism our hopes,” etc (p. 113). Much marvel is expressed at the cultural discretion and concomitant “silence” that permitted such perverse public adulation of a character so undeserving of adulation in his lifetime. Alas, to return to *The Forger’s Tale*, the similar theory of cultural discretion and silences which is so well articulated by Newell in other contexts in the book is suddenly muted here, precisely at the point in her narrative where the theory most begs application and where it may have enabled a more appropriate interpretation of the piece of data confronting her. It is quite tempting to assign this strange omission to hegemonic inclinations or to the politics of culture. However, it is also possible to assign the entire confusion to what we have called ‘outsider blues,’ for which some allowance has also made in the foregoing.

The Confusion of Language in Discourse on Possible African Queer Sexuality

An emergent dimension of the debate on the origin of homosexuality in Africa is that of language. This dimension deserves an independent treatment, but only a brief sketch of its highlights can be accommodated here.

African proponents of the homosexuality-is-un-African dictum such as Julius Nyerere and Robert Mugabe had apparently ‘played easily’ into the hands of the ‘opposition’ by positing that there are no indigenous African words for homosexuality, as one ‘evidence’ for the absence of the phenomenon on the continent prior to colonial contact (see Dunton and Palmberg, 1996). The western response to this claim has been to roll out a long list of African names for same-sex practices. However, both sides are simply victims of the fallacy that language is a perfect reflection of social or historical reality. Various problems associated with terms and their referents have long been highlighted in discourses in semantics and the philosophy of language. Of particular interest here is the distinction between ‘sense’ and ‘reference,’ and especially the problem of *non-referring* expressions (expressions that relate to non-existing or fictive/imaginative ‘entities’ or to hypothetical situations), as propounded in 1892 by the German

philosopher Gottlob Frege in his *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (*On Sense and Reference*). Truly an ‘indigenous’ eskimo word for ‘desert,’ or an ‘indigenous’ word for ‘snow’ in tropical Africa would be an obvious matter of philosophical and sociolinguistic interest; which ‘mystery’ only the appropriate enquiry would resolve.

Within the present context it is clear that, on the one hand, the absence of a term would not necessarily imply the absence of the cognate phenomenon (compare similar mysterious absences such as the absence of synthetic terms for ‘male virginity’ in most languages, or the absence of generic pronouns and terms for male or female sibling (‘brother’/‘sister’) in Yoruba, etc.¹⁷ On the other hand, the presence of a term is not a proof of the material presence of the referred phenomenon or practice (consider, within the present context, a Yoruba expression such as *oloko d’ogi d’ope* (‘penetrator of trees and palms’/‘one whose penis penetrates trees and palms’). While words and expressions do have indexical value in relation to their social, historical or cultural referents, the value is of necessity probative and must often be subjected to the strictest correlation procedures to validate related claims.

The first requirement of a thoroughgoing enquiry within this context therefore is that African terms for same sex practices and their ascribed meanings should be factually and indisputably located in the pre-contact histories of the respective African societies. Word formation is a dynamic and continual process that responds to emerging realities, and this process can be quite spontaneous and rapid especially with African languages in which there is a preponderance of analytic and descriptive lexis (consider, for example, Yoruba, in which noun formation is often as easy as attaching the noun-forming prefixes [*a-*], [*ala-*], [*o-*] [*oni-*], [*olo-*], etc to newly emerging situations, hence *a-ghorun* (lit. coverer of/protector from the sun), for “umbrella;” *amohunmaworan* (machine that captures sound and vision), for “television;” *alakowe* (educated/westernized, etc, person), etc. Given such a trajectory (ease of word-formation processes and rapidity of word-formation response to emerging phenomena), the location of a word in history can only be established through a painstaking etymology, with findings correlated with other indices of history. Such an exercise, so crucial especially to a discourse of contested origins, has so far been lacking in related studies such as the ones cited in the foregoing purporting that the presence of African terms for same-sex inevitably means the existence of the cognate practice in pre-contact Africa.

Concrete examples of the problem of assigning historical values to words based on their surface values can be cited here from two Nigerian languages, Hausa and Yoruba. In Hausa, the term, *yan daudu*, is often cited as indicative of pre-contact homosexual practices in northern Nigeria. However, the term originally had nothing to do with homosexuality. The Hausa term for sodomy is ‘*yan ludu*.’ Its literal meaning (‘people of Lot’) exposes its modern and post-contact origin (in this case Arab contact), which may be why the term is not popular with western commentators. However, the preferred term, *yan daudu*, literally meant “sons of daudu” or “people of *daudu*.” The term, *Daudu*, designates prince, noble or heir, and was used to refer to a spirit (lord) of the Hausa Bori cult. *Yan daudu* were therefore the weak or ‘feminine men’ who, along with defenceless women, sought the protection of the Bori spirit or lord (*daudu*),

¹⁷ Linguistic phenomena such as these have inevitably generated their own theories and contentions. Compare, for example, Oyewumi 1997 and Bakare-Yusuf 2005.

According to Salamone (2007), the Bori cult “provides a niche for marginal people of all kinds ...”

Although Salamone’s list suggests that some of these marginal people may have included homosexuals, the point at which homosexuality actually entered the equation and ‘meaning’ of *yan daudu* is not clear. Oddly, however, the hint of colonial contact or link is often present in anthropological renditions. Salamone offers further, on *yan daudu*:

These “men who talk like women” form a link between the old non-Muslim Hausa and the Muslim Hausa, indicating where stress lines still exist between the old and new Hausa identities, for the coming of Islam to West African societies necessitated a rethinking of numerous cultural and social arrangements, not least of which were the relationship between men and women and the organization of family life.

The anthropological description of *yan daudu* even today does not sustain an exclusive or even a definitive ‘homosexual’ tag. According to Pell Claudio Gaudio in his quite popular book *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic City* (2009):

When I describe ‘yan daudu as ‘feminine men’ to people from the USA and other Western societies, I am often asked, “Are they gay?” The answer is not straightforward.

It does not seem appropriate therefore that a definitive ascription be made about this term, *yan daudu*, in relation to homosexuality, as has been done in some western queer studies on Africa. (See also Sininkangas, 2004, which, cited in Banwo, 2011, expresses doubt about the homosexuality tag imposed on the term, *yan daudu*).

Now, among the Yoruba, an indigenous term for ‘homosexual’ or reference to ‘homosexuality’ is actually rare. The Yoruba saying referred to above, *oloko d’ogi d’ope* (‘penetrator of trees and palms’) does not refer to homosexuality or to actual penetration of trees and palms. Rather, it refers metaphorically to amplified, excessive or unbridled sexual activity of specific heterosexual males (the ‘anything in skirts’ or insatiable male syndrome). The absence of ancient homosexuality terms in Yoruba language is significant, considering that Yoruba rhetorical usage is not at all bashful about sexuality, and that its rhetorical repertoires contain hundreds of proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, etc explicitly connecting penis to vagina, with several explicit references to coition!¹⁸ Why there is such a dearth of reference to homosexuality in this otherwise exuberant language is a matter for conjecture. Many would say the ancient Yoruba either did not practice homosexuality or did not condone it; others might suggest other possibilities.

Recently, however, a Nigerian scholar presented a couple of sayings apparently produced by votaries of *Ifa*, the ancient Yoruba Divination Cult,¹⁹ which include such items as *obinrin dun ba sun ju okunrin lo* (“it is easier to sleep [have sex] with a woman than with a man”). Such isolated

¹⁸ A recent book, *Yoruba Proverbs with Feminine Lexis* (Sheba, 2009) highlights many of such sayings.

¹⁹ Ajibade’s paper was also presented at the June 14-18 2011 ECAS 4 conference in Uppsala, Sweden.

cultic sayings are apparently being held up as evidence of homosexuality practice among the ancient Yoruba; however, the connection between the sayings and the alleged practice is quite tenuous (Compare cognate possibilities such as: “It is easier to eat bread than stone” or “It is easier to drink water than blood,” which would obviously not be ‘evidence’ for the ‘practice’ of stone eating or blood drinking.) Indeed, the metaphorical purport of the Yoruba expression cited above is clearly brought out in a more established version encountered outside of cultic settings: *okunrin o se ba sun bi obinrin* (“you cannot sleep with a man as with a woman”). While the discussion of expressions such as this develops within queer discourse (and one hopes that Dr Ajibade would pursue his observations further, in a critical vein), it is helpful to note that Yoruba rhetorical usage is virtually dripping with didactic rhetorical usages that aesthetically deploy hypothetical constructs and unlikely scenarios which are never meant to be interpreted at a literal level:

Iru to ba ba l’epon, ogbon la fi n pa (“The fly that perches on the scrotum requires tact to kill”)

Eni ti yo ba je oyin abe apata ko ni wo enu aake (“Who would eat the honey under a rock would not care about any damage to the axe”)

A ki i ti oju onika mesan kaa (“It is not appropriate to count the toes of someone with nine to his face.”)

Obo ni ohun gbogbo loun le fi jeri oko, sugbon bi ti obo ko (“Vagina says it can vouch for Penis in everything but not when it comes to the matter of Vagina”)²⁰

Adan sorikodo o n wo ise eye “The bat hangs head downwards, it is only studying the conduct of other birds”

O go, o f’enu hora (“He/she’s idiotic; he/she scratches his/her body with his/her teeth).

O tuto soke o foju gba (“He spits into the sky, collects the sputum in his face” [symbol of extreme anger]).

A kii loyun sinu ka fi obo tore (“One does not carry a pregnancy and then give away her vagina”)

Ota ta ofa soke won yi odo bori (“The enemy shoots up an arrow then covers up with a [wooden] mortar”)

Etc, etc.

Attempting to assign actual personas or literal, situational/historical certitudes to expressions such as the above is to miss their locus as second-order significations.

²⁰ Cited in Sheba (2009).

Conclusion

The one predicament that continues to run through critical discussions of African sexuality, or of sexuality in Africa, is how to distinguish between universal manifestations of sexuality on the one hand and possible regional, especially African, peculiarities on the other hand. A related predicament highlighted in the foregoing is whether the answer to this question would be found in contemporary sexuality practices on the continent, for which there is unassailable evidence, or in the continent's disputed historical past. As demonstrated in the foregoing, western discourses on African sexuality are often complicated as much by historical uncertainty as by incongruous representations and interpretations of strands of African history, linguistic expressions and other ethnographic data. Inflexible focus on post-contact phenomena and colonial continuities in contemporary African sexualities also leads to the exclusion of indigenous perspectives on sexualities in a number of western narratives and tends to trample on African continent's sense of history, identity and self-definition.

On the whole, given the considerable vagueness that characterizes pre-contact information about African sexualities, including possible African queer agency, the field of contemporary ethnography as well as representations in the arts and the media would appear to offer a more concrete field of enquiry. In other words, a synchronic focus on today's sexuality realities in Africa may well offer safer grounds of analysis of queer representation than the frequently strained colonial imaginaries on pre-contact African sexualities. Fair minded persons would ordinarily agree with the human and minority rights dimension of queer sexuality, a dimension that does constitute a surer basis for queer activism.

References

Achebe, Chinua, "Igbo Intellectualism and Development." 24th Ahajioku Lectures, Owerri, Nigeria (January 23, 2009).

Achmat, Zachie. 1993. "'Apostles of Civilised Vice': 'Immoral Practices' and 'Unnatural Vice' in South African Prisons and Compounds, 1890 – 1920." *Social Dynamics* 19, no 2 (1993): 95.

Alloula, Malek. 1986. *The Colonial Harem*. Trans. Myrna Godzich and W. Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Amadiume, Ifi. 1987. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books.

Arnfred, Signe. 2004. "Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa: Introduction." In *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, edited by S. Arnfred, 7-29. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.

Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2003. "'Yorubas Don't do Gender': A Critical Review of Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*." [www.codesria.org/Links/conferences/.../BAKERE YUSUF.pdf](http://www.codesria.org/Links/conferences/.../BAKERE_YUSUF.pdf). Accessed 10 Sept 2005.

Banwo, A. 2011. "A Review of Marc Epprecht's *Heterosexual Africa?*" (forthcoming).

Becker, Heike. 2004. "Efundala: Women's Initiation, Gender and Sexual Identities in Northern Namibia." In *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*, edited by S. Arnfred. 35-58. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.

Bush, Barbara. 1990. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838*. London: James Currey. .
Chikere, Tchidi. 2003. *Soul Provider* (Omotola Jolaade-Ekeinde, Richard Mofe-Damijo). Nigeria: Great Movies Production.

Clark, Jim (2006) "Gltb Review: *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*" (Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe eds.).
<http://jclarkmedia.com/gaybooks/bookreviewboywives.html>.

Desai, Gustav. 1997. "Out in Africa." *Genders* 25 (1997): 120 – 143.

Desai, Gustav. 2004. "Queer Theory and Alternative Sexualities."
<http://africa.wisc.edu/ala2004/seminars/theory/desai.pdf>

Dunton, Chris. 1989. "'Whetying be dat?' The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature." *Research in African Literatures* 20.3 (1989): 422 – 48.

Dunton, Chris and Palmberg, Mai. 1996. *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*. Current African Issues No 19. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.

Epprecht, Marc. 2004. *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Epprecht, Marc. 2008. *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of Aids*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Gibson, Brian. 2006. "Review of Epprecht, Marc, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*." H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.
URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12329>

Gaudio, Rudolf P. 2009. *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Gill, Anton. 1995. *Ruling Passion: Sex, Race and Empire*. London: BBC Books.

Gilman, Sander. 1985. *Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.

Guyer, Jane I. 1994. "Lineal Identities and Lateral Networks: The Logic of Polyandrous Motherhood." *Nuptiality in Sub-saharan Africa: Contemporary Anthropological and Demographic Perspectives*, edited by Bledsoe, Caroline and Gilles Pisson, 274-295. Oxford:

Clarendon

Press.

Haram, Liv. 2004. "‘Prostitutes’ or Modern Women? Negotiating Respectability in Northern Tanzania." *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*, edited by S. Arnfred, 211-232. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.

Helle-Valle, Jo. 2004. "Understanding Sexuality in Africa: Diversity and Contextualised Dividuality" *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*, edited by S. Arnfred, 195-210. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.

Kolawole, Modupe. 1997. *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.

Lorde, Audre. 1983. *Zami, a New Spelling of my Name*. New York: Crossing Press.

McClintock, Jane. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality, in the Colonial Contest*. London: Routledge.

Millet, Jane. 1969. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

Murray, S.O. 2004. (ed.) "Gltb: An Encyclopaedia of Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, & Queer Culture." http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/africa_pre,2.html.

Murray Stephen O and Will Roscoe eds. 1998. *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. Palgrave Macmillan. .

Newell, Stephanie. 2006. *The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku*. Athens: Ohio UP.

Norton, Rictor. 2002. "The Myth of the Modern Homosexual." *A Critique of Social Constructionism and Postmodern Queer Theory*, 1 June 2002, expanded 11 July 2002 onwards, updated 24 October 2002. <<http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/extracts.htm>>

Oloruntoba-Oju, Taiwo. 2007. "Body Image, Beauty, Culture and Language in Nigerian African Context." *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series (2007)* (African Regional Sexuality Centre). <http://www.arscr.org/downloads/oloruntoba-oju.pdf>

Oloruntoba-Oju, T. 2008. "Perspectives on Rhetorical Patterns in Nigeria: Contrastive Rhetoric and the Politics of Culture." *Issues in Intercultural Communication*, Vol 2, Issue 1: 41 – 61.

Osha, Sanya. 2004. "A Post-colonial Scene: On Girls' Sexuality." *Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series 2* (African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre). <<http://www.arsrc.org/downloads/sanya.pdf>>

Oyewumi, Oyeronke. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke. 2001a. "Ties that (Un)bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and other Foreign Relations." *Jenda: A Journal of African Studies*, 1.1. <http://www.jendajournal.com/vol1.1/oyewumi.html>.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke. 2001b. "Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Colour Black." *Jenda: A Journal of African Studies*, 1.2. <http://www.jendajournal.com/vol1.2/oyewumi.html>.

Salamone, Frank A. 2007. "Hausa Concepts of Masculinity and the 'Yan Daudu'." *JMMS: The Intimate Connection*, 1.1., 45-54.

Sheba, O. 2009. *Yoruba Proverbs with Feminine Lexis*. Ibadan: Spectrum.

Sininkangas, M. 2004. "*Yan Daudu* – A Study of Transgendering Men in Hausaland in West Africa." M.A. thesis in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, May 2004.

Wekker, Gloria. 1997. "One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup: Afro- Surinamese Women and Critical Analysis." In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. Ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. New York: Routledge.

Willis, Deborah & C. Williams. 2002. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.