

## THE QUEER THEORY AND TRADITIONAL YORUBA BELIEFS IN SEXUALITY: AN EXPLORATIVE ANALYSIS.

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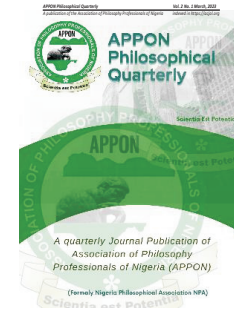
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### Abstract

Queer Theory refutes the notion of an absolute identity of the self, especially as it concerns sexuality. It concerns with the deconstruction of the binary of male/female in gender studies. Essentially, Queer Theory is a prominent perspective employed to dislodge fixed and stable characterizations of gender and identity in Western societies. Upon a consideration of traditional *Yoruba* sexuality, I find some places of parallels with Queer Theory, which to my mind, has not been properly explored in spite of the unique outlook of the *Yoruba* on sexuality. In this study, I employ ordinary language analysis as a methodology to investigate traditional *Yoruba* discourse on sexuality to make these parallels as vivid as possible, and then use same to uncover the flexible nature of gender relations and the place of homosexuals among the *Yoruba* in Africa prior to contact with non-Africans. From these, I counter the contemporary comprehension of the phenomenon and the criminalization of the Queer even when these were not evident in the primordial times.

**Keywords:** Africa, *Lakiriboto*, Gender Studies, Queer Theory, *Yoruba*

### Introduction

Before the 1970s, it was a general perception among social scientists, that only class and race defined personal identity and social life. After the 1970s, with the surge in deconstructionism and critical theory, this outlook was no longer tenable. There have been strong showings that "...gender has joined race and class in our understanding of the foundations of an individual's identity."<sup>1</sup> This is an aftermath of the Queer Theory, where shift on the traditional understanding of

sexuality has taken a twist. Foremost scholars whose ideas have served to contest the traditional construction of sexuality in the West are Judith Butler and Michael Foucault. Their ideas with those of several others have not only reshaped gender construction in the West, but have affected African lifestyles too.

In contemporary Africa, aside the persistence of masculine domination, there has been the daring and increasing display of homosexual attitudes, cross-dressing, and trans-sexual

<sup>1</sup>. M.S. Kimmel. *The Gendered Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 5

persons who “often speak of themselves as persons mistakenly trapped in the wrong body.”<sup>2</sup> In some other instances, the queer “either feel feminine despite the fact that they possess male sexual organs or they think of themselves as men despite of their female appearance.”<sup>3</sup> The consequence of this is not far-fetched. It has been stated that, “Western values have risen once again to corrupt African moral and value systems.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, “homosexuals are sick; they are possessed by demons, owing to deep immersion into Western lifestyles and values,”<sup>5</sup> some have concluded. Impliedly, there were no cases of homosexuality among Africans prior to Western contact. Even when Ebun Oduwole is willing to grant instances of homosexuality among traditional Yoruba; she maintains that “it is believed to threaten traditional marriage institutions, family values, acceptable cultures and other traditions which the Yoruba hold in high esteem.”<sup>6</sup> Oduwole had already anchored her argument elsewhere on the problem of procreation. A careful consideration of this locus reveals a fallacious stance but more on this later.<sup>7</sup> At the moment, it is helpful to relay that this research purports to argue that homosexuality is not an alien affair, completely oblivious to the traditional Yoruba society. It will also argue that gender

construction among the Yoruba does not derive from the expression of sexual organs.

The agenda is to argue that what would later be termed as Queer Theory in relation to gender has been ingrained in traditional Yoruba culture centuries before Western and Arabian contacts. In the next section, the main thrust of Queer Theory will be unveiled relying on the frameworks of Judith Butler and Michael Foucault. Afterward, emphasis on traditional Yoruba construction of gender that accommodates homosexuals and gender complementarity and flexibility will be discussed, in a bid to deduce the persistence of Queer Theory.

### **An Exploration of the Fundamentals of Queer Theory**

Central to the primary concern of the Queer Theory is the revision of the connection between 'sex' and 'gender'. Although, these terms are inter-related, a deeper look will supplant their divergence. Sex connotes the physical manifestation of an individual, particularly the sex organs. It is the perception that engenders the “strong belief in the existence of two and only two sexes.”<sup>8</sup> It is this binary that lends credence to the existence of just the male and female sex, failing to recognize persons whose sexual expression does not conform to either. The

<sup>2</sup>. G. Pamperl. *The Subversion of Gender: Representations of New Women in Literature of Fin de Siecle*. Mag. Phil (Wien: Universitat Wien 2008), 6

<sup>3</sup>. M.S. *The Gendered Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 104

<sup>4</sup>. M. Umukoro. “Much Ado about Homosexuality.” *Guardian Newspapers*, March 10, 2009.

<sup>5</sup>. K. Obasola. “An Ethical Perspective of Homosexuality among the African People.” *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*. 1 no. 12 (2013), 84.

<sup>6</sup>. E. Oduwole. “Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society.” 79<sup>th</sup> Inaugural Lecture of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2018, 13

<sup>7</sup>. E. Oduwole. “The Reality of Homosexuality in Africa: The Yoruba Example,” In *Women, Gender and Sexualities in Africa*, edited by T. Falola and N.A. Amponsah (Durham: Carolina Academic Press 2013)

<sup>8</sup>. G. Pamperl. *The Subversion of Gender: Representations of New Women in Literature of Fin de Siecle*, 4

series of reflections wherein sex decides the sexual orientation of an individual have been branded 'biologism'. In the words of K.A. Rodier, "biologism is the view that human behaviour and social situations can be causally explained by an appeal to the physical mechanisms at play in the organic biological processes of the human body."<sup>9</sup> As a way of amplifying, "biologism is a certain kind of essentialism that locates women's 'natures' in the cycles of menstruation, reproduction, lactation, and other bodily processes."<sup>10</sup> Astrid Fellner points out that until the late eighteenth century, biologic sex was an epiphenomenon to gender and not its foundation."<sup>11</sup> By implication, to be regarded as either man or woman was rather having a certain role in society or rank in the hierarchical order than being a biologically-fixed sex. This is what Foucault means by "being by nature."<sup>12</sup> While sex is primarily the anatomical and physical portrayal of a person, gender "refers to the social role of an individual, based on the person's sex."<sup>13</sup>

While biologism maintains that sex is the determinant of gender, a critical reflection serves to show otherwise. Perhaps this is what

Michael Kimmel has in mind when he avers that "what is meant to possess the anatomical configuration of male or female means very different things depending on where you are, who you are, and when you are living."<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler and Michael Foucault have served sharply to strengthen this outlook dubbed as Queer Theory. However, before I explore their thoughts on the subject, it is important to give a brief attention to the main thrust of Queer Theory.

Queer Theory "focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire."<sup>15</sup> As a way of expatiating, Annamarie Jagose expounds that, "Queer is a product of specific cultural and theoretical pressures which increasingly structured debate (both within and outside the academy) about lesbians and gay identity."<sup>16</sup> According to Elizabeth Dörner, Queer Theory is "an area of studies whose main concern is the invalidation of binarisms like heterosexual/homosexual, licit/illicit, man/woman or masculine/feminine."<sup>17</sup> It is an area that terminates any effort to define, confer, and confine identity as it seeks to steer away from "exclusionary and reifying effects"<sup>18</sup> that may ensue. Given the fact that in

<sup>9</sup>. K.A. Rodier. "Biologism and Simone de Beauvoir: A Phenomenological Re-reading of 'The Givens of Biology.'" M.Phil. Thesis Submitted to the Department of Philosophy (University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon 2007), 10

<sup>10</sup>. K.A. Rodier. "Biologism and Simone de Beauvoir: A Phenomenological Re-reading of 'The Givens of Biology,'" 10

<sup>11</sup>. A. Fellner. *Bodily Sensations: The Female Body in Late Eighteenth Century American Culture*. (Vienna: University of Vienna Press 2006), 46

<sup>12</sup>. M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. (New York: Vintage Books 1990), 68

<sup>13</sup>. G. Pamperl. *The Subversion of Gender: Representations of New Women in Literature of Fin de Siecle*, 5

<sup>14</sup>. M. Kimmel. *The Gendered Society*, 3

<sup>15</sup>. A. Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press 1996), 32

<sup>16</sup>. A. Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 46

<sup>17</sup>. E. Dörner. *The Deconstruction of Binarisms in Feminist Science Fictions*. (Dipl: University of Vienna Press 2003), 8

<sup>18</sup>. A. Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 46

the attempt to construct gender, sex is not a sufficient affair, Queer Theory seeks to make distinct, the viewpoint that persons that do not fall into the rigid construction of gender are not to be excluded from social roles.

Although the term became prominent with scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Diana Fuss, Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler, it may be traced to the initial exposition provided by Michael Foucault. It therefore does not come as a surprise for David Gauntlett to perceive Foucault as the pioneer of Queer Theory.

While attempting to dislodge the outlook that sex is insufficient to determine someone's gender, Michael Foucault accords that sex was seen to be the "cause of any and everything."<sup>19</sup> With a thorough account of the history of sexuality, Foucault avers that:

The most discrete event in one's sexual behavior - whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or an excess - was deemed capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one's existence; there was scarcely a malady or physical disturbance to which the nineteenth century did not impute at least some degree of sexual etiology. From the bad habits of children to the phthyses of adults, the apoplexies of old people, nervous maladies, and the degeneration of the race, the medicine of that era wove an

entire network of sexual causality to explain them.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly for him, understanding of sexuality is not a natural or fixed identity but is something whose meaning changes in tandem with cultural and historical codes. Foucault highlights four ways that show the connection between knowledge and power to inform moral standards regarding sexuality in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

The first is the "hysterization of women's bodies."<sup>22</sup> This allowed women to be seen as sexualized objects for medical analysis. This perspective allowed women to be seen as nothing but means for procreation and the symbols of the health of society. As a consequence, "hysteria was then constructed as a disease inherent in women's bodies and caused by sexual problems. The second trait is what Foucault calls the "pedagogisation of children's sex."<sup>23</sup> This perception saw children as highly sexual beings. It was the emphasis that they need to be checked otherwise they may carry this to adolescents and pose a threat to themselves and society. Masturbation was precisely seen as a sin, horrific and detrimental by teachers, priests, and parents who initiated several means of regulation. The third mechanism that shows the link between moral development and understanding of sexuality is the "socialization of creative behavior."<sup>24</sup> The goal of sexuality was seen here as having an important role to play in society rather than for personal or individual pleasures. The fourth is the "psychiatrization

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<sup>19.</sup> M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 65

<sup>20.</sup> M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 65

<sup>21.</sup> M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 104-105

<sup>22.</sup> M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 104

<sup>23.</sup> M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 104

<sup>24.</sup> M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 104

of perverse pleasures.”<sup>25</sup> This is courted by the understanding that analyzing human sexuality can serve as a dais for the identification of abnormal human behaviours.

Foucault maintains that these four mechanisms, but not some fixed or stable biological factors inspired the production of sexuality. In his words:

Sexuality is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.<sup>26</sup>

In essence, Foucault's approach to sexuality and gender does not derive from biologism. He echoes that the binary model where humans are separated into men and women is not grounded in nature or anatomy but a constructed notion. He concludes:

...the notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensation, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity

as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.<sup>27</sup>

This line of thought has also been substantiated by another popular queer theorist Judith Butler. Butler maintains in her *Gender Trouble*, that sex does not necessarily inform gender but that both of them are socially constructed. She counters the traditional outlook of gender-based-on-sex that gender does not embed the essence of one's identity, but a performance, like a cloth or mask one puts on. Butler disregards the essentialist model where gender derives from sex and coins the term 'gender performativity'.<sup>28</sup> What this implies is that independent of one's body, “one may perform an identity and unconnectedly from your identity performance, you may have desires.”<sup>29</sup> Butler accounts that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expression that are said to be its results.”<sup>30</sup>

Just like Foucault, Butler insists that the notion of sex as the natural, fixed and inevitable marker between male and female is a consequence of cultural factors. Hence for Butler, far from being a basis for identity, “gender is a performance, a form of drag, by which through the successful manipulation of props, signs, symbols, behavior, and

<sup>25</sup>. M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 105

<sup>26</sup>. M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 105-6

<sup>27</sup>. M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 154

<sup>28</sup>. J. Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of the Identity*. (New York: Routledge 1990)

<sup>29</sup>. D. Gauntlett. *Media, Gender, and Identity: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge 2002), 137

<sup>30</sup>. J. Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of the Identity*, 25

emotions, we attempt to convince others of our masculinity or femininity.”<sup>31</sup>

Through the use of the thoughts of Michael Foucault and Judith Butler to expatiate on the core kernel of Queer Theory, one can safely deduce thus:

1. That both sex and gender are socially constructed and hence not fixed naturally;
2. That there is more to the binary sex model of just male-female; and
3. That both (1) and (2) make possible the validation of homosexuals and inter-sex persons as normal humans with unique sexuality, not to be discriminated against.

The foregoing propositions, to my mind, reveal the main contention of Queer Theory. In the remainder of this essay, I will uncover striking semblances with traditional Yoruba construction of sexuality in a way that is suggestive of the Queer Theory.

#### **Traditional Yoruba Discourse on Sexuality and Queer Theory**

Today, information, values and ideas have been made more accessible with ease through globalization. Globalization “refers to worldwide processes that make the world, its economic system, and its society more uniform, more integrated, and more interdependent.”<sup>32</sup> It is this interdependence and integration that accounts for the way cultures and religious institutions have been perceived. Traditional African cultures have been on the defensive given the role and influence wielded by Western culture and values as well as the religious tradition too.

Traditional African culture has been construed as backward and antiquated even by Africans themselves.

Christianity and Islam are religious products of foreign cultures. The introduction of these religions within the African sphere has cemented the understanding of foreign values and cultures over and above the African culture. The consequence of this on the part of a contemporary African is the dearth of a full and in-depth knowledge of his culture and tradition. When the Western society, in spite of being the precursor of Christian values in many parts of Africa, consented to homosexuality, there were discordant tunes in Africa among Africans. Quickly, Africans revived their long forgotten tradition and culture as a veritable paradigm that homosexuality is alien to Africa but a consequence of Western influence. The analysis of the African past to jettison homosexuality and sexuality as a whole by most of these scholars, to my mind, is either inadequate or shoddy, evidence of an uncharitable presentation of sexuality among traditional Africans. Some instances will suffice and this is where I return to the argument of Oduwale which had been briefly mentioned in the opening lines of this inquiry.

Ebun Oduwale admits that “from ordinary language and ideas in Yoruba thought, it is arguable that there are traces of homosexuality in traditional African society though the influence of Western culture might have made it more pronounced.”<sup>33</sup> She further submits: “nonetheless, homosexuality is generally seen as unacceptable in Africa because it is believed to threaten traditional

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<sup>31</sup>. M.S. Kimmerl. *The Gendered Society* 103

<sup>32</sup>. F.P. Stutz & W. Barney. *The World Economy: Resources, Location, Trade and Development*. (New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc 2007), 9

<sup>33</sup>. E. Oduwale. “The Reality of Homosexuality in Africa: The Yoruba Example,” 13

marriage institutions, family values, accepted cultures and other traditions which the *Yoruba* hold in high esteem.”<sup>34</sup> Here, she fails to make a clear distinction between the Africa that she has in mind, whether it is contemporary or ancient. The former has been influenced by Euro-Christian and Arab-Islamic ideologies whereas the latter, which is undiluted has never seen homosexuality as a reason for the plummet in family values. This is where the fallacious inference from Oduwale, which was earlier stated may be noticed.

While providing a justification for the argument against homosexuality, Kehinde Obasola takes a position similar to Oduwale's. For Obasola, “homosexuality is an adaptation, not an inborn trait. It is a distortion of the biological and psychological components of the body.”<sup>35</sup> He amplifies further:

It is proper to respect homosexuals as human beings created in God's image, their moral shortcomings notwithstanding. But such respect and sympathy should not translate to condoning the pseudo dichotomy of homosexual orientation and homosexual desires which are unarguably opposed to the creator's original will.<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere, it is made more explicit that the Western world is to blame for the perceived intrusion of homosexuality into the African

continent. It is intriguing to find a scholar asserting that:

*The Western world has provided acknowledged leadership in science and technology, but the African marital culture is infinitely superior to theirs, and we must not let them take it away from us. Rather, they should be made to recognize and adopt our cherished family values and the beauty of our extended family system which guarantees corporate and individual well-being. The giddy technological height attained by the so-called developed world has resulted in the disintegration of their traditional society and the breakdown of family life, as well as the collapse of social and religious institutions, which serve as ballasts to communal living.*<sup>37</sup>

Implied in the foregoing is that homosexuality, being a Western construct, aims to cripple African family values which are superior. Consequent to these scholarly contentions, the then Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta denounced homosexuality as alien to Africa. In his words: “There are some things that we must admit we don't share (with the US). Our culture, our societies don't accept.”<sup>38</sup> Robert Mugabe, the then president of Zimbabwe held that homosexuals “are worse

<sup>34</sup> E. Oduwale, “Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society,” 14

<sup>35</sup> K. Obasola, “An Ethical Perspective of Homosexuality among the African People,” 83

<sup>36</sup> K. Obasola, “An Ethical Perspective of Homosexuality among the African People,” 83

<sup>37</sup> M. Umukoro, “Much Ado about Homosexuality.”

<sup>38</sup> Bisi Alimi, “If You Say Being Gay is Not African, You Don't Know Your History.” *The Guardian* (2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/09/being-gay-African-history-homosexuality-christianity.html>

than dogs and pigs.”<sup>39</sup> Mugabe was confident that homosexuality is 'Un-African.'<sup>40</sup> Heads of government in African countries like Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe have kicked against homosexuality as a reality that derives from the West but not original to Africa. The consequence of this is not far-fetched - discrimination against homosexuals and in Nigeria, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2014.

The foregoing proscription of homosexuality on the African soil mirrors Michael Foucault's third mechanism that shows the link between moral development and understanding of sexuality as the “socialization of creative behavior.” As I had exposed in the previous section, this mechanism has the tendency to portray sexuality as a social affair to be regulated and governed. It is more social than private. However, has this always been the case? Is homosexuality necessarily 'un-African'? Is homosexuality a Western affair imported to destabilize Africa's values? What is the nature of sexuality among traditional Africans? Is it the same as the one paraded by contemporary Africans? These are the questions I seek to respond to as I employ traditional *Yoruba* understanding of gender and sexuality as a dais for the 'Africanness' of homosexuality.

To my mind, it is *unarguable*, that there were traces of homosexuality in traditional Yoruba society. I will begin with the outlook that

sexuality among the traditional Yoruba is not fixed or rigid by relying on ordinary language analysis of concepts and words among the Yoruba. In addition, there is clearly the lack of gender-specific terms in the Yoruba language that are suggestive of a fixed and immutable understanding of sexuality.<sup>41</sup> One must understand that, “Biological anatomy is not a limitation to social status as that of husband, wives, mothers, or fathers among the Yoruba. In addition, the Yoruba language provides no pronoun for sexual distinction. The notion of gender among the Yoruba is complex and multidimensional.”<sup>42</sup> This, however, does not mean that the traditional Yoruba does not know the biological or anatomical expression of man and woman. It needs to be affirmed that even when “gender is central to traditional *Yoruba* culture and society,”<sup>43</sup> my contention is that sex is not the paragon or yardstick.

The traditional *Yoruba* construction of sexuality moves beyond the yardstick of a person's sexuality and gender. While they perceive the man as *ako* and the female as *abo*, consequent of their anatomy, there are terms that show that the traditional *Yoruba* takes into cognizance some other humans that do not share this two-fold distinction which Queer Theory condemns. One of these suffices in my articulation of their thoughts on sexuality: *Lakiriboto*.

The closest English word for *Lakiriboto* is

<sup>39</sup> J. Moyo. “Worse than Dogs and Pigs: Life as a Gay Man in Zimbabwe.” *Reuters* (2012) Retrieved from [www.mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/iDUSKCN1BF03Z.on](http://www.mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/iDUSKCN1BF03Z.on)

<sup>40</sup> J. Moyo. “Worse than Dogs and Pigs: Life as a Gay Man in Zimbabwe.”

<sup>41</sup> O. Oyewunmi. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997)

<sup>42</sup> O. Olajubu. “Seeing through a Woman's Eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 20 no. 1 (2004), 42.

<sup>43</sup> J. Olupona. “Imagining the Power of the Goddess: Gender in Yoruba Religious Tradition and Modernity.” *Lecture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002), 32

hermaphrodite.<sup>44</sup> But for the sake of my purpose, I will use a more euphemistic term that is recognized in the academia, 'intersex persons'. These are human beings with partial expressions, the physical features of male and/or female. They do not express the widespread and dominant biological characterizations of male-ness and female-ness. For instance, *Lakiriboto*, could appear as a woman without female reproductive organs.<sup>45</sup> There are other cases where such may even possess the reproductive organs of a man yet express the physical manifestation or presence of a woman. The important point to learn from this is that there among the traditional Yoruba, there are no efforts to neither stigmatize nor discriminate against such persons. What this implies is that the traditional treat the biological conditions of these ancient versions of Queer persons as any other humans. Whatever gender that they choose to align with are acknowledged and respected without penal codes.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the lack of a pronoun for sexual distinction, it seems the people recognize the possibility of intersex queer humans.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to relay that some may find it difficult to admit the argument that traditional Yoruba view on sexuality parallels queer theory. What I aim to relay is that even when these critics cannot deny the lack of queer people in pristine times, there were no penal measures raised against them. My purpose is to show that traditional Yoruba discourse on sexuality is a version of

Queer Theory that became full-blown in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as already affirmed by the foregoing paragraph.

Proposition (1) of Queer Theory: “That both sex and gender are socially constructed and hence not fixed naturally”, does not need too much amplification at this juncture. In addition, the proposition (2) of Queer Theory: That there is more to the binary sex model of just male-female; and proposition (3) That both (1) and (2) make possible the validation of homosexuals and inter-sex persons as normal humans with unique sexuality, not to be discriminated against have been addressed with the affirmation of the term *Lakiriboto*, among the traditional Yoruba. There is however, another key term – *Adofuro*; and it is to this that I now shift attention.

In the literal sense, *Adofuro* connotes an individual who makes love via the anus. In other words, instead of vaginal penetration what obtains is anal penetration. Technically, an *Adofuro* within traditional Yoruba parlance is necessarily a man. This is because such a man prefers anus to the vagina; whether out of habit, biological disposition or mere sexual pleasure, one cannot be certain. The implication here is that in ancient times, there were gay men in traditional Yoruba societies.

While no term that correctly captures lesbianism has come down to us, *Odu Ifa Gori-Irete* is redolent of the reality of it. The *Odu*, which was quoted by Oduwale says:

<sup>44</sup> E. Oduwale, “The Reality of Homosexuality in Africa: The Yoruba Example,” 23

<sup>45</sup> S.L. Oladipupo and E. Ofuasia. “The Religious Foundation of Violence against Homosexuals: Proposing a Relief from African Local Epistemologies.” In *Religious Violence and Conflict Management in Africa: Phenomenological and Epistemological Engagements*, eds. D.O. Laguda & E.G. Konyana, 185-201 (Harare: Africa Institute for Culture, Peace, Dialogue & Tolerance Studies 2019), 195-6

<sup>46</sup> S.L. Oladipupo and E. Ofuasia. “The Religious Foundation of Violence against Homosexuals: Proposing a Relief from African Local Epistemologies.”

*Two men are copulating*  
*Two men are copulating*  
*Two women are copulating, two women are mating*  
*Why don't we take a man?*  
*And then take a woman*  
*Why don't we take a man?*  
*And then take a woman*  
*Therein lies enjoyment and fulfillment*  
*Divination was cast for Erifobogbile*  
*The (primordial) Head's diviner divined for it too*  
*When head was to site an abode*  
*Head was told to offer a sacrifice*  
*May I trade and make profits*  
*My (primordial) head, may I have two thousand children*  
*May I trade and make profits*<sup>47</sup>

There is also a *Yoruba* proverb that suggests lesbianism in traditional times: "It is idleness that causes a woman to fondle her mate's breast."<sup>48</sup> As the *Yoruba* proverb indicates, not only was it that the traditional *Yoruba* society was aware of lesbianism, but also that it did not see it as a very serious issue that would attract serious punishment.

In like manner, though the traditional *Yoruba* perceives homosexual activities as an exercise in futility regarding procreation, there is no outright condemnation of homosexuality. Also, while it is true that *adofuro* is a degrading word in the traditional *Yoruba* society to designate a male person who engages in sex via anus, there were no reported cases of such individuals being severely punished (such as being stoned, hanged, ex-communicated or even flogged),

probably this was due to the belief among the traditional *Yoruba* that the forces behind the acts were beyond the control of the actors. The implication of this is that though the traditional *Yoruba* society was not enthused by homosexual acts, the society still accommodated the actors. The argument, ultimately, is to the effect that if the act of homosexuality is beyond the control of the actor (a homosexual), to what extent can the society hold such an actor responsible for his actions?

Against the argument that homosexuality is unacceptable because "it is believed to threaten traditional marriage institutions, family values, accepted cultures and other traditions which the *Yoruba* hold in high esteem."<sup>49</sup> one is moved to ask: are there no instances where heterosexual activities threaten marriage institutions and African values? In addition, what makes an adult having carnal knowledge of a minor morally better than two consenting homosexuals who are both of age? Is it not obvious that the former threatens accepted cultures and traditions more than the latter?

Furthermore, when Oduwole cites *Odu Gori-Irete*, an *Ifa* verse, wherein *Orunmila* pronounced that homosexuality is an exercise in futility, she fails to discern the implications of that argument. Oduwole's argument could be deployed against women suffering from *mullerian agenesis*, that having sex is an exercise in futility, since they have no womb. It is true that the *Odu Ifa* that Oduwole cited recommends that for the sake of procreation, a man and a woman should copulate. The *Odu*

<sup>47</sup> Cited in E. Oduwole. "Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society," 14

<sup>48</sup> E. Oduwole. "Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society," 15

<sup>49</sup> E. Oduwole. "Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society," 14

*Ifa* in question however, does not say that sex is purely for the sake of making babies.<sup>50</sup> With Oduwole's argument, however, she revives the age-long but misleading locus that sex is for procreation *simpliciter*. While Oduwole holds to the outlook that the practice of homosexuality is arguable, some African heads of state conclude that it is entirely alien to the continent and must be proscribed.

I must add that homosexuality is not limited to traditional *Yoruba* societies alone. There are cases of terms that are suggestive of homosexuality among other African peoples prior contact with the West. Among the Hausa, the term *Yandaudu* is an example. These are individuals that have the physical attributes of a man, but dress as women and even get married to men. A modern term for a person of this caliber is that the person is gay. Realities of this nature are present in some other parts of Africa prior contact with Europe. To then put it as many Africans and African heads of government have done, that homosexuality is 'Un-African', is to state the complete opposite of what is true.

### Conclusion

My preoccupation in this paper is to show that whatever could be termed 'Queer Theory' is not a new phenomenon in some traditional African societies. I used traditional Yoruba sexuality to make this point obvious. It is also important to relay that in the traditional Yoruba history, queer acts were not criminalized as is the case in the contemporary times. It is the advent of colonialism and foreign religious practices and beliefs that account for the nostalgia of Africans for anything regarding their culture and tradition.

But we are Africans! It is important to embrace what is ours, be authentic and responsible. This is what Queer Theory purports to do. It portends to break the barriers raised against sexual expression and originality. Queer Theory seeks to show that persons with sexual orientation that do not fit within the binary of male-female need not be perceived as outcasts or as less-humans. Some traditional African societies (for example, the Yorubas) had this understanding and did not persecute homosexuals. If after our exposure in this age through the globalization of knowledge and technology, coupled with the advancements and studies in sexuality and gender studies, we still nurture beliefs that our forbearers accepted, understood and tolerated in ignorance, persons with sexual orientation that do not fit within the binary of male-female dichotomy, then how much have we advanced as humans?

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