

African Religions, the Parapolitics of Discretion and Sexual Ambiguity in African Oral Epics

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My point is, and I think it is a very anthropological one, our real enlightenment lies not in the application of imageless ideas exported from the West, but in beginning with African images and by careful method learning what they imply—what is embedded in them.

Fernandez²

All politics are about stories and imagination. Stories not only shape how we view reality but also how we respond to life and indeed the very sort of persons we become.

E. Katongole³

Politics must be renovated parapolitically—within the matrix which allows politics to reform and transcend itself.

Raghavan Iyer⁴

ABSTRACT

Does religion and cultural imagination matter in the understanding of the controversy about sexual orientation in Africa today? This contribution articulates the importance of religious beliefs and cultural imagination in documenting not just oppression, but also ambiguous sites for theorising sociopolitical identities in Africa. I explore the idea of ambiguity within African religions and oral epics and the place that sexuality occupies in the imagination of possible progressive or regressive social transformations. Contentious posturing about sexual orientation often rests on simplistic binary constructs of subjects (African/un-African, heterosexual/homosexuals, homophobic/homophile). In contrast, ambiguity as a starting point for analysis allows one to retrieve nuanced modes of

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 - 2 J.W. Fernandez, "African Religious Movements", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978), 195-234.
 - 3 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 2.
 - 4 Raghavan Iyer, *Parapolitics: Toward the City of Man*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), x.

conceptualising and theorising the human and sexuality in Africa. The main point of this contribution is that African cultures and epics are rich in alternatives and complementary spaces for the imagination of queer belonging on the continent.

Introduction

In the past decade, debates about homosexuality have taken centre stage in several African countries. State institutions have been mobilised to fence off against what is coded 'un-African behaviour'; real and perceived homosexuals have been persecuted or killed. Human rights activists advocating for sexual rights have been detained and/or have fled their countries of origin in search for safe havens elsewhere. In response to what is now known as 'state-sponsored homophobia', Western states have threatened to withhold economic aid to homophobic African countries and have selectively enforced this policy. More recently, Uganda and Nigeria have passed stringent laws that effectively preclude meaningful public debate or action other than repressive mobilisation against homosexuality and its practitioners. A close reading of the tension that homosexuality sparks on the continent suggests that although the sphere of contention is deeply political, it is also very much informed by cultural and religious beliefs that stand in the way of sociopolitical change. So far, interventions by human rights activists and Western funders have sought to address the political controversy about sexual orientation in Africa through the adoption of state-centred initiatives. This mobilisation has embraced the language of human rights within the framework of a liberal order to demand change in attitudes toward homosexuality and policy regarding consensual same-sex practices between adults.

Elsewhere I addressed the premises and potential pitfalls of state-centred approaches that have recently gained prominence among sexual rights activists and international funders working in Africa.⁵ This contribution articulates the importance of religious beliefs and cultural imagination in documenting not just oppression, but also ambiguous sites for theorising sociopolitical identities in Africa. I explore the idea of ambiguity within African religions and oral epics and the place that sexuality occupies in the imagination of possible progressive or regressive social transformations. Contentious posturing about sexual orientation often rests on simplistic binary constructs of subjects (African/un-African, heterosexual/homosexual, homophobic/homophile). In contrast, ambiguity as a starting point for analysis allows one to retrieve nuanced modes of conceptualising and theorising the human and sexuality within African systems of thought. By

5 S.N. Nyeck, "Stretching the Margins and Trading Taboos: A Paradoxical Approach to Sexual Rights Advocacy in Africa", in *Sexuality and Politics: Regional Dialogues from the Global South*, edited by Sonia Sonia Corrêa, Rafael de la Dehesa and Richard Parker, *Sexuality Policy Watch* 1, (2014), 63-95.

suggesting a return to the epic to theorise the ambivalent trajectories that human sexualities have taken within African oral tradition, I recognise the secular, temporal, transcendental and universal attributes of the genre.

My analysis, however, is limited to those elements that imaginatively and politically may be relevant to the debate about homosexuality in Africa today in part because they ride on religion to articulate a nuanced understanding of human sexuality. Additionally, the turn to oral tradition through the epic genre here seeks to avoid, at least provisionally, the trappings of un-reflexive globalised liberalism that divides the world into homophobic and homophile states. I therefore depart from formal analysis of state apparatuses within a liberal order as sole sources of imagination, emancipation and freedom in Africa. Such a departure is presented here in two movements. First is an encounter with the cultural and religious forces that sustain the crisis of identification and intelligibility of homosexuality in Africa. Second is the exploration of the use of discretion in African oral epics to speak about sexual ambiguity as a strategy for political communication. Finally, I derive implications for the controversial debate about sexual orientation in Africa today. The main point of this contribution is that African cultures and epics are rich in alternatives and complementary spaces for the imagination of queer belonging on the continent. In particular, the richness of oral tradition shows the self-reflexive nature of political communication as simultaneously constructing/ordering the normalisation of persons and bodies through social ontologies, and resisting the same order through discordance, primarily invoked in the poetics of ambiguity. The implication for a renewed ethics toward a religiously/spiritually informed journey of communal inclusion in Africa today is to seek not just the common good, but also to articulate a radical critique of the existing order as 'that which is recalcitrant or subjugated or excluded may be a sign that any human construct worthy of admiration must spawn that which does not fit'.⁶ Queer sexuality in this sense may just be the 'necessary discordance within concord'⁷ with regard to the sociopolitical project of optimising Africa's resources and people's potential. Thus, I am not advocating the rejection of norms *tout court*. Instead, I am invested in the project of identifying ambiguity as the cornerstone of the politics of normalisation, without the requirement of deformation and silencing of sexual disturbances/discordances.

Anti-Homosexuality Laws: A Silent Revolution

Does religion and cultural imagination matter in the understanding of the

6 W.E. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 11.

7 Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity*, 11.

controversy about sexual orientation in Africa today? Most people and analysts would agree it does. To be more precise, religion and culture matter as a 'problem' with regard to homosexuality in Africa. To illustrate, on 30 December 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria signed the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill into law. The 2013 Act 'prohibits a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of same sex, and provides penalties for the solemnization and witnessing of same thereof'.⁸ Although the Act deceptively codes the law as 'same-sex marriage prohibition' in both civil and religious institutions (sections 2 and 3), it also criminalises the right of assembly and cultural production in pursuance of a gay agenda. Gay offenders entering into a marriage contract or civil union are liable on conviction to fourteen years of imprisonment and their direct allies to ten years of imprisonment, while sociopolitical organising of any kind may result in ten years' imprisonment (section 5 (1)(2)(3)).

Following the Nigerian move, President Museveni of Uganda signed into law The Anti-Homosexuality Act in early 2014. The Ugandan Act, an outgrowth of the Bahati Bill introduced in the Parliament in 2009, is 'to prohibit any form of sexual relations between persons of the same sex; prohibit the promotion or recognition of the relations and to provide for other related matters.' Homosexuality, defined as 'same gender or same-sex sexual acts', is criminalised (sections 1 and 2) with a provision for aggravating circumstances such as the age of the victim, the HIV status of the offender, the offender's social/moral standing in relation to the victim, etc. Under the new law, homosexual offenders with or without the aggravating circumstances are liable to life imprisonment (sections 2 and 3). The difference in the typology of offenses is mainly designed to serve the victim who is entitled to reparations if the courts convict pursuant to section 3 of the Act. Although Nigeria and Uganda are two different countries, recent laws enacted to criminalise homosexuality are similar in the ways in which they repress social organising and define the contours of public moral order.

In Uganda, the Anti-Homosexuality Act specifically prohibits the 'promotion of homosexuality' and 'where the offender is a corporate body or a business or an association or a non-governmental organisation, on conviction its certificate or registration shall be cancelled and the director, proprietor or promoter shall be liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for seven years' (section 13(2)). Institutions that conduct same-sex marriage are liable to seven years' imprisonment maximum with cancellation of the license to operate (section 12). The law, however, does not define these institutions but rather leaves specification to The Minister through statutory provisions for better implementation (section 15). The Act defines the Minister as the person or office 'responsible for ethics and integrity' (section 1). The Nigerian Same Sex (Prohibition) Act of 2013 prohibits marriage contract

8 The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013; see its explanatory memorandum.

or civil union from being ‘solemnized in a church, mosque or any other place of worship’ (section 2(1)). Furthermore, ‘the registration of gay clubs, societies and organisations, their sustenance, processions and meetings is prohibited. The public show of same sex amorous relationship directly or indirectly is prohibited’ (section 4(1)). While homosexual offenders are liable on conviction to fourteen years’ imprisonment for getting married or for entering into a civil union their bureaucratic and religious allies are liable to ten years’ imprisonment for either registering, witnessing or participating in gay social organising (section 5(1)(2) (3)). In its scope, the law applies to and is supposed to supersede Islamic law or customary law (section 7). A close reading of these two Acts suggests, the criminalisation of same-sex lifestyle, representation and organising is a project that is conventional, revolutionarily regressive and atypical.

Same-sex repression in both cases is *conventional* because the state is harnessing formal institutional tools to regulate and code sexuality as a component of public morality and order. This aspect of formal criminalisation has received worldwide attention from media outlets to political commentators as well as scholarly publications.⁹

Same-sex repression in these two cases is *revolutionarily regressive* because it effectively broadens state surveillance power to categories, organisations and people, for whom the only ground for conviction is ‘guilt by association.’ Students of politics often call authoritarianism and totalitarianism the phenomena through which states arrogate unlimited repressive and monitoring power by creating networks of guilt by association. These totalitarian and authoritarian turns have been documented in the political development of Nigeria and Uganda under the rules of military leaders. Thus what makes the new ‘crime of homosexuality’ revolutionarily regressive is the insidious return of associative repression within the body politics at a time when the same societies are demanding more democratic inclusiveness in the management of ethnic conflicts and transparency in public finance.

Same-sex repression in Nigeria and Uganda is *atypical*. The power and logic of ‘guilt by association’ invert the premise of ‘association by guilt’. Arguably, formal repressive laws in Nigeria and Uganda desexualise the ‘homosexual crime’ by emptying this categorical legal infraction of its material basis (sex, sexual practices or claims of non-heterosexual identity), which ironically inspired

9 Paul Canning, “International Pressure on Anti-Gay Laws in Africa Must not Stop”, *The Guardian*, 20 April 2011. <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/apr/20/anti-gay-laws-africa-uganda-ssempa>>; Lauren Gelfand, “Global Fund Expresses ‘Deep Concern’ About New anti-Gay Law in Uganda”, AIDSPAN *GFO Newsletter* no. 238, 28 February 2014. <http://www.aidspace.org/gfo_article/ukraine-activists-seek-stability-hiv-funding-face-political-turmoil>. Adewale Maja-Pearce, “Nigeria’s Absurd Rule of Laws”, *The New York Times*, 30 January 2014 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/31/opinion/maja-pearce-nigerias-absurd-rule-of-laws.html>>.

anti-homosexual mobilisation in Nigeria, Uganda and beyond. What is atypical therefore may not just be increased in the punishment of the homosexual, a category that associates with its same through guilty pleasures (association by guilt), but also unprecedented attacks on social ties. Thus looking at the fate of culture and religion within the parameters of newly-enacted laws, one could conclude that religious opponents of homosexuality have prevailed. After all, in recent anti-homosexuality laws, cultural and religious institutions seem to have been made guardians of the public moral order on the behalf of the state.

Indeed, existing literature often point to 'strategic entente' between religion and the state to explain adversarial policy repressing homosexuality. For instance, in Zambia Christian 'eschatological discourse about the Devil and the end times'¹⁰ inspires political attitudes toward homosexuality. A Christian discourse was instrumental in creating categories of perversions that entered the medical practices of the apartheid and post-apartheid state in South Africa.¹¹ Similar adversarial mobilisation of Christianity, Islam¹² and cultural beliefs against sexual rights organising has been documented in the Gambia.¹³ In light of this evidence, cultural and religious institutions could rightly be said to be a problem one has to reckon with in the struggle for a dignified understanding of human sexual diversity in Africa. Nevertheless, it is my contention that the 'strategic entente' between religion, culture and the state for the repression of homosexuality is more problematic for religion and socio-cultural imagination than commonly assumed.

New policy development such as anti-homosexuality laws in Nigeria and Uganda may signal a triumph of cultural and religious beliefs. Such a victory, however, comes at a great cost because it takes away a fundamental socio-religious right and practice: the *right to reserve opinion and action, and the practice to negotiate terms of involvement or noninvolvement* in the debate over sexual orientation on society's own terms. In Christian parlance, the prefixing of religious behaviour in this case could be likened to taking away the necessity to pray, the practice of discernment and patient search for knowledge that most religions encourage. Furthermore, it is an example of the mobilisation of political power against social epiphanies, the element of surprise and mystery that guide

10 Adriaan S. Van Klinken, "Gay Rights, the Devil and the End Times: Public Religion and the Enchantment of the Homosexuality Debate in Zambia", *Religion* 43, no. 4 (2013), 520.

11 Vasu Reddy et al., "Military Mutilation: The Aversion Program in the South African Defence Force in the Apartheid Era", in *Sexual Diversity in Africa*, Nyeck and Epprecht, eds. Also see Melissa Hackman, "Constructing the 'Ex-Gay' Subject: Cultural Convergences in Post-Apartheid South Africa", in *Sexual Diversity in Africa*, S.N. Nyeck and Marc Epprecht, eds.

12 R. Guadio, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

13 Stella Nyanzi, "Rhetorical Analysis of President Jammeh's Threats to Behead Homosexuals in the Gambia", in *Sexual Diversity in Africa*, S.N. Nyeck and Marc Epprecht, eds.

the understanding of human subjects in most African religions and Christianity. That is, whereas political logic often treats citizens as finite rational beings whose behaviour is interpreted through scrutinising logical facts,¹⁴ African cultural imagination often treats the human as a project in the making thereby leaving room for mystery, revelation, death, incarnation and reincarnation. Viewed from this angle, the only winner in recent state-centred moves to amplify the criminalisation of homosexuality based on legal categorisation of sexual 'acts' is nothing but repression itself.

A close reading of the recent laws, however, suggests at the command of the state, prohibitions of homosexuality are pegged to ceremonial prohibitions of religious practices. Arguably, the specific emphasis that the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Law in Nigeria supersedes any other religious or customary arrangements is not intended to affirm a policy about the separation of power. Rather, it is effectively breaking away from a long tradition of accommodating different socio-religious institutions and spaces that may hold different values about the significance of sexuality, marriage and divorce.¹⁵ Indeed, the existing plurality of marriage forms (traditional, civil/state and Christian) reflects the ongoing negotiations between the state, indigenous customs and imported religions in Nigeria. In Uganda, the use of legal means to compel families to engage in witch-hunts and denunciation of relatives is not just an attempt to curtail a perceived foreign threat. The policy undeniably seeks to expropriate society and religion from ownership of parallel, alternative and sometimes competing confessional refuges such as gossip and rumour¹⁶ without seeming to do so. These refuges, as Tuulikki Pietila shows, are important to society because their dialogical logic as sites of ambiguity often resist monolithic narratives about reputation and human behaviour.¹⁷

It is important to note that the issue of homosexual marriage has not been prioritised in political demands for rights in Nigeria or Uganda. Thus on the account of the low priority that marriage occupies in same-sex rights advocacy in Nigeria, the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Law is a pre-emptive strike that also disrupts existing sociopolitical arrangements that accommodate the diversity of family experience in that nation. Thus, besides the question of homosexuality is the larger issue of the place and future of discretionary institutions within society. The pre-emptive insertion of the prohibition of marriage in recent anti-

14 Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

15 Man Singh Das, ed., *The Family in Africa* (New Delhi: M.D. Publications, 1993).

16 Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strahern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

17 Pietila Tuulikki, *Gossip, Markets, and Gender: How Dialogue Constructs Moral Value in Post-Socialist Kilimanjaro* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

homosexuality laws therefore seems misplaced except when one considers the bargaining role that the institution of marriage had played and continues to play in negotiating the frontier of state power in Africa. State-sanctioned marriage institutions in Africa differ from those in the West because they reflect unfinished negotiation with society. Thus, while most modern African states define civil marriage as an act between a man and a woman, several states recognise and accommodate different forms of marriage arrangements, often guided by religious and customary procedures and logics.

The relevance of these alternative spaces for the articulation and practice of sexuality to my analysis is twofold. First, precisely because formal state authority is reaffirmed through the strategies of accommodation, the task of drafting operational details of what goes into a marriage, how it is interpreted and by whom has traditionally been left to the community itself. Second, marriages that do not quite fit the modern rationale of a liberal state often accommodate different expressions of gender fluidity. For instance, customarily among the Lele of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), a “village wife” [is] considered married to all the men of a particular age in the village. This [is] not a low-status position and the children of the village wife [are] considered legitimate even though their biological father might not be known¹⁸. Among the Bulai and Higi in Northern Nigeria, ‘a woman maintain[s] several marriages simultaneously, each of which [is] socially regarded as a legal marriage’.¹⁹ Among the Nuer of Sudan, ‘a childless Nuer woman could assume a male role. She could make bridewealth payments for a young woman who bore children on her behalf; the father of the children had no legal rights over them or their mother’.²⁰ Gender fluidity outside of heterosexual marriage has also been documented in several places in Africa.²¹ All these social practices and sexual expressions did not survive the imposition of a colonial state in Africa. Nevertheless, they have survived in various forms as cultural practices

18 Caroline Bledsoe and Barney Cohen, *Dynamics of Adolescent Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: National Academies Press, 1993), 44. Referencing M.T. Douglas, *The Lele of Kasai*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

19 Bledsoe and Cohen, *Dynamics of Adolescent Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 44. Referencing C.K. Meek, *Tribal Societies in Northern Nigeria*, Vol. 1 (London: Keegan-Paul, 1931). J. Chalifoux, “Secondary Marriages and Levels of Seniority among the Abisi (Piti) of Nigeria”, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 11, no. 3 (1980), 325-334. W.H. Sangree, “The Persistence of Polyandry in Irigwe, Nigeria”, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 11, no. 3 (1980), 335-343.

20 Bledsoe and Cohen, *Dynamics of Adolescent Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 44.

21 Saskia Wieringa and Ruth Morgan, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-sex Practices in Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005). Will Roscoe and Stephen Murray, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). Marc Epprecht, *Unspoken Facts: A History of Homosexualities in Africa* (Harare: GALZ, 2008). N.Z. Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2008).

or beliefs that sometimes afford protection, if not contextual rights or ways of belonging to communities and people.

The passing of new stringent laws against homosexual conduct in Nigeria, Uganda, and the Gambia as well as the prospect of new laws in the Gambia represent a major setback for political activism.²² In Uganda, a challenge to the constitutionality of the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Law was launched²³ and led to a legal reversal based on technicality.²⁴ Regardless of the outcome of this litigation, it is my contention that meaningful social change with regard to popular attitudes toward homosexuality is more likely to remain the same in Uganda and elsewhere over a significant period. That is, formal liberal tools such as progressive or regressive laws alone remain imperfectly capable of bringing about the desired goal of the inclusion of sexual diversity in African citizenship. Rather than suggesting a stalemate, social attitudes toward homosexuality highlight a crisis of intelligibility which articulation necessitates *caution* and *discretion*. Put differently, cautionary moves based on advocacy strategies that reflect political realities in Africa, not Western-driven priorities, will have to be considered in the future. Socially and culturally speaking, exploration of other discretionary registers, their logic and accommodative synergies is required to complement the rule-bound trajectories that sexual identity with regard to homosexuality in Africa is being forced into. Formal and legal recognition of homosexuality or the oppression gay individuals in Africa certainly has far reaching implications. I am nevertheless concerned with the realisation that legal trajectories often purge rather than affirm discretionary logics that sustain the balance of power between the state and society in Africa. As political scientists know, effective governance often requires a certain degree of discretion or a centripetal delegation of power to authorise and affirm agency at the lowest level of command.²⁵

The Epic as Political Communication and Discretion

There is no simple recipe for the challenge of exploring social registers different from repressive state command to theorise alternative possibilities

22 Reuters, "Gambia Passes Bill to Introduce Crime of 'Aggravated Homosexuality'", 10 September 2014. <<http://af.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idAFKBN0H50HS20140910>>.

23 Agence France Press, "Uganda Anti-Gay Law Challenged in Court", *The Guardian*, 31 July, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/31/uganda-anti-gay-law-constitutional-court>>.

24 Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, "Why was Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Law Struck Down?" *Al Jazeera*, 15 August 2004. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/08/why-was-uganda-anti-homosexuali-201481194426136709.html>>.

25 John Huber and Charles Shipan, *Deliberative Discretion? The Institutional Foundations of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

for understanding homosexuality in Africa. This turn away from the traditional concerns of politics (self-preservation/protection and stability) to embrace 'imaginative application of seminal ideas vitalizing political theory and practice; the elaboration of fundamental principles into paradigms of relationships among persons and between civil means and human ends',²⁶ is what is termed parapolitics in this contribution. Drawing insight from the Epic of the Mvet Moneblum, or the Blue Man (henceforth Mvet)²⁷ among the Fang of Cameroon and Gabon, I analyse the function of discretion in referencing sexual ambiguity as a strategy for political communication of both individual and communal importance. I do not intend to survey the literature on the place and function of the epic genre in African cultures. Such an undertaking will take us too far afield. Rather, I treat epics as a form of communication that is a 'vehicle of political thought... [that] processes a multitude of inputs from [a] social environment that becomes outputs of political structures, values, and actions'.²⁸ Political communications can be short-term as during electoral cycles, or long-term as in interest group lobbying from a marginal position. Political communications are based on specific objectives and often use technical tools that reach out to the masses. Political communications, finally, are audience-centred, implying they often shun neutrality. Put differently, 'audience-centred approach properly forces the analyst to think in terms of the processes that govern the search for consensus, or its unmaking. The arts of compromise, emphasis, de-emphasis, and simplification are well very much a part of this process'.²⁹ There is certainly more to epics than politics. Focus on politics nevertheless allows one to not just theorise the genre, but also to establish similarity between the queries, puzzles and performances of the past with our struggles today. Hence, although context and epic performers change over time, the message remains both ancient and new.

For the purpose of this contribution, I retain the working definition of epics as 'poetic narratives of substantial length, on a heroic theme...multigeneric and multifunctional, incorporating more of a community diversity...They are not overnight creation of visionaries, whatever the role of individual creativity in the generation of a specific performance version'.³⁰ Although epics in Africa are not spontaneous, they rest on the creation and endorsement of originality. Among the equatorial people, the *Mvet* inventiveness rested on the '*creation of variety amongst people*' in their skills and intellectual reach, not only producing a finite

26 Iyer, *Parapolitics*, 27.

27 John William Johnson, and Thomas Hale, editors, *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). See chapter 22.

28 Robert Denton and Gary Woodward, *Political Communication in America*, (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 3.

29 Denton and Woodward, *Political Communication in America*, 6.

30 Johnson and Hale, *Oral Epics from Africa*, xviii.

set of known roles and the functions with respect to a “system of thought” but also endorsing a *constant and volatile engagement* on its boundless frontiers’.³¹ Thus, in analysing the *Mvet* for the purpose of understanding political communication around sexuality, one should see the lead performer, the musicians and the audience as agents who are engaged in the poetics of constant and volatile negotiations with a variety of themes—among which sexuality is not the least—for entertainment, simulation or ritualisation’s sake. Thus in style, content and scope African epics appeal to a complex discourse and performance that is magical (both secular and religiously speaking). The *Mvet* is traditional in that performance and the story repeat certain events; but as Boyer suggests, ‘the repetition of occurrences and the conservation of a model’ should not be equated.³² The implication is that the *Mvet*’s evocations are at best paradoxical as they continually reaffirm as well as challenge common sense. In general, ‘the subject matter of the *Mvet Moneblum* is not *historical but imaginary or mythical*... The performer is free to shape his or her story in this mythical landscape as he or she wills, and the results are highly creative’.³³

The *Mvet* is a mythical epic that tells the story of the struggle between the mortal men of Oku and the immortals of Engong whose ruler is Akoma Mba. The epic is too long to warrant only a summary here. The underlining story is about family tensions pitting a son named Mekui-Mengômô-Ondo (henceforth Mekui) against his father Ondo Mba (henceforth Ondo) over the question of marriage. Ordinarily, a father would provide a bride-price for a son. But when Mekui approaches his father Ondo the first time with the question ‘when shall I marry?’ he is threatened to be banished. The second time, when Ondo asks ‘when will you get me married?’ the father takes the matter to king Akoma and asks him to ‘Cut off his head, or send him into exile’. The story from this moment follows three movements: the trials of Mekui, his exile in the land of Bluemen (Moneblum) and the return to the village. My focus here is on the first movement in which Ondo tries to convince the village to exile his son.

... ‘That is why I say you are no man,’ he said to his son.

‘A man would never ask his father, “When shall I marry?”’

‘That is why I am banishing Mekui-Mengômo-Ondo,

‘So that no longer will he resemble a woman here among us in Engon-Zok.’

A heavy silence sat over the assembled Eka Mebe’e.

... ‘Let Ondo entrust Mekui-Mengômô to me, and I shall get him married,

31 Jane Guyer, “Traditions of Invention in Equatorial Africa”, *African Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (1996), 1. My emphasis.

32 Pascal Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2.

33 Johnson and Hale, *Oral Epics from Africa*, 257. My emphasis.

'For Ondo seems to me a poor man.'
 Ondo answered, 'That is out of question!
 'No other man shall arrange the marriage of my son.'
 ...Ondo answered, 'I am not of that opinion...'
 'No one in Engon-Zok has the right to marry off my son.'
 Then all the Great Men of Engon-Zok became angry.
 They Told Akoma, 'Exile Mekui-Mengômô-Ondo.'
 [...]Ahaya ! It is true that Akoma will win again !
 Silence !³⁴

Because the epic is not historical but imaginary, it is particularly intriguing to the political theorist. The story also offers many points of entry. Indeed it could be approached as a communication about the material conditions that force a father to choose to exile his son rather than face the humiliation of exposed poverty. Conversely, the story could be said to lay the ground for the imagination of a solidaristic sociopolitical project. After all, the community offers to provide for Ondo to help him get married. Solidarity in this sense is quick to substitute personal shortcomings with communal responsibility. A solidaristic project for communal bonds imagined this way often seeks to 'mark the cohesion of a group, the obligations of civic membership, the bond that unites the human family, shared experience, expressions of sympathy or struggle for liberation'.³⁵ Indeed, one could imagine an early resolution of the father-son tension through redemptive community intervention. Surprisingly, Ondo's objection is expressed in the strongest terms: 'That is out of question!' Ondo's strong sentiments suggest he is less concerned with the material hermeneutics that his son's question may have generated in society and more about the poetics of the query itself in relation to a father's discretionary rights to marry his son.

Boyer rightly notes that 'one of the sticking features of the *Mvet* stories is that most crucial notions are used...in a puzzling way, often contradictory or paradoxical...Descriptions are strikingly different from, and sometimes incompatible with, what is received as common wisdom about the ancestors'.³⁶ Ondo is certainly an unconventional ancestor on several counts. He objects to collectivist solutions through peer pressure and sees the limits of the idea of politics as an outcome of a deliberative process.³⁷ Both repertoires of coercion collapse under Ondo's insistence that his son be sent into exile; into the magical and ambiguous unknown. Thus, by calling upon the unnatural (magical), Ondo

34 Canto 3:45-50; Canto 8:51-84.

35 Sally Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2010), 17.

36 Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication*, 99.

37 Stephen Macedo, *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Disagreement and Disagreement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

‘enabl[es] its own ambiguity to become more overt [and] encourages us to be wary of doctrines that glorify normalization by defining it has harmonization [he] encourages us to treat normalization as an ambiguous good to be qualified countered, and politicized’.³⁸

Ondo is a strong willed individual, but not individualistic. While on one hand his stubbornness could reveal an inflexible character, it paradoxically renders possible collective imagination beyond simplistic solutions on the other. Stubbornness as Katongole puts it, ‘makes it possible to invent the future...it is what makes [life] work as both a critique of the current social history and an alternative to it’.³⁹ Besides his role as the plaintiff and obstructor of social redemption for his son, Ondo does not reappear elsewhere in the epic *Mvet Moneblum*. He is the obstructor of conscience; the voice that gives potency to the poetics of sexuality evoked in the question ‘when will you get me married?’ He is a conventional father with unconventional answers to queries about human sexuality; answers that open new conceptual domains punctuated by gaps of silences.

The ability to steer imagination in new directions is what makes Ondo political. As the epic has it, the community finally agreed to exile Ondo’s son, but where exactly was left to the oracle to determine. Eventually, the oracle decides to exile Mekui to the land of the Bluemen (Moneblum). What is interesting from the argumentative perspective of this contribution is what takes place between the moment when agreement to exile is reached and the choice of the land of alienation revealed. The oracle spent a great deal of time discussing options for exile and these included the possibility of sending Mekui to the land of Yeminsin, whose queen has shape- and gender-shifting magical powers.

*She has mysterious power
Which she uses to gain wives for her brother
She has a magic jewel on her breast,
And as though by magic, any man who moments before might have boasted
he could marry five women, grows breast on his chest, and on his head he
has women’s hair.
She tells her brother, ‘you may marry them all. There are no longer any men
among them; the men all have become like women.’ (Canto 10:105-127)*

Other possible places of exile included the land of Mvele-Mekomo (known for its celebration of prohibitions including the prohibition to smoke tobacco) and the land of Angono (where polyamorous relationships are celebrated and women exchanged to settle disputes between men). That the oracle sent Mekui to the land of the Bluemen was not an indictment over morality of other places. Indeed, the

38 Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity*, 11.

39 Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 193-4.

survey of other lands seems to have been intended for no other purpose than to render *real* and *plural* the world beyond Mekui's village. From the perspective of the oracle, shape shifters and gender benders were not more or less evil/good than tobacco smugglers. In one society women dominated and in the other men did. In one society men could be turned into women and in the other women could be graded. Sexuality and gender roles seem fluid and simultaneously meaningless in comparative perspectives. The oracle, however, remains doubtful about the utility of dominant sociopolitical discourses for the education of the soon-to-be-exiled Mekui, son of Ondo. Hence, preference is given to the 'third path'⁴⁰ the land of the Bluemen, because it is the only place that the oracle does not describe *a priori*.

The first two options pre-emptively frame the exile experience as disproportionately determined by dominant sociopolitical narratives about gender and sexuality. In the land of the Bluemen, sexuality, gender and power remain a mystery to be discovered. As often in African oral techniques of communication, truth that explains why things happen and the way they do is the prerogative of closing arguments. It is only at the end of the journey in exile that the meaning of a father's objection and conventional answers to perennial questions is revealed: the formation of character. Exile was intended to shape Mekui's character and prepare him to become the leader of his people after he returns to the village. At the conclusion of the epic, Mekui is presented as a skilled and hardworking military leader, and as a man who finally chooses his wife. The post-exile Mekui is a person who has discovered self-determination as the recovery of initiative.

The Ethics of the Journey

The epic of the *Mvet* celebrates the ethics of the journey, rather than the journey itself and provides a framework for thinking Africa today. The ethical implication of the *Mvet* presents Africanist intellectuals with two challenges, especially in the way we think and write about gender and sexuality. Like Mekui, African gay men and women are asking their political society 'when shall we be? When shall we breathe? When shall we marry?' The answer has been similar to Ondo's. They are sent into exile literally and figuratively. Rejection, however, can be a blessing in disguise, not because it is painless, but because it also forces the gay community to rethink its relationship to modes of presentation and representation within African societies. The *Mvet* particularly challenges the gay subject, the Africanist intellectual and society at large to entertain healthy skepticism about dominant and conventional narratives of both oppression and liberation with regard to gender or sexual identity. Do conventions within a human rights framework allow the gay

40 Canto 23:168.

subject to engage with or to avoid substantive questions about Africa within and beyond sexuality? As previously argued, formal repressions of homosexuality in Africa are not merely about homosexuals. To the extent that anti-homosexuality laws are configured to restrict human encounters, they suppress, without seeming to do so, cultural and religious imagination. Thus, it is difficult to imagine liberation or change in political attitudes towards homosexuality without the reclaiming of the discretionary power invested in culture and religion, and Christianity in particular. As Katongole rightly puts it,

Christian social ethics in Africa must shift its exclusive focus on strategies for fixing the structures of democracy and development into the business of stories. Christian social ethics must uncover the underlying stories of the key social institutions in Africa that affect both their performance and the types of characters they produce. Shifting the focus from strategies to stories provides a fresh way to talk about politics: politics as dramatic performance grounded in a particular story that requires, and in the end shapes, particular characters. But this way of thinking about politics, a unique performance grounded in a different set of stories that shape unique expectations and characters. Accordingly, the focus on stories and performance not only opens up a fresh conversation about Christianity and politics (or Christianity as politics) in Africa; it is a way to highlight the type of politics Christianity can shape, and the new future it can produce.⁴¹

The suggestion of a paradigm shift that invents new meanings and logics is well-taken. Although Katongole mainly reflects on the future of Christianity, the epistemological queries in his vision of a new Christian ethics can be broadened to include an ethical conversation about which stories could guide conversations about human sexualities in Africa. We are too familiar with the single story of homophobia; less challenged, however, is the single story of liberation expectations confined to human rights without the need of the social belonging. Contrary to the logic of a liberal minimalist order, human rights are important not just because of what they accomplish (i.e., the protection of groups and individuals), but also because they embody a human purpose. Thus a restatement of a human rights agenda in Africa needs not to be limited by, or restricted to one particular modus operandi as socio-cultural and political pluralism dictate disagreement on what is right and what is good. As Ignatieff rightly puts it, 'seeking human rights redress is distinct from seeking recognition... In this sense, to emphasize agency is to empower individuals, but also to impose limits on human rights claims themselves'.⁴² Thus, the ethical challenge, or journey of storytelling, requires the imagination of alternative and complementary spaces of recognition and belonging and perhaps and the exploration of what culture and religion have to offer in the understanding of sexuality in Africa. As the analysis of the *Mvet*

41 Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 3, 7.

42 Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 56, 57.

demonstrates, the imaginative potential of cultural and religious production in Africa offers more than one frame for controversial debates in society through its ability to simplify the complex and to complicate what may appear simple. Sexuality and gender, character formation, the premise and trappings of new and old social solidarities emerge as critical themes worth exploring in the process of socialising or politicising gay rights as human rights in Africa.

Conclusion

This contribution grappled with the challenge of articulating a conceptual domain for the unconventional: mainly, the idea that sexuality matters not just for regulation's sake, but for character formation. Using the example of the epic of the *Mvet* and its paradoxical articulation of ambiguity, I argued that the epic shifts focus from state-centred repression of non-heterosexual identity to emphasise socio-spiritual conversations about the purpose of sexuality, including queer sexual expression in the development of social character. Once notions of good versus evil are bracketed, the place and function of sexuality in Africa lends itself to critical posturing to retrieve both Africa and its subjects from the shibboleths of hyper-repression as seen in new anti-homosexuality laws in Nigeria, Uganda and the Gambia. Thus the journey, if any, toward the articulating of belonging and contestation about human sexuality in Africa today is parapolitical, in the sense that it forces all interested parties to critical distance from both regimes of oppression and liberation and to commit to ideals rooted in ethics, but also self-awareness. The self explored in this contribution is one that is stubborn enough to resist harmonisation, thereby revealing the violence of the process. It is also a self that invites us to journey with that which is unconventional or seems unnatural in the realm of human sexuality. In mobilising the *Mvet* for the theorisation of African sexualities, I have only painted the broad strokes of a canvas whose colours must be defined, hopefully in the nearest future, by African scholars and theologians.