About the concept of queerness in the African context

Introduction

What about the topic of homosexuality in Africa? Can we speak about a queerness in Africa, or even apply it to this geographical context? Before studying the (in-)visibility of queerness in the art of Africa and beyond, I would first like to focus on the (in-)visibility and the (in-)existence of the concept of queerness in the African context - in the history, traditions, cultures and societies of Africa and the African diaspora. Originally, the concept of queerness was introduced and developed in the Western context first by American theoreticians - joined later by their European peers - in opposition to the binary distinction between the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, both considered as normative: on the one hand, they would reduce the plurality of sexual desire to only two poles, on the other hand, they would ignore cultural plurality. In this way, Queer Studies - especially the "plural-queer variant" (Perko 2006) of the concept of queerness - open the analysis of same-sex intimacy as well as gender identities and practices beyond the Western context. By considering categories such as race, ethnicity and culture in addition to sexuality and gender criteria, it makes sense to use and apply the concept of queerness in other geographic contexts than the Western one - understood as the American-European axis.

Indeed, numerous same-sex and transgender practices exist in traditions and cultures of Africa. They challenge heteronormativity as well as the normativity generated by gay identity formations. In this sense, even though they are not commonly apprehended within the category of queer, they correspond to its concept and can be identified and recognized as such.

Furthermore, Queer Studies aim at rendering visible diversity within and in opposition to social normativity in order to support plurality and fight against every form of discrimination. In the discourses of several African politicians and in the legislation of numerous African countries, though, heteronormativity is promoted, and homosexual practices are condemned.

1. How can the concept of queerness be applied and used in the African context?

First, it is necessary to focus on the origins of the concept of queerness. In this first part I will especially center our attention on Gudrun Perko's essay "Queer-Theorien als Denken der Pluralität. Kritiken, Hintergründe, Alternativen, Bedeutungen" (2006) and Thabo Msibi's essay "The Lies We Have Been Told. On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa" (2001).


1.1. The background of queer theories
1.1.1. Genesis of queerness in the Afro-American context in reaction to gay and lesbian identities

According to Gudrun Perko (Perko 2006: 5) the term ‘queer’ was first used and remained so for a long time in the U.S.A. as a swearword to designate persons who did not correspond to social normativity - the heterosexual normativity and the gender binary, i.e. gays and lesbians. However, by the end of the 1980s the swearword was subverted and has been developed as a positive and affirmative designation. Thus, the term ‘queer’ got a critical and political dimension. So, it was henceforth not only used in opposition to the heterosexual, but also to the gay and lesbian category of identity.

1.1.2. The specificity of ‘gay’ identity

As emphasized by Thabo Msibi (Msibi 2001: 56-57), the term ‘gay’ does not simply, neutrally designate people with same-sex desires. It characterizes a specific group of people and evolved out of a Western “specific cultural history”. It designates “an identifiable, visible, individual who engages in same-sex relations”, in other words a political identity. This sense originates from the 1960s when in the West a movement of people with same-sex desire looking for a public collective identity [1] began to struggle for civil rights. This movement has its own cultural and political institutions, festivals, neighborhoods and its own flag. It would be “among the most vibrant and well-organized social movements in the United States and Europe” (Msibi 2001: 56). Thus, ‘gay’ identity is the “product of history and [has] come to existence in a specific historical era”. [2] It was introduced in a part of the Western world - principally in the U.S.A. - where ‘the rise of capitalism, with its free labor system, was intricately linked with the rise of men and women in claiming a ‘gay’ identity” (Msibi 2001: 57). Thus, ‘gay’ identity is characterized by a specific history and designates a specific group of people. In the 1960s U.S.A., people who evolved in a context of both social and political liberalization, who possessed enough economic and social security and visibility to fight for the recognition of their ‘gay’ civil rights were in majority issued from the white middle class.


1.1.3. Queer as self-qualification

The term ‘queer’ has thus been developed as an affirmative and positive self-qualification between the late 1980s and the early 1990s in response to the limitations of the category ‘gay’. According to Gudrun Perko, the initiators of this self-qualification were homosexuals, mostly Afro-American but more broadly people of colour, both men and women, of the fringe of U.S.-American metropolises (Perko 2006: 5). The term ‘queer’ was therefore first used as a self-qualification by people with same-sex desire but who did not identify themselves as ‘gay’. Indeed, ‘gay’ identity does not consider the plurality of social groups, cultures and races of people with same-sex desire and does not aim at giving visibility to this plurality. A queer artistic scene developed in the U.S.A. questioning the representation of queer black bodies and made more visible the emerging queer milieu. Lyle Ashton Harris (born in 1965) was for example part of this wave: he explored constructions of sexuality, race, and gender through several media, especially photography but also collage, installation and performance.

1.1.4. Conceptual theorization and development of the queer-studies

Gay rights in Africa


Zanele Muholi, *Zinzi and Tozama III* (from the series *Being*), Mowbray, Cape Town, 2010

All rights reserved: http://www.stevenson.info/artists/muholi.html
In 1991 Teresa de Lauretis formulated the concept of ‘queer’ in the context of the elaboration of the question of how a Queer Theory would look like, questioning the limits of categories in the political context.

The concept of queerness was therefore developed as a policy aiming at making visible plurality and at criticizing both heteronormativity and the binary of gender, but also gay and lesbian identity categories as well as their limitations to encompass only a specific group of people. Thus, the concept of queerness was theorized to transgress the limits of two kinds of categories. On the one hand, it aspires to reach beyond both heterosexual and homosexual schemes and to encompass every form of sexual desire forgotten by these two categories. On the other hand, it intends to open up political dimensions and to acknowledge the plurality of social groups, races and cultures.


1.2. How to apply the queer concept in the African context

1.2.1. An intersectional approach of Queer Studies

The concept of queerness is characterized by its potential to deconstruct the principle of categories and to encompass plurality. It aspires to promote a “non-identity” and works not to remain framed or support framing. Thus, Morland and Willox emphasize:

“It was a strategy, not an identity. Put differently, the message of queer activism was that politics could be queer, but folk could not”.

So, ‘queer’ has been theorized in numerous ways: on the one hand, because of its open aspect and on the other hand, in function of the social and cultural context in which it has been developed.

Indeed the concept was born in the U.S.A. but evolved in different ways in other countries, for example in Germany. In her essay, Gudrun Perko analyses the evolution of the concept of queerness - especially in the German context - and its different variants. She focuses in particular on what she calls the "plural-queer variant" ("die plural-queere Richtung" or "Variante"). This comprehension of ‘queer’ does not only understand plurality in terms of gender and sexual desire but also in terms of social criteria (class, race, culture, etc.) and intersects several kinds of criteria. Furthermore, the "plural-queer variant" works towards the deconstruction of every kind of static category or identity of group which could generate social exclusion and discrimination.

Thus, Gudrun Perko emphasizes an intersectional approach to queerness: not only to focus on the criterion of sexuality, but also on social criteria such as class, race, culture, religion, etc. Such an approach permits to identify inequalities in the domain of representations and also in material relations and apprehends them as being changeable. In other words, the intersectionalization of queerness permits to have a more realistic vision of inequalities and discriminations from which non-heterosexual people suffer (Dietze 2012:13).

An intersectional approach of queerness appears therefore relevant to apply in the African context to study queer practices, in other words, for the understanding of the African context through the analyzing approach of Queer Studies.

1.2.2. To challenge the sexual and gender categorizing

---

The pearl of Africa - Episode 1: A Ugandan transgender girl fights for her right to love
"Sex and gender get debunked as a social and cultural construct, heterosexuality, as a category edified by people, that means not given from the nature. Conventional role normativity gets broken. Gender gets thought as a changing and evolving variable."[1]

1.2.2.1. Heteronormativity

Queer theories focus on the critic of heteronormativity. Generally, heterosexuality appears as the privileged and dominant model of identity. On the one hand, heterosexuality implies that a person's gender necessarily corresponds to their biological characteristics. Therefore, a person with male genitals could not be but a man, while a person with female genitals could not be but a woman. Sex is thought as the determining parameter of our identity: there would exist only two categories creating a binary system that opposes the man to the woman. On the other hand, the heterosexual model suggests that our sexes define our sexual orientation: one sex is attracted to the other sex. So, according to heteronormativity, our biological sex defines our gender and our sexual desire. Furthermore, the binary system of gender and heteronormativity at its basis favours the existence of a hierarchy between gender, where men have power over women. It therefore produces a set of privileges.

1.2.2.2. Deconstruction

Queer theories aim at debunking heteronormativity. They argue that the gender binary and (hetero-)sexual identity are not determined by biological criteria: gender and sexual identity would only be social constructions, results of social structures, norms and social and political representations.

On the one hand, gender does not necessarily correspond to sex: gender would be only a social construction based on sex. We would have to talk no more about the categories of man and woman, but about masculine and feminine identities, independent from the biological sex. An individual biologically considered man can claim a feminine identity and vice-versa. On the other hand, gender does not necessarily determine sexual desire. This means that sexual desire has to be thought not solely as a desire for the opposite gender or sex, but can be characterized as same-sex desire. Therefore, sexual desire can be heterosexual, homosexual or even bisexual. Furthermore, by working towards the deconstruction of heteronormativity, queer theories aspire to deconstruct also the structure of hierarchy between man and woman promoted by the heterosexual model.

1.2.2.3. Transgression

Queer theories do not only work to question heteronormativity as a framed category of gender and sexual identity. They intend to give more visibility to the plurality of gender and sexual identities. Queer theories do not only focus on homosexuality as identity formation, but also on trans-identities and intersexuality. We have to remember that 'queer' is essentially used for self-qualification. Therefore the term can be used by any person who is willing to distance him- or herself from the heteronormative model to claim his or her difference and therefore his or her own identity without having to conform to the frame of a specific category. This addresses not only gays and lesbians - I have shown the limits of this category - but also every other kind of gender and sexual identity, like bisexuals, transgender people, drags, cyborgs, etc..

1.2.3. To transgress the sexuality and gender criteria

1.2.3.1. A lack of social plurality
Gudrun Perko emphasizes that originally the queer concept was developed in the U.S.A. in reaction to heteronormativity and the gender binary but also to gay and lesbian identity models that only concern a certain category of people with same-sex desire. Similarly, the second generation of German Queer Studies, also understood as Black Queer Studies of queers-of-colour, does not focus only on the category of sex and gender but also on social criteria. Indeed, the first German queer theories were criticized insofar as they did not consider racist structures in society since the discourse of Queer Studies was only developed by white analysts who did not need to reflect on and defend their whiteness. This lack of social and racial plurality inside the German academic Queer Studies milieu was for example criticized by Jennifer Petzen in her essay *Queer Trouble. Centering Race in Queer and Feminist Politics* (2012) [1]. It appears therefore that the concept of queerness has to work on an intersectional approach: it has not only to transgress sexuality and gender normativity, but also to intersect the sexuality and gender plurality with other social criteria - like social class, race and culture or cultural origins - in order to avoid maintaining other forms of discrimination while promoting acceptance and tolerance.

1.2.3.2. Inclusion of social criteria into the concept of queerness

Thus, an intersectional method of Queer Studies developed in response to a limited comprehension of the concept of queerness that focuses only on sex and gender categories. Such an approach, considering every form of social discrimination, can be understood

"as a form of queer theories that includes several categories like sex/gender, colour, culture, cultural origin, age, ability, etc. in accordance with them the social status of people is determined." (Perko 2006: 8) [1]

Furthermore, it works "for the abolition of hierarchies as a division of the respective society in categories of power and non-power, in 'upper' and 'lower' status groups, in people with and without rights and pleads in an ethic and political sense for the recognition of the same rights, the same possibilities and the equal access to social resources for everyone" (Perko 2006: 8). [2]

1.2.4. To transgress identity policies as mechanisms and structures of an order

1.2.4.1. Identity thought as a social construct

As Gudrun Perko reminds us, queer theories argue that identity is a social construction. It is the result of the addition of several criteria like social status, race, culture, cultural origins, etc.. Therefore identity is not innate but has been acquired and may become a generator of discrimination.

---


[2] [Der plurale-queere Einsatz] kann als eine Richtung von Queer-Theorien verstanden werden, der mehrere Kategorien wie Sex/Gender, Hautfarbe, Kultur, kulturelle Herkünfte, Alter, Ability etc. einbezieht, über die der Status eines Menschen in der Gesellschaft bestimmt wird". (Perko 2006: 8)

"The closer an individual’s identifying attributes are to a social mainstream, the more integrated and successful the individual will be in that society. The more these attributes diverge from the mainstream, the stronger the relegation of the individual to the status of a social misfit. The more totalitarian a society is, the more unidimensional these institutionalized categories of identification are, categories that are linked to specific representations of normality and always imply inclusions and exclusions." (Perko 2006: 9)\[1\]

1.2.4.2. Deconstruction of identity as a factor of discrimination

Queer theories intend to provoke the deconstruction and the transgressing of categorical and identity’s political restrictions in order to break the distinction between mainstream and social fringe, to break social structures and mechanisms of reproduction of these structures thought as a system of unequal attribution of privileges between mainstream and outsiders. Therefore the concept of queerness opposes a static comprehension of identity and supports a definition of the subject explained by Cornelius Castoriadis as an imagining, composing project in permanent movement and an evolution that never embodies a satisfying form and always needs to be rethought.\[1\] In this way, a queer perspective advocates not only for a mixing and a crossing of identities, but for the abolition of every univocal and natural identity. The concept of queerness works against the formation of a framed group with a specific political thought and conception that would work for a system of inclusion and exclusion of people inside or outside the group. The concept of queerness can therefore be considered as working for a free self-qualification, so that everyone can choose to qualify his- or herself as queer or not, without having to correspond to specific criteria. Queer claims to be an open and free category, or a non-category.


1.2.4.3. Evolving identity remains political

Nevertheless, another aspect of queer is, especially as Judith Butler argued, that deconstruction of identity does not mean deconstruction of politics. As Hakan Gürses emphasizes, it is possible to act as individual without having to adopt a collective name and identity (such as gay and lesbian, migrant, black, etc.): it is possible to fight against power and mainstream as an individual with other individuals without having to be part of a united group or category (Perko 2006: 9).\[1\] Thus, the plural-queer variant criticizes every univocal identity and framed category (heterosexual, gay and lesbian, etc.) as a structure and mechanism of exclusion that provide social order.


1.3. The relevance of employing the concept of queerness in the context of Africa

1.3.1. Same-sex and transgendering practices
Considering the first step of an intersectional queer approach as a method to understand the concept of queerness in the African context, I will focus on several kinds of social and cultural practices that challenge heteronormativity. But it would be wrong to consider these practices as ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay and lesbian’ only. In other words, applying Western social structures to these practices does not make sense in the context of African countries, because there is no historical correspondence to the Western construction of homosexuality as social category.

As I explained before, ‘gay’ identity is not universal and actually applies only to a specific group of people. It is a Western concept that does not consider - at least does not work for the visibility of - social, racial and cultural diversity, contrary to ‘queer’. Furthermore, Thabo Msibi argues that even the term ‘homosexual’ is originally a Western concept. It was invented and developed during the 19th century in the West to denote a kind of sickness for those attracted to the same sex. In his essay *The Homosexual Role*, Mary McIntosh wrote that “the creation of a specialized, despised, and punished role of the homosexual keeps the bulk of society pure in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law-abiding” (Msibi 2001: 56). According to Msibi then, “homosexuality was therefore a term initially introduced in the West to control social relations, while labeling those engaged in same-sex relations as deviant”. In this way, Thabo Msibi insists that “both the concepts of ‘homosexuality’ and ‘gay’ have no meaning in Africa, as they come from especially historical and political Western experiences”. Therefore, historically Africa did not know a ‘gay liberation,’ and homosexuality has not been recognized as a category of sexuality or identity as it is the case in the West. An identity based on sexuality was not considered. Therefore, it is more relevant to use the term ‘same-sex-desiring individuals’ for an analysis of same-sex relations in the African context. Msibi also calls for Debora Amory’s approach of *homosexuality*: “same-sex erotics, practiced by many people in many different historical contexts, do not always necessarily lead to emergence of a [‘gay’] identity” (Msibi 2001: 57).

So it is relevant to apply the concept of queerness in the African context insofar as Queer Studies - in their intersectional approach - consider sexual and gender criteria but also social, racial and cultural criteria. In this way, the concept of queerness considers the specificity of the structures and social mechanisms of the African context. It transgresses a white discourse thought as universal and reaches beyond a comprehension of sexual and gender plurality limited to the Western context.

Then, an intersectional approach, and especially Gudrun Perko’s ‘plural-queer variant’ works for the deconstruction of a static group identity which may become a factor of inclusion and exclusion. A reduction of Africa to the geographic borders of the continent, though, would establish a distinction between native Africans and migrants. I will thus not reduce Africa to a geographic area but also consider the African diaspora outside the continent, for example in Cuba: *Queering Blackness and Diaspora: Las Krudas Cubensis’ Feminist Hip Hop from Cuba*.


2. How can Queer Studies work towards the tolerance of "queer" practices in the African context?

2.1. Queer theories as a way to think plurality and struggle against discrimination
Gudrun Perko’s essay ends with the presentation of queer theories as a way to think plurality. According to her, the model of plurality is on the one hand understood as a deconstruction of policies of identity and the thinking of identity. On the other hand, it is thought as recognition and depiction of both diversity and equality of people and ways of life as a fact. Plurality signifies therefore to recognize and consider the multiplicity and diversity of human beings and human livings. In this way, any conception of human being and living cannot be considered as ‘normal’ or ‘mainstream’ in opposition to an other that is the subject of discrimination.

### 2.2. Current homophobic discourses in African countries. ‘Sodomite-Free’ Africa

Nevertheless, this plurality of human beings is currently not considered everywhere and is even still the object of discrimination in some contexts where heteronormativity is strongly promoted. In numerous African countries homosexuality is forbidden by law, and it is punishable by penalty, imprisonment or even death in certain states. Same-sex relations between men are punished in 38 of the 54 African countries and same-sex relations between women in 29 of these countries.

Nevertheless, this plurality of human beings is currently not considered everywhere and is even still the object of discrimination in some contexts where heteronormativity is strongly promoted. In numerous African countries homosexuality is forbidden by law, and it is punishable by penalty, imprisonment or even death in certain states. Same-sex relations between men are punished in 38 of the 54 African countries and same-sex relations between women in 29 of these countries.

Several African leaders promote a discourse that presents homosexuality as “un-African”. Thabo Msibi gives some examples in his essay. President Obasanjo from Nigeria, for example, stated on national news that “homosexuality is unnatural, ungodly, and un-African” (Msibi 2001: 61). Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe argues that homosexuality is a “scourge planted by the white man on a pure continent” (Msibi 2001: 62). And in the same way, Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi claimed that “Kenya ha[d] no room or time for homosexuals and lesbians”, and that “homosexuality is against African norms and traditions and even in religion it is considered a great sin” (Msibi 2001: 62). By considering these homophobic discourses, Thabo Msibi argues “that these claims represent a façade that serves to entrench patriarchy and heteronormativity as legitimate and fixed in African societies” (Msibi 2001: 55).

### 2.3. Homophobia as a Western import

In one way, African leaders are right: homosexuality considered as a political identity is a Western import. Indeed, as we explained before, homosexuality understood as ‘gay’ is characterized by a specific history that has no equivalence in the African context. So, Msibi shows that “the key difference between the West and Africa is not the presence or absence of same-sex desire, but its different social construction” (Msibi 2001: 55). Thus, homosexuality understood as same-sex desire does exist today in Africa but is above all an inherent part of African history. Numerous practices of same-sex relationships have been identified in African cultures and traditions.

But although homosexuality thought as simply same-sex desire is not a Western import, homophobia is. Homophobia evolved consequently to Western colonization. Here, I would like to give some keys for comprehension, and we will synthesize the topic of homophobia in Africa in two points:

### 2.3.1. A product of Western colonization and the influence of religion
First, the current relation of the people to homosexuality in Africa is the product of Western colonization. On the one hand, as Desiree Lewis explained in her essay *Representing African sexualities*, colonial and racist representations considered African as primitive, uncivilized people, “whose instincts, it was felt, were wholly different from the sophisticated desires of Westerners”.[1] In this way, their sexuality could solely be defined in relation to purpose of reproduction and in this way, it had to be heterosexual. Thus, “Africans could not possibly display homoerotic desires or agencies, which were associated with sophisticated human desires and eroticism” (Lewis 2001). On the other hand, with colonization, Western norms were introduced and imposed in Africa, and especially Christianity and Christian moral, which worked towards a condemnation of same-sex practices and the socialization of heterosexuality as the only way to be. Thus homophobia was institutionalized and introduced in law. Today, law and religion are the two principal criteria used to support and justify homophobia in Africa. Thus, penalization of homosexuality African legislations is often an heritage of colonial time. Thabo Msibi insists that countries like Malawi, Uganda or Nigeria are former British colonies and that all of them “have retained the penal code imposed through colonialism” (Msibi 2001: 57). Furthermore, religion is currently very frequently used to condemn homosexuality. According to Msibi, “religion, both Christianity and Islam, has served to deny and place in question the morality and existence of same-sex relations” (Msibi 2001: 68).


### 2.3.2. A “neoconservatism”?

The second cause of current homophobia in Africa is the recurrence of what Thabo Msibi calls a “neo-conservatism that in effects works to create and foster patriarchy” (Msibi 2001: 70). In the last decades, Africa has been marked by struggles for gender parity that challenged the role and definition of manhood while women’s emancipation troubled and destabilized men’s position of superiority in society. “Similarly, a visible ‘gay’ identity destabilizes men’s positions in society, creating the need for men to reassert themselves.” (Msibi 2001: 70) Thus, a will to reduce homosexuality in Africa became visible through projects of anti-homosexual laws and through social phenomena of homophobia like the ‘correctives rapes’ in South Africa. Therefore, these increased expressions of homophobia in Africa appear also as “a tool for sexism, an attempt to solidify men’s position in society” (Msibi 2001: 70-71). They are linked to a promotion of compulsory normativity in order to legitimate the patriarchy in place that has been questioned not only by the emancipation of women, but now through the visibility of same-sex desire. Therefore “recent attempts to rid Africa of same-sex-desiring individuals symbolize the rise in conservative sentiments seeking to legitimize patriarchy in African societies” (Msibi 2001: 71).

This patriarchal ‘neo-conservatism’ must be put in relation to national political discourses. Politicians of post-colonial governments such as Robert Mugabe and Jacob Zuma have exploited “populist appeals to many African’s desire for ‘authenticity’” and worked “to demonstrate their allegiance to practices defined as African” (Lewis 2001). They have therefore promoted models of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity generates a patriarchal family frame that insures “the ‘natural’ reproduction of communities and the ‘rightful’ belonging of individuals within collectivities” (Lewis 2001). Thus, homosexuality “drastically confounds the ‘natural’ binaries, identities and relationships central to fictions of nation: to belong as citizens, we have legitimate and ‘natural’ sexual roles to play. When we step out of these roles, we become unnatural, Westernized and traitorous” (Lewis 2001). Some leaders have developed a “paternal authority that has been defined as an index of the pride of an entire group, and ascendant manhood has come to signify the reclaimed pride of the entire community” (Lewis 2001). Therefore these politicians work to maintain themselves as a patriarchal figure for several African (authentic) communities, “and central to their paternal power is the demonstration of control over others’ bodies” (Lewis 2001). In this way, controlling sexuality and maintaining heteronormativity become a demonstration of their power. By working for the reduction of homosexuality, they work for the maintenance of their paternal figure which would be destabilized by the visibility of same-sex desire.
Regarding current expressions of homophobia in the African context, Queer Studies might be able to give visibility to same-sex practices as an inherent part of African history in order to work against this representation of same-sex desire as un-African and to promote tolerance and acceptance toward homosexuality in the African context.

3. Queer practices in tradition, history, culture and society

Same-sex relations as well as transgenering practices are present in numerous African societies where they were tolerated and accepted. However, such practices were and are not understood as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ in terms of political categories or identities. I will therefore describe some cases of these practices and try to depict recurrent phenomena by considering the specificity of social structures in the African context.

3.1. “Female-husbandry”

Marriages between women constitute a tradition in numerous African societies. They are generally practiced between an older wealthy woman who has no children and a younger woman with children. The older woman ‘adopts’ the children of her ‘wife’ who become her descendants and the younger woman is nurtured by her ‘female-husband’. The tradition of ‘female-husbandry’ is not relegated solely to the pre-colonial period since anthropologists Robin Morgan and Saskia Wieringa have identified same-sex relationships among women in more than forty contemporary African cultures, for example among the Igbo people in Nigeria, the Nandi, Kisu, Kamba, Kalenjin and Kikuyu in Kenya, the Sangoma in South Africa and the Fon in Dahomey (Benin) (Msibi 2001: 65-66). I will focus on the cases of the Igbo and the Kamba.


3.1.1. Trans-gendering and “female-husbandry” by Igbo women from Niger

The practice of ‘female-husbandry’ among Igbo people has already existed in precolonial time in a social context where women were powerful and autonomous. Women enjoyed a great power and autonomy in “goddess worship, matrilinearity, dual sex-systems, gender flexibility in social roles and neuter linguistic elements or systems”[1] in this society. Thus, ‘female husbandry’ appears as a way to get social prestige.

In the indigenous Nnobi society on the 19th century, woman-to-woman marriage was called igba ohu. The ‘female husband’ could have one or several ‘wives’; polygamy was possible. In her book Male Daughters, Female Husbands. Gender and Sex in an African Society, Ifi Amadiume notes that the ‘female husband’ could give her wife, who generally came from another town than Nnobi, a (male) husband somewhere else and adopt the role of mother to her but claim her services (Amadiume 1987: 42). Furthermore, ‘female husbands’ generally possessed the ekwe title. It was believed that women who were characterized by involuntary possession (beyond one’s wish or control) had been chosen by the goddess Idenilli. People thought that “it was the goddess herself, through her possession of the woman, who would give her the money or wealth with which to take the title”. But actually, this wealth came from the woman’s economic abilities and charismatic attributes, real or potential (Amadiume 1987: 42), which means control of other’s services, such as woman-to-woman marriage. ‘Female husbandry’ appears therefore as an economic practice and a way to get social prestige.
Furthermore, in her article *Of Female Husbands and Boarding School Girls. Gender bending Unoma Azuah’s Fiction*, Chantal Zabus depicts woman-to-woman marriage as a way to entertain familial lineage, another form of social prestige. Female husbands, originally as currently, are generally widows without male offspring, who take on ‘wives’ to produce heirs for their husbands’ lineages. The ‘wives’ then take in male lovers, have children who are in turn handed over to the ‘female husbands’. In another case, “families whose lineages are in danger of dying out due to lack of male heirs encourage their eldest daughter to stay home as the ‘son’ of the family, take in lovers and bear children, hopefully sons to perpetuate the family name”. Indeed, daughters could “become sons and consequently males, after the nhanye practice of ritualistically transforming a daughter into a son or ‘male daughter’” (Zabus 2004: 94). Thabo Msibi evokes also a process known as *nyayakwa* (replacement) through it a brother-less daughter could also become a male to inherit the fathers compound (Msibi 2001: 65).

However, as Chantal Zabus emphasizes it, the question remains if woman-to-woman marriage implicated also female-female sexuality and desire, or if it was only an economic and symbolic way to get social prestige. The *Ekwe* ceremony - whereby the *Ekwe* title conveys control of other’s services - ends with the crawling of the ‘co-wives’, or *inyom di*, one after another, between the legs of the *Ekwe* titled, while she sits with legs astride. Through this ritual, the ‘co-wives’ showed respect and honor (*ugwu*) to the *Ekwe* woman. According to Chantal Zabus, this ritual does not only symbolize “the acceptance of the female husband’s superiority and authority”, but is also characterized by a sexual connotation and could be understood as an allusion to “a larger economy in Igbo woman-to-woman marriage, as is the case in the case in the “mummy-baby” relationships in Lesotho and other parts of the African continent” (Zabus 2004: 95).

---


---

3.1.2. Traditional marriages between Kamba women from Kenya

The practice of woman-to-woman marriage also developed in certain ethnic groups from Kenya in the precolonial era. ‘Female husbandry’ was practiced in the Kikuyu tribe, the largest ethnic community in Kenya, but also among the Nandi, Kisu, Kamba and Kalenjin ethnic groups. In these tribes, an elderly woman could marry a ‘female wife’ when she felt that she needed it. According to Nancy Baraka [1], this was encouraged by the community, “not solely for the sake of inheritance but also as a way of encouraging procreation” (Morgan and Wieringa 2005: 26-27).
This tradition has been in existence for a long time and is still practiced and accepted today for Kikuyu, Kamba and Kalenjin people who currently live in traditional rural settings. There, woman-to-woman marriages are seen "as a welcome alternative to heterosexual marriage" (Morgan and Wieringa 2005: 40). Usually, an elder woman whose husband has died marries a younger woman who can bear children for her, as this is the case of the female marriage between Kavisu and Mwikali, two Kamba women that Nancy Baraka interviewed. Kavisu, the ‘female husband’ of the couple, is a 57-years-old woman without biological children, living in Kitui, around 120 km from Nairobi, the capital. She grew up in a rural setting with no education and is a traditionalist. After her husband died, she inherited his property and had to take care of it. Kavisu was encouraged by her clan to marry Mwikali who could help her with the chores. Kavisu would also benefit by getting her wife’s children who will inherit her property. Mwikali is a 29-years-old woman who had a basic education and is Christian. Baraka reports that she agreed to the same-sex marriage as she needed someone to take care of her four children who were fathered by different men. Then it is also a way to improve her economic situation and to get land. Thus, after Kavisu’s death, Mwikali will inherit her property. The ‘wife’ takes also the name of her ‘husband’; Mwikali’s has become Mwikali Kavisu. According to the custom that the older woman pays the bride-price to the younger woman’s family, Kavisu gave Mwikali some goats, cows and some other properties for appreciation. Even after the marriage, Kavisu continues to help Mwikali’s family in appreciation of them letting her marry her.

However, in such woman-to-woman marriages the relationship between women is not sexual: Nancy Baraka emphasizes even firmly that the issue of same-sex sexuality within these marriages is considered taboo (Morgan and Wieringa 2005: 40). According to Nancy Baraka, "when an older woman takes a younger woman as her wife, she refers to the older woman as her ‘mother in law’. The children call the older woman ‘grandmother’. The relationship is viewed as if the younger woman has been married to the older woman’s son". Thus Kavisu describes the motherly love she has for her ‘wife’ and for her ‘grandchildren’: "I love her in the same way a mother loves a daughter, so that is what I feel for her. I do not love her romantically like the way a woman loves a man; no, mine is motherly love. […] I love my children because they are my grandchildren and my wife."

Furthermore, even Kavisu as the ‘female husband’ (or ‘grandmother’) takes care of her wife’s children and is considered by them as the father, she feels that she does not take the role the husband in the family and rather sees herself as the elder who is respected as a provider. According to the custom, the younger woman helps the older woman with chores. So Mwikali washes Kavisu’s clothes, cooks for her and is the one who cultivates. In return, Kavisu looks after the children if their mother is not at home.

At least, procreation is encouraged. The younger woman discusses with her ‘mother-in-law’, the main determinant of who will impregnate her, to decide who should father the children. Kavisu and Mwikali have finally chosen a married man of Kavisu’s clan. Baraka reports also that Kavisus has built a separate house for her wife to accommodate her male lover and give her more intimacy.

Finally we have to emphasize that these female marriages are accepted by the society insofar as the relationship between the two women is not sexual. Nevertheless, according to Nancy Baraka, “this kind of relationship in a female-headed household could form a basis for the acceptance of same-sex marriages and the raising of children in female households” (Morgan and Wieringa 2005: 40).


3.2. Simultaneity, same-sex relationships and friendships and “heterosexual” marriage
Same-sex relations and/or friendship, either among men or among women, are a usual practice in several ethnic groups and societies in the African context. These same-sex relationships, which may mingle friendship and sexual relations, generally take place between people who are also married with a person of the other sex and have children. However, even if these practices include both same-sex and ‘heterosexual’ relationships, they cannot be categorized as “bisexual” according to Western comprehension.

Rudolph P. Gaudio, in his article Male Lesbians and other Queer Notions in Hausa, describes bisexuality as “an individual’s acknowledged capacity to be sexually attracted to both men and women and to the assertion of one’s prerogative to act on such attraction”. Indeed, that “implies a degree of choice regarding sexual matters” which is not necessarily recognized in African societies (Gaudio 1998: 47). [1] Then, marriage appears often in the African context as a social and cultural institution, not necessarily linked to heterosexual desire and love.

Different variants and specific forms of this kind of relation developed depending on cultural and social contexts. For example, Thabo Msibi, referring to Evans-Pritchard’s study, writes that among the Zande - Islamic-influenced people living in the forest of southwestern Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the northeastern Congo - sisters who married brothers were reputed to have sexual compensation in engaging same-sex sexual practices during which they used sweet potatoes carved into penis shapes and other things (Msibi 2001: 68). [2] According to Msibi, in Benin, among the Fon ethnic group, boys are currently allowed to enjoy close sexual friendships among each other to ease the sex drive (Msibi 2001: 66). This researcher also reports male same-sex practices among a Senegalese thriving community in Dakar (Msibi 2001: 67-68) and among the Hausa-speakers in Nigeria (Msibi 2001: 65-66). In Lesotho, the “Mummy-baby” relationships between young girls have been the object of several studies. I will focus on this last case, but also on the cases of Dakar and of the Hausa-speakers.


3.2.1. “Mummy-baby” same-sex relations between young girls in Lesotho

As William J. Spurlin reports, ‘Mummy-baby’ same-sex relations between young girls and women have been institutionalized and are considered as a customary in Lesotho. [1] Adolescent girls in the modern schools develop close relationships with slightly older girls: one girl who takes a liking to another and asks her to be her “mummy” or “baby”, depending of their relative ages (Spurlin 2001: 193). William J. Spurlin reports that “the relationship develops through organized encounters and by material and emotional exchanges such as gift-giving and advice on having sex with men, and are recognized means within Lesotho culture by which young women extend the range of their social relations” (Spurlin 2001: 193). Furthermore, there are not only affectionate ties but also erotic ties between both girls. Indeed, sexual intimacy is an important aspect of these relationships, even if, as emphasizes Desiree Lewis, they are not semantically conceptualized as such, with ‘sexual’ being a term reserved for heterosexual relations.
Furthermore, William Spurlin emphasizes that the “mummy-baby” relationships have to be understood in Lesotho’s specific socioeconomic context, which is characterized by male migrant labor. Indeed, nearly half of Lesotho’s adult male labor force migrates to nearby South Africa to work for long periods of time. Thus, this has the effect of increasing female economic dependence - women become dependent on male earnings or subsistence from the land - but also to create unstable marital relations: the migrant system encourages not only prolonged separation, but also non-support, desertion, and divorce. Thus, this form of female same-sex relationship takes place in parallel and in compatibility of the marriage with a man. On the one hand, the intense level of genital sexuality that the relationship includes makes women able “to exercise a great deal of initiative and autonomy, unlike the formal rules of marriage where they were constrained both by the male-dominated family system and the modern male-dominated economic system”. On the other hand, women develop and nourish romantic and sensual bonds that “often continue alongside and are compatible with conventional heterosexual marriage and can become the basis for a lifelong support structure” (Spurlin 2001: 193). Thus Spurlin reports the testimony of Mpho’ M’atsepo Nthunya, a woman from Lesotho, who tells that she developed a same-sex friendship with another woman in parallel of the union with her husband, who agreed with this relationship and was friend with the other woman’s husband (Spurlin 2001: 193-194). So, according to Judith Gay, “mummy-baby relationships not only provide emotional support prior to marriage, but also a network of support for married and unmarried women in the new towns or schools, either replacing or accompanying heterosexual bonds”. [2]


3.2.2. A thriving community of men with same-sex practices in Senegal

Teunis and Larmarange, whose studies Thabo Msibi mentions in his article [1], have identified a current thriving community of men having same-sex intercourses in Dakar which would be known to exist in the entire city (Msibi 2001: 67-68). This same-sex sexuality has been defined in language by these men who refer to themselves as gordiguene and which translates as ‘manwoman’ (Msibi 2001: 68). Two different broad types of sexual identities appear among the gordiguene. On the one hand, the term oubis (that means ‘open’) (Msibi 2001: 68), also ubbi or ibbi (Larmarange 2009: 729) designates the passive men who are effeminate and often speak to each other in feminine pronouns (Msibi 2001: 68). On the other hand, the term yauss (Msibi 2001: 68) or yoos (Larmarange 2009: 729) (that means ‘loose woman’ or ‘the fallen or bad woman’) designs the men who penetrate during sexual intercourse. These are mostly married or have girlfriends and largely present masculine mannerisms (Msibi 2001: 68). According to Larmarange, the ubbi recognize themselves as ‘homosexual’ and claim to be “gay” or “bran chéf” (trendy), while the yoos do not recognize themselves as ‘homosexual’ and use the term “MSM” (Men having Sex with other Men). [2] Thus, Larmarange’s study emphasizes an absence of systematic links between practice and identity in the African context.

However, it appears that both categories of men - the yauss but also the oubis - entertain relationships with women, an often matrimonial relationship. In other terms, most of the men who have same-sex intercourses do it in parallel of relationships with women beyond the categorization of yauss and oubis. Indeed, Larmarange emphasizes that the main differentiating factor to understand the relational dynamics of men he interviewed for his study is the question of romantic attachment to a man or a woman beyond the practice of same-sex intercourse.
On the one hand, for men who feel love with other men who mainly identify as “gay” or “branché”, marriage of convenience is viewed as a necessity, “either to conceal their homosexuality - which often provokes strong feelings of guilt with regard to religion or the family - or else to put an end to family pressures to marry” (Larmarange 2009: 734). The relations they have with women “are limited to the wife, fiancée, or betrothed even if the individual has occasional sexual relations with other types of female partners, notably when he feels that he is required to demonstrate his heterosexual “normality” and his “masculinity”, or when taking part in “folies”, that Larmarange describes as “a kind of erotic orgy, generally without penetration, and in which women may take part, unlike what MSM call a ‘partouze’, which only concerns men” (Larmarange 2009: 734). Thus, these men have an almost exclusive relation to their lover which involves few other male partners.

On the other hand, men who feel love for women “view heterosexual marriage, even a love marriage, as a way of escaping their homosexual practices which are a source of shame and dissatisfaction” (Larmarange 2009: 734). Their male same-sex intercourses are usually characterized by multi-partnerships of both sexes, often simultaneously, involving both a variety of practices in a search for maximum sexual pleasure, and/or transactional relations.

---


Larmarange reports that the term Men having Sex with Men (MSM) has been used by the World Health Organization (WHO) since 1994 to designate individuals by their practices and not according to their social or cultural identity.

### 3.2.3. A male same-sex subculture in Hausaland, Nigeria

As in Dakar, there is a community of men with same-sex relations among the Hausa-speakers, the most widely spoken language in West Africa, in Kano (Nigeria), the largest city in Hausaland. Rudolph P. Gaudio, an American homosexual graduate student researcher in Northern Nigeria in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, describes it in his essay *Male Lesbians and other Queer Notions in Hausa*, as “a thriving social world of Hausa men who acknowledged and acted upon their sexual attraction to other men” (Gaudio 1998: 47), which takes place in nightclubs and outdoor festivities. These men are called *yan daudu*, what is usually translated as “homosexuals” or “transvestites”, and self-identify as men who act “like women” (*kamar mata*). Indeed, according to Teunis, they are cross-dressers and “have sex with men and frequently engage in activities especially associated with women” (Msibi 2001: 66). Thus, the *yan daudu* displays visibility and social proximity to female *karuwai* (courtesans, prostitutes) which attracts otherwise unidentifiable “men who seek men” (*maza masu neman maza*) and enables them to meet and socialize without having to blow their cover (Gaudio 1998: 47). Gaudio therefore identifies two groups of men having sex with men, the “feminine” and the “masculine”, among what could be seen as a same-sex desire Hausa subculture.

The researcher also stresses the specificity of this community with male same-sex relations, especially in relation to the Western U.S. gay community, of which most of Hausa men from Nigeria have little if any knowledge. Even these men are “conscious of themselves as men who have sex with men”, and “consider themselves to be socially (if not temperamentally) distinct from men who do not have this kind of sex”. Hausa people do not name them in terms of specific identity. Gaudio reports that “Hausa people generally refer to homosexuality as an act rather than a psychological drive or predisposition”, and homosexual men are more often described as men who do homosexuality, that is, who have same-sex intercourses, rather than as men who sexually want other men, in other terms, who feel same-sex desire. So, the most common in-group term for men who have sex with men is *masu harka* (“those who do the business”), often abbreviated to *masu yi* (“those who do [it]”).
Furthermore, men who have same-sex relationships, including those who identify as “womanlike”, are also often married to women and have children, even as they maintain their more covert identity as men who have sex with men. Heterosexuality, marriage and parenthood constitute strong normative values in Hausa Muslim society. Thus, Gaudio emphasizes that most Hausa people do not see marriage (with a woman) as a choice connected to heterosexual desire but rather as a moral and social obligation. So, both the mainstream and in-group, by considering male same-sex relationships, presume that men involved in same-sex practices have sex with women at least in order to father children and not necessarily for sexual pleasure.

3.3. Cultural understanding of same-sex relationships in other terms than sexuality

In this last point, I will emphasize again that the Western gay, lesbian and bisexual categories cannot apply to the African context insofar as sexuality is traditionally not understood as a criterion defining identity. In other terms, identity is in several cases based on criteria other than sexuality. To illustrate the discussion, I will focus on male same-sex relationships in South Africa during the apartheid era.

3.3.1. Sex and Gender rather than sexuality. Same-sex desiring men or a third sex

In several cases, same-sex relationships and sexual relations are understood in gendered terms rather than in terms of sexuality. This is for example the case of the yan dauda that we have already described. Indeed, while their sexual relations with other men are marginalized, yan dauda’s dress, conduct and work align them with women’s domain. Thabo Msibi reports also that in Uganda, among the Nilotico Lango, an agriculturist community north of Lake Kwanai, men who assumed an alternative gender status called mukodo dako, could marry other men and have same-sex relations (Msibi 2001: 66). Besides, among the Iteso ethnic group in Uganda and Kenya, same-sex relations have been practiced among men “who felt like women and became women for all intents and purposes, including voices, manner of walking, and speech” (Msibi 2001: 66).

As Doham shows it in his essay Freeing South Africa. The Modernization of Male-Male Sexuality in Soweto, sexuality in terms of same-sex identity construction is especially understood in gendered terms during the apartheid era in South African urban black culture where local notions of sexed bodies and gendered identities were used to divide and categorize instead of sexuality in the Western sense (Doham 1998: 7). Thus, in the 1960s and the 1970s, male same-sex subculture in the townships revolved around cross-dressing and sexual role-playing and around the idea of a third sex. Urban black boys showing signs of effeminacy - in other terms, who were gender-deviant - were not seen as men, but as women, or at least as some variation thereof, a mixture of a man and a woman, a third sex. Effeminate partners in male-sex coupling were designed as stabane, a term that literally means ‘hermaphrodite’ in black township slang. Conversely, the other partner remained, according to most participants, simply a man (and certainly not a ‘homosexual’) (Doham 1998: 8). Commenting Doham’s essay, Msibi emphasizes therefore that “sexuality was defined according to one’s sexual role. Men doing the penetration were considered ‘real men’, while those who had the receptive role were considered to be ‘women’” (Msibi 2001: 65). Furthermore, most of these effeminate men, who dressed as women and adopted only the receptive role in sexual intercourse, referred to themselves in their own slang as sk esanas.
Doham, who in his essay reports of the existence of a network of *skesan as* in Soweto by the early 1970s, especially illustrates his topic with the case of Linda, a gay black man who died of AIDS in his mid-thirties in Soweto in 1993. He was also one of the founding members of GLOW (the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand). Linda, who grew up in Soweto during the apartheid era, did not initially consider himself to be ‘gay’ but to be part of the female gender. A gendered system was imposed on him as she grew up. Even if he had male genitalia, because of his effeminacy, Linda was raised by his parents as a girl - for example by wearing girl’s clothes - and thought of himself in this way. Doham reports that even if it was gender that made sense to Linda himself, strangers in the township typically used sex as a classificatory grid. Linda was therefore taken by others as a biologically-mixed third sex, who thought that he had both female and male sexual organs. Even as an adult, he was treated like a girl at home by her family, who expected him to do jobs generally performed by women, like being in the kitchen, washing and ironing and baking. According to Doham, as a teenager, Linda began to undergoing female-hormone treatments, on the recommendation of the doctor. But when he finally decided to halt treatments, his father, a minister of the Twelfth Apostle Church, was disappointed. It seemed that he would rather have a son who grew breasts and outwardly appeared to be a girl than a son who was gay (Doham 1998: 8).

Nevertheless, (self-)identifying as gay for black men in townships around Johannesburg emerged in parallel to the end of apartheid and the creation of modern nation. Thus, according to Doham, “with the birth of a ‘free’ South Africa, the notion of sexuality was created for some black men, or more precisely, an identity based on sexuality was created” (Doham 1998: 11). So, a new classificatory grid developed in another way than the old one. That means that now, effeminate men who engaged same-sex relations were not the only ones to be considered as ‘homosexual’ anymore: “both partner in same-sex relationship were potentially classified as the same (male) gender - and as ‘gay’” (Doham 1998: 11). Therefore, gay identity literally meant a new gender for Linda and a new way of relating to his body: “Before, I thought I was a woman. Now I think I’m a man, but it doesn’t worry me anyway. Although it used to cause problems earlier.” (Doham 1998: 13)

3.3.2. Age and wealth. Male-male marriages

During the apartheid era, male-male marriages appeared as a recurrent pattern in South Africa, especially among gangs of thieves on the Rand in the early 20th century, among gold mine workers into the 1980s (Doham 1998: 10) and among the all-male hostels in Soweto populated by men from rural areas in the 1960s. This practice may be perceived as a response to an unusual situation imposed by white rule or that it was linked to real same-sex desire. [1] It nevertheless appears that male-male relationships were organized by age and wealth rather than sex.

Thus, as Doham states, Soweto’s hostels where men from rural areas without the right to reside permanently in Soweto and without their wives lived in order to provide labour to the white-dominated economy, from the 19th century onwards, constituted all-male environments. Here, male-male marriages called *mkehlo* were celebrated. Some of them would take younger workers as ‘wives’. As boys matured and gained their own resources, they in turn would take ‘wives’. In these hostels that had become notorious sites for same-sex sexual relations, it was therefore age and wealth, not sex, that organized and defined male-male sexual relationships. Urbanized *skesan as* - like Linda - were also involved in this kind of marriages. Linda’s testimony, quoted by Doham, reports that during marriage ceremonies, all the young *skesan as* sat on one side and the older ones on the other. Then the young marrying man would get a ‘mother’ chosen by the older men among them while his partner’s ‘mother’ became his ‘father’. The father and the other older men would thus teach him male same-sex sexual practices (Doham 1998: 10).

---

Male-male marriages were also celebrated in Southern African gold mines compounds in the 1980s. According to Msibi, during these matrimonial celebrations known ‘inkostane’, young miners would be ‘married’ off to older workers and would be expected to perform ‘wifely’ duties. They also had sexual intercourse. The younger man got lucrative gifts. Regarding these marriages, Achmat argues that “the labor compound regime created a new space of desire that fostered a number of practices - including male homosexuality - that did not simply help sustain social relations in the countryside, but in fact disrupted them, and exacerbated pre-existing class, gender, and age difference in indigenous social formations” (Spurlin 2001: 191). So, without doubting the presence of same-sex desire, it appears again that other criteria than sexuality organized same-sex relationships, like age, class and gender, that were exacerbated by the social and economic context.

Through these numerous examples, I have shown that same-sex practices do exist in the African context. However, they cannot be understood through Western categories and rather form specific social structures as female-husbandry or sexual friendship. Nevertheless, we cannot establish a generic categorical classification insofar as every practice takes a singular and specific form according to each different region, country and culture. It appears anyway that in the African context same-sex practices are included to and are inherent in the social structures. They are tolerated and accepted across the society but do not constitute a social category. Indeed, sexuality is not a criterion defining identity. Thus, same-sex desiring individuals are not recognized or considered as a specific social group.


4. The current development of homosexual, gay and queer identities

If same-sex relationships and transgendering practices were and are effectively present in the African context and are an inherent part of Africa’s history, they cannot be read through the Western classificatory grid as corresponding to gay and lesbian or bisexual identities, who did not originally exist in this context. Nevertheless, with the beginning of an era of postcolonialism and postmodernism, an identity based on sexuality was also created and developed also in many African countries.

Recently, expressions of homophobia increased throughout the African continent claiming that homosexuality is un-African. However, even the social construction of same-sex desire as a political category and identity is a Western import. Practices including same-sex relationships have existed throughout the history of the African context, as well as same-sex desiring individuals, and exist and evolve here today. With the beginning of a postcolonialist era and globalization, an identity based on sexuality - especially of same-sex desire - developed, and the concept of ‘gay’ identity was introduced into the African context. An amalgam is therefore made between ‘gay’ identity that is perceived as Western import and homosexuality - now neutrally understood as same-sex desire and independent from the Western political dimension.
However, same-sex desiring individuals in the African context aspire to freely live their sexuality without being threatened under the pretext that is un-African. In the last decade, the aspiration of the recognition of same-sex desiring identities has emerged. Several activist movements of African same-sex desiring individuals have developed during the recent years to defend their civil rights throughout the African continent. These organizations thus call for civil rights for gays and lesbians, queer individuals or LGBTQ community members. Then, although the previous examples of same-sex practices reflect the complexity of homosexuality in the African context, the emerging movement of same-sex desiring individuals has to use 'Western' terms and concepts in order to become recognized as a political identity with civil rights. However, the designation of gay and lesbian is often considered as a general term for same-sex desiring individuals and has taken a universal sense for homosexuality. So, it does not particularly appear as a claim for a specific ‘Western’ identity anymore. These organizations work for the recognition and tolerance of same-sex desire in the African context.

Current movements struggling for civil rights for same-sex desiring individuals in Africa are different from Western ‘gay’ movements of the past century not only in view of the geographical, cultural and social context, but also in view of technological progress and in terms of new means of action. Indeed, unlike the ‘gay’ movement born in the 1960s, the current activist organizations have and make use of the Internet and of modern technological means. They are able to work for visibility and tolerance of homosexuality through virtual networks and especially through media and multimedia. Organizations involved in queer activism like the Queer African Youth Network and the Coalition of African Lesbians use online networks. But, especially South African visual activist Zanele Muholi as well as human right activist, photographer and curator Jabu Pereira are involved in such a visual and artistic process via online platforms.

4.1. The Queer African Youth Network

See: http://www.qayn.org/

The Queer African Youth Network is a queer feminist organization that currently includes six member organizations in four countries in both Anglophone and Francophone West Africa and Cameroon: AIDS-ACODEV (Cameroon), ELLES (Cameroon), Ladies’ Voice (Togo), Huma nity First Cameroun and Queer Alliance Nigeria.

4.1.1. History and context of emergence

This organization was founded in 2010 by a Mariam Armisen, a queer feminist from Burkina Faso, as a virtual network that gathers and provides accurate and relevant information on sexual orientation and identity to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) West African youth. To develop QAYN, she approached LGBTQ organizing through a feminist lens, interrogating power and resources distribution in social justice movements, how funding guidelines are customizing women’s grassroots movements into NGOs.

The first member of QAYN was the Queer Alliance Nigeria organization. This organization was founded and is directed by Williams Rashidi, a passionate and visionary defender of equality for all Nigerians regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. He played a key role in the defeat of the same-gender marriage bill in 2009 having spoken before the Nigeria Parliament as an open gay man. He is a graduate of Science Laboratory Technology from Accra Polytechnic in Ghana and is a fellow of the International LGBT and Human Rights Training from the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education.

Six months after its foundation, QAYN in collaboration with Queer Alliance Nigeria, organized a forum in Lagos that gathered over 50 young LGBTQ Nigerians. The meeting shaped the organization’s focus and priorities. The organization reports that the needs that emerged from this forum challenged QAYN to revisit its strategic direction - moving from a virtual space to establishing a network with member organizations across the region. Further needs assessment were conducted within the lesbian, bisexual, queer and women who have sex with women (LBQWSW) communities in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria. The focus group discussions and individual interviews were designed to surface issues at the individual level and challenges faced by young emerging leaders in initiating collective action. [1]
After the issues that surfaced from these discussion groups and QAYN's own experience as a newly formed organization, QAYN chose to define its strategic priorities as such: organize community, build movement, develop leadership, documentation and advocacy work. Then, the organization realized the gap between the emerging LGBTQ movements in Anglophone and Francophone African contexts and decided to prioritize collaboration with francophone groups which are historically under-served. In 2011, on the recommendation of one of its advisers, Charles Gueboguo - a young African sociologist from Cameroon interested in LGBT issue in Francophone Africa [2], QAYN decided to invite two organizations in Cameroun, Humanity First Cameroon and Aids-Acodev, to join the Network.

Then, QAYN wanted to place the leadership of Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer and Women who have Sex with Women (LBQWSW) in the center of the Network and the LGBTQ movement. Thus Women's Health and Equal Rights was the second member of the Network, followed by ELLES formerly Lesbiennes du Cameroun in 2013 and Ladies' Voice (Togo) in 2014.

QAYN's currently directed, managed and administrated by young gays and lesbians and sympathizers activists from Burkina Faso - like Mariam Armisen, the QAYN's founder and network coordinator, Stéphane Simporé, QAYN's programme coordinator of Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (GBT) youth, Félix Zorbo, the assistant programme coordinator of the Francophone LGBT Advocates Initiative (FLAI) project, and Germaine Assoubiona, the assistant programme coordinator - and activists from Togo - like Nataka Smakagni the LBQWSW programme coordinator - and from Europe - like Pierre Meyer, the legal advisor, a Belgian Ph. D of laws teaching in Ouagadougou.

[2] The other advisers are Cesnabmihilo Dorothy Aken'Ova, a Nigerian feminist and a sexual rights activist and the founder and executive director of International Center Reproductive SE, Williams Rashidi, the founding executive director of Queer Alliance Nigeria, Bakah Aicha, an African lesbian living in Niger and an ICT professional currently working with the United Nations World Food Program, Aba Taylor, a first-generation Ghanaian in U.S.A. who has been involved in HIV/AIDS advocacy, international women's rights, LGBT and social justice movements for over a decade, and Malee, a queer Pan-African woman from Côte d'Ivoire and a professional question asker.

4.1.2. Mindset and strategy

QAYN promotes a vision of Africa as “a continent free of violence and discrimination, where the principles of equality and human dignity are upheld for all Africans, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity”. The organization’s self- proclaimed mission is therefore “to establish a vast network of support to promote the well-being and safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in West Africa”.

QAYN argues for an approach integrating the LGBTQ issues in the ensemble of social African issues through comprehension and the sharing of values of social justice. Advocacy and education are integrated in all of the organization’s activities and programs: “At the individual and community level, our mission is to educate both the LGBTQ community and society in general on topics of sexuality, personal freedom, notion of citizenship, principles of non-discrimination and human dignity - to end hostility and violence against LGBTQ individuals”. Thus, in the strategic plan for 2014-2015, QAYN works to raise awareness among the populations and public opinion on LGBTQ problematic, in order to promote a socio-cultural change perception of LGBTQ people. Another important aim of QAYN is to advocate and support access to spaces and resources for emerging activists and the LGBTQ communities as a whole. The organization therefore works for increasing LGBTQ people’s leadership into the promotion and the defense of their rights. Furthermore, at the policy and law level, QAYN advocates for legislative actions and political engagement to end human rights violations against LGBTQ individuals. In this way, QAYN claims that specific programmes working for increasing LGBTQ people’s leadership and populations’ awareness of them have to be integrated in larger countries’ projects of development and in international engagements. In this way, QAYN works for improving the political and juridical environment in favor of LGBTQ people’s rights.
4.2. Coalition of African Lesbians

See: http://www.cal.org.za/new/

4.2.1. History and context of emergence

The Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) is a formation of over 30 organizations in 19 countries in Africa involved in “advancing justice for lesbian and bisexual women and transdiverse people”. This coalition which self-identifies as a group of “passionate feminists, activists and human rights defenders” was established in 2003 at a meeting of 50 women sexual rights activists attending the Sex and Secrecy Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa. The meeting focused on women rights, more precisely about the fact that women - and lesbian women in particular - were often marginalized from decision making and leadership processes on criteria of gender and/or sexual orientation. From this starting point the participants of the conference embarked on a programme of mobilization of lesbian women and organizations in feminism, women’s rights, sexual reproductive health and from what was then the gay and lesbian community. “This was part of [their] commitment to organize [them]selves and get ready for collective action and the building of solidarity to advance and defend [their] rights [as women] on the continent.”[1]

The CAL grew rapidly and wrote its constitution in 2006. Its work and membership increased so quickly that it had to set up a secretariat with staff to support the process of mobilization and organization throughout the continent. The organization’s constituency was expanded so that it now includes lesbian and bisexual women and transdiverse (LBT) people. Furthermore, the CAL network has been through major struggles to keep growing and keeping up with external pressures and internal movement building challenges. The CAL argues: “We have also fought hard to, against all odds, keep our doors open and have emerged stronger and more focused.”

The CAL is currently directed by Dawn Cavanagh who frames her political standpoint as a woman and a lesbian and hopes for a world where there is freedom from gender constraints. As an activist and feminist she has worked over the years on issues of access to health, HIV and AIDS, women’s rights sexual and reproductive rights. The CAL secretariat is firstly composed by Fadzai Muparutsa, a Zimbabwean feminist and human rights defender, who is the international and regional advocacy officer, Eunice Namugwe, a Ugandan activist, who is the programmes officer for East Africa, Trish Dzingirayi a social worker by profession, who is the programmes officer for Southern Africa, Thomas Sweleka, a human rights activist from Kwathema, East of Johannesburg, who is the general assistant, Mathabo Maqhubela, a feminist, activist and human rights defender, who is the finance officer, and Surprise Maroga, an activist, feminist and human rights defender, who is the finance assistant.

[1] Every quote is extracted of the website.

4.2.2. CAL’s claims and mindset

Originally, CAL’s philosophy is based on a feminist approach. The coalition argues that patriarchy, understood as a male domination system of oppression, is a key system of oppression that women in general and lesbian and bisexual women and transgender people in particular live and experience. So, according to CAL, patriarchy serves to keep women oppressed and to punish women who do not comply with its expectations. But patriarchy also oppresses and punishes men who do not conform to patriarchal ideas of what a man is and should be: “patriarchy then contributes in a major way to the deep fear of those of us who do not comply with or fit into the norms that it creates about what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. Homophobia and transphobia result from this process.”
Thus, \textit{CAL} does not only focus on women's situations and also considers and recognizes violation and oppression of gay men's rights. The coalition is therefore involved in the defense of civil rights of women, lesbian and bisexual women, but also of transdiverse people. The coalition reports: "over time, and as a trans-identity was asserted by many of the members of the Coalition, our constituency broadened to include ‘transdiverse’ people. This includes the full range of gender non-conforming people." So \textit{CAL} claims for an evolving feminism and welcomes and embraces different forms of progressive feminisms: "this implies any form of feminism that condemns, makes visible and challenges oppressive power against people on the basis of race, sex, (dis)ability, age, gender, gender identity and expression and sexual orientation".

Furthermore, \textit{CAL} calls for an intersectional approach, considering various criteria in understanding oppression: "we believe that our multiple identities intersect and are linked. Our race, class, gender, sexual orientation, [dis]ability, geographic location and other identities are connected in a web of oppression." Thus, while the coalition focuses on issues concerning lesbian, bisexual and transdiverse people, it asserts to be also aware and mindful of broader struggles for social and economic, as well as civil and political rights of all, and to be part of them.

"We value and seek debate, challenge and ongoing critique as part of a democratic process that makes political space for diverse voices. This recognizes that we are not a homogenous group and are therefore bound to have different ways of thinking, analyzing, interpreting and applying feminisms into our daily lived realities. This democratic process is that which we collectively work to build."

Moreover:

"We recognize and articulate the realities of multiple oppressions where the oppressions based on our sexual orientation and gender identity is linked with other oppressions based on race, gender, [dis]ability, geography and other identities. As such, we are able to articulate a textured and complex and nuanced analysis of oppression. Although all LGBTI people are oppressed, there are particular circumstances that deepen this oppression and its impacts on women in general. Black women and poor black women in particular experience the impacts of oppression in even deeper ways."

4.2.3. CAL’s objective and actions

"The Coalition of African Lesbians works to transform Africa into a place where all lesbian and bisexual women and transdiverse people enjoy the full range of human rights, secure in the knowledge that we are recognized as full citizens, with rich and diverse cultures, and a significant and respected presence in all spheres of life, including social, political and economic and through personal and organizational growth."
Beyond violation and oppression that women, homosexuals and transgender people undergo, the *Coalition of African Lesbians* promotes the individual and collective power of these people as “actors and activists with agency and capability to change the way the world works”: “We work to strengthen this power amongst ourselves as a movement and together with other movements. It is this that gives us the hope to push for the kind of change we want to see in the world.” The coalition works therefore to raise consciousness amongst and strengthening activism and leadership of lesbian and bisexual women and transdiverse people, but is also involved in a broader cause: “we are politically located within the women’s and LGBTI communities and as such, we engage in an ongoing way with the broader struggles and in some of our work, work in a direct way with LGBTI people and with women more broadly.”

So, as a feminist activist organization committing to working within a framework of movement building, *CAL* first wants to render visible the oppression of people by the patriarchy and demonstrates against it. The coalition works also for the mobilization of the different communities who suffer oppression to “take action against patriarchy, homophobia and other forms of oppression”. A further aim is to empower these communities in order to fight for civil rights: “we work with others to build a world where we are all free and equal and live in dignity. To change the world, we need to build new ways of working with power. We develop power within/ personal power, power with/collective power. We channel power within and power with to power to bring about the kind of change we want to see in the world. We also resist oppressive power, the power that dominates and controls. This anti-power work is critical because of the brutality that those in power exert on us and the violations that we face as a result of this.”

Furthermore, *CAL* works for production and creation of knowledge through a process of a constant development of its analysis and thinking based of the personal and lived experiences of the different members and realities and learning from others. “In our media and consciousness raising work we engage in influencing the ideas, beliefs and understanding of broader society about justice for LGBT people.” The coalition focuses thus on three issues, separate but linked: sexuality, gender, women’s rights; sexual orientation and gender identity; human rights defenders. Finally, the aim of *CAL* is to demonstrate that “both the social, economic and cultural rights AND the civil and political rights are articulated and addressed”.

### 4.3. Inkanyiso

*See: [http://inkanyiso.org/](http://inkanyiso.org/)*

*Inkanyiso* - ’light’ in Zulu language - is a forum for queer and visual (activist) media that was conceptualized in 2006 and officially founded in 2009 by the visual activist Zanele Muholi in response to “the lack of visual histories and skills training produced by and for LGBTI persons, especially artists (in the form of photography, film, visual arts and multimedia)”. The platform focuses on visual arts and media advocacy and visual literacy training and is thought as “a flexible and unique source of information for art advocacy” supporting the idea that queer activism is linked to queer media. Thus the slogan of *Inkanyiso* is “We Produce. Educate. Disseminate information to many audiences especially those who are often marginalized or sensationalized by the mainstream media.” This platform responds to Muholi’s self-proclaimed mission, which is “to re-write a black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in SA and beyond.”


### 4.4. Iranti.org

*See: [http://iranti-org.co.za/](http://iranti-org.co.za/)*

#### 4.4.1. Iranti-org’s visual approach

*Iranti-org* is a queer human rights visual media non-governmental organization based in Johannesburg, South Africa, founded in 2012 by South African Human Rights activist, photographer and curator, Jabu Pereira. The organization works to build local partnerships and movements that use media as a key platform for lobbying, advocacy and educational interventions across Africa.
The particularity of Iranti-org is that its specific archivist self-identification: “through the use of various visual mediums such as videos, photography, audio recording, among others, Iranti-org sets itself as an archive of Queer memory in ways that destabilize numerous modes of discrimination based on gender, sexuality and sexual orientation.” Iranti-org uses these multi-media approaches to document issues related to gender and gender identification; sexuality and sexual orientation within varied contexts in South Africa and on the continent.

Furthermore, Iranti-org aspires to give testimony of individual and particular stories of queer and same-sex desiring individuals throughout South Africa. This is why the organization was called Iranti-org. Indeed, Iranti (pronounced írantì) is the Yoruba word for ‘memory’. According to the organization, the Yoruba people - largely found in South West Nigeria and parts of Benin Republic - consider memory a prized form of intelligence which determines how often one remembers what they see and hear. “Iranti-org seeks to find local vernaculars that tell the stories of vulnerable persons simultaneously alongside and outside International Human Rights universalisms.” Thus, Iranti-org works with rural and urban populations in South Africa and the region as part of its engagement with civil society at different levels.

“As a Queer Visual Media Non-Governmental Organisation, Iranti-org seeks to document the lives of Queer Africans and Africa-based persons with the intention of building visual narrative evidence, creating awareness and influencing the making of policies and laws that advance Human Rights across South Africa and beyond.”

4.4.2. Iranti-org’s objectives and mindset

Believing “that all human beings have the right to enjoy and celebrate a life of economic, social and political freedom underpinned by dignity and respect”, Iranti-org works at advancing human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity at a regional level, in response to human right violations under which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people suffer in Africa, by fostering collaboration and movement-building for the advancement of human rights regionally. The organization also promotes international human rights norms and standards by documenting the failures of African governments to meet these standards. Furthermore, it trains LGBTI human rights defenders to document in their respective contexts and thus amplifying the voices of LGBTI activists as a collective through training programmes and resources strengthening local and regional movements. Iranti-org monitors, documents and reports on human rights violations by community members, service providers and government agents in the region such as several hate crime attacks and murders that happened in 2012.

5. Conclusion

Since decades, same-sex and transgenering practices have been an inherent part of African history. However, regarding to the social structures of the African context, they have developed in a different way than in the Western context. So they have to be apprehended through a specific matrix transgressing Western categories. Indeed, although same-sex desiring individuals in the West are recognized as a political category and identity, homosexuality is traditionally not considered similarly in the African context. A movement of struggle for gay civil rights has not developed as in the Western context, and sexuality is not originally regarded as a criterion defining social identity. Thus same-sex practices have evolved in African countries in a complex way and have formed specifically according to the different cultural and geographic areas. That is why homosexuality as a political identity is considered by several African politicians as being a Western import.

An intersectional approach of the concept of queerness appears therefore as relevant to apprehend this complexity of same-sex desire in the African context insofar as it permits to challenge heteronormative as well as gay and lesbian categories. Moreover, an intersectional approach enables to consider the specificity of the geographic and cultural context.
Because of their complexity and plurality, same-sex and transgendering practices in the African context have to be apprehended and considered in their specificity, region by region and case by case. However, these complex and specific dimensions have percluded a global political visibility of these practices and same-sex desiring individuals, because they are not considered as a global community. They are tolerated and accepted in the society but through a cultural, not a political dimension. This lack of visibility might be one of the reasons of the current homophobic discourses of several African politicians pretending that homosexuality is un-African ignoring the existence of such practices. So, these practices constitute a relevant historical basis in order to show that even if the social construct of the gay category is originally Western same-sex desire is universal. This would promote other forms of sexuality and go against prejudices.

Thus, the struggles for same-sex desiring individuals' civil rights have to be united under a global concept of homosexuality to get political recognition and consideration in the global context. The homosexual movement has to develop as a global movement throughout the African continent overstepping local and cultural specificities of same-sex practices in order to get visible and strong. In the last fifteen years, the movement increased through the struggle of several organizations working for empowerment and visibility through visual media. Art becomes a support for claiming and give visibility to a queer and homosexual identity. One of the most well-known examples is the work of the visual activist Zanele Muholi broadcasting the existence and the struggle of the queer African community across the world through numerous exhibitions.

To conclude, I would like to point to a visual project, the forthcoming documentary *The Pearl of Africa*. Directed by the Swedish Jonny von Wallström, the film focuses on Ugandan transgender activist Cleopatra Kambugu and her life in Kampala after she makes the decision to transition openly. After being publicly outed in a Ugandan tabloid she had to flee from Entebbe, her home city in Uganda, to Nairobi in Kenya. The documentary has been made public in short preview webisodes over the last few weeks before the sixth international day of transgndering visibility on the 31st of March 2015. The idea of the film was born as an effort to create an impact and raise awareness about the lives of LGBTQI Africans.

See: http://pearlofafrica.tv/

6. Bibliography


