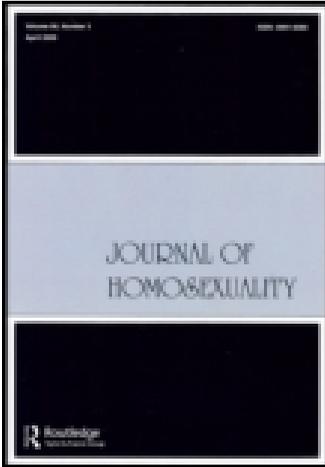


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Homosexuality

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjhm20>

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Published online: 28 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: George Olusola Ajibade PhD (2013) Same-Sex Relationships in Yorùbá Culture and Orature, Journal of Homosexuality, 60:7, 965-983, DOI: [10.1080/00918369.2013.774876](https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.774876)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.774876>

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Same-Sex Relationships in Yorùbá Culture and Orature

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It is widely believed that lesbianism and homosexuality are foreign concepts and colonial imports to Sub-Saharan Africa. This popular view is not unconnected with hegemonic heterosexual orientation of the society. The pitfall of heterosexual orientation, which hinges on politics of sexual representation, is worth an academic investigation. Therefore, this study seeks to close the analytical gap by examining Yorùbá oral literature, which is regarded as the repertoire of their traditional and cultural beliefs and nuances, to unravel the subject of lesbianism and homosexuality from a sociological approach.

Drawing on interviews and oral literature, this article examines the vital ideas of lesbianism and gay culture among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria. This article argues that the preconceived obscenity of lesbianism and homosexuality among the Yorùbá hinges on the culture of silence within the cultural milieu of the people. The study concludes that the representation of lesbianism and gay in diverse oral literature, as the repertoire of people's experiences and worldview, rubberstamped its presence and practices in the Yorùbá society.

KEYWORDS *culture, homosexuality, lesbianism, oral literature, Yorùbá*

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RESEARCH METHOD

The primary research method employed for this study was the field investigative technique of research. There were recordings of poetry through open-ended interviews with purposively selected custodians of Yorùbá cultural texts—especially Ifá and Şàngó priests and the aged men and women who are very versatile in the proverbial lore in southwestern Nigeria. In addition, young men and women were randomly selected for interview to elicit information on their understanding of the subject matter. Books, journals, articles, magazines, and other relevant materials on related topics were also consulted to enhance my analysis. The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using the sociological approach.

The Yorùbá People

The Yorùbá, numbering some 35 million people, comprise one of the main ethnic groups in West Africa. They are to be found not only in their prime homeland of western Nigeria, but all over West Africa and as far as Brazil and Cuba, where their culture still exerts a well-built influence. The Yorùbá share close boundaries with several other large West African groups including the Edo, Nupe, Borgu, Aja, and Ewe. The origin of the Yorùbá people, although there is no certainty about it, is believed to be in Egypt, where the Odudua, founders of the first Yorùbá kingdoms, emigrated. Beside Ile-Ife and Oyo, other major kingdoms are Ijesha and Ekiti to the Northeast; the Shabe, Ketu, Egbado, Ijebu, and Awori in the Southwest; and the Ondo, Owo, and Itsekiri in the Southeast.

Information about their deities was mainly passed down through oral tradition. There is a general belief by the Yorùbá that they have 401 different deities. The complexity of their cosmology has led some Western scholars to compare the Yorùbá societies with ancient Greece. Ifá, a sophisticated geomantic art of divination that uses signals and increasing the number four square to predict all facets of the future is very popular among them and many Yorùbá do not make any major decisions without consulting Ifá. Also, Şàngó, the god of thunder, occupies an important position in the pantheon of Yorùbá cosmology. He creates thunder and lightning by releasing “thunder stones” to the ground. It is believed that these stones have special powers, and are kept in temples dedicated to Şàngó. Other major deities include, but are not limited to, the following: Ògún, Ọbàtálá, Şànpònna, Èşù, Ọşun, Yemoja, and Olókun.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of sexual orientation is a controversial one in Africa and the existence of transvestites usually gets little attention. The duo should be

given an adequate scholarly attention. Homosexuality is a major sexual orientation that is generating various debates. Homosexuality is romantic or sexual attraction or behavior among members of the same sex or gender. When considered as a sexual orientation, homosexuality refers to an enduring pattern of or disposition to experience sexual, affection, or romantic attractions primarily to people of the same sex. It also refers to an individual's sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, behaviors expressing them, and membership in a community of others who share them. Homosexuality is one of the three main categories of sexual orientation, along with bisexuality and heterosexuality within the heterosexual-homosexual continuum.

The saga of exclusive heterosexuality in Indigenous Black or sub-Saharan Africa was extensively investigated by the famous Edward Gibbon's (1781/1909–1914), *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Referring to homosexual behavior in its 94th chapter, Gibbon wrote, "I believe and hope that the Negroes in their own country were exempt from this moral pestilence." Gibbon's (1781/1909–1914) assertion was based on non-inquiry and one doubts if he had visited Africa before his oversimplification on a topical issue of this sort. Similar error was made by Dunton (1989) regarding homosexuality as a Western import. The paucity of literature and research on lesbianism and gay among Africans, especially the Yorùbá, is mainly based on preconceived prejudice and unfair criticism of this sexual orientation. This has made many, including academics, to put up feathers of neglect against these topical issues that this small piece seeks to explore. It has even been noted that, "many academics view research on homosexuality and lesbianism with a considerable degree of suspicion and hostility" (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 3). The observation of Kitzinger perfectly describes the state of scholarship on lesbianism and homosexuality in Africa, especially among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria. It is widely believed by Africans, especially the Yorùbá, that homosexuality and lesbianism constitute an abuse of traditional values. The duo is seen as a sign of Western sexual corruption and immorality.

Peoples' perceptions and attitudes toward homosexuals and lesbians vary along diverse dimensions, such as gender or political orientation, among whom are Herek (2002) and Strand (1998). It has been pointed out that several agents contribute to this socialization process, including parents, peers, and religious institutions (e.g., Ballard & Morris, 1998).

The handling of same-sex relationships discourse in African literatures has been greatly influenced by the conventional belief systems of various African societies, the imported views of domesticated religions (mainly Christianity and Islam), and legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Many scholars opine that lesbianism and homosexuality are colonial imports. Views on lesbianism and homosexuality in Africa are mainly discussed in newspapers and on cinematography. This phenomena has not been subjected to academic exercise among the Yorùbá, especially by the

Yorùbá scholars. Contrary to the claims of some scholars, lesbianism and homosexuality were not unknown activities over much of the African continent previous to colonialism. While writing about the construction of homosexuality, Greenberg (1988) proposed a four-part classification to bring order to the descriptions of homosexual behavior recorded for various cultures across the centuries. Baum's (1993) ethnographic survey of 50 African cultures established the incidence of three types of homosexual behavior in traditional African societies—namely, transgenerational, transgender, and egalitarian relationships. The transgenerational and transgender patterns of homosexual behaviors are of great significance in many traditional African belief systems. Their function is involved with the proper maturation of children into full adulthood and the achievement and transfer of certain types of spiritual and religious authority. Egalitarian homosexuality covers the familiar category of adolescent sexual exploration between members of the same gender. The obscure, yet worldwide, force of sexuality appears in nearly all genres of literature, with its meaning and expression determined by the interwoven threads of customs, historical experiences distinctive to each community and period, the intent of individual authors of written texts, and societal norms of patrons of traditional folklores.

Public hostility to homosexual relations in Nigeria is widespread.¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons in Nigeria face legal challenges not experienced by non-LGBT inhabitants. Both male and female same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Nigeria. Homosexuality in Nigeria is illegal according to Chapter 21, Articles 214 and 217 of the Nigerian penal code, and can be punished by imprisonment of up to 14 years throughout all of Nigeria. This stance by the federal government of Nigeria on LGBT is not unconnected with the people's cultural background and religious bias; be it traditional religion or the domesticated religions: Islam and Christianity to be precise. Homosexual activity is punishable by death by stoning in the 12 states that have adopted the Shari'a penal code (Shari'a law), and by up to 14 years imprisonment throughout Nigeria.² In the 12 northern states that have adopted Shari'a law, anal intercourse (*Liwat*) is punished with 100 lashes (for unmarried Muslim men) and one year's imprisonment, and death by stoning for married or divorced Muslim men.³

Human sexuality is a primary drive in life. I have discovered that in some cultural texts, better put popular culture, the discourse of sexuality is dominant, although it is yet to be seen how this is constructed in relation to lesbianism and homosexuality among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria. Even the patriots of some of these cultural texts do not submit to the fact that lesbianism and homosexuality exist among the Yorùbá prior the incursion of colonialism. But, unfortunately, they have sermons against lesbianism and homosexuality, which is the more reason why one can conclude of the presence of these in their cultural praxes at one point in time or the other. To fully understand the role of the sexual sermon encapsulated

in Yorùbá popular culture, one must examine the methods and context by which it is depicted. It is, however, crucial to understand the meaning of the obscene in Yorùbá popular culture. In the popular culture among the Yorùbá, they have always had an affinity toward the obscene, the explicit, and the vulgar, regardless of historical censorship laws, forbiddance of sexual “perverseness,” and a shoddy image of sexual depiction in the eyes of the public realm. This is sequel to the poetic license of the Yorùbá poets as encapsulated in the proverbial saying, “*Ọba kii pa òkòrin*,” meaning the king does not kill (prosecute) a poet or singer. The following has been noted:

The closet has become a central category for grasping the history and social dynamics of gay life. This concept is intended to capture social patterns of secrecy and sexual self-management that structure the lives of “gay individuals” in societies organized around a norm of heterosexuality. (Seldman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999, p. 9)

Seldman’s observation perfectly fits the experience of the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria whereby heterosexual norms prevail; and other sexual orientations are regarded as obscene. However, in recent times, the issue of sexuality is receiving fresh attention, becoming a subject of public debate. In the past, the discourse of sexuality was regarded as sacred and it could only be discussed within certain spaces, mainly during the performances of certain oral literature. But, in the modern world, repressiveness cannot be used to categorize the discourse of sexuality any longer. This is in consonance with the observation of Hardy (2000) that, “In the modern world, Foucault (1981) argued, power operates more effectively through an ‘incitement to discourse’ on sexuality than through the repressive tradition it hereby negates” (p. 82). Nowadays, the discourse of sexuality—heterosexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, and various forms of sexual attitudes and orientations can be seen in oral and screen media among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria, although with negative and derogatory depictions of sexual orientations that are not heterosexual norms. Various misleading claims and assertions that lesbianism and homosexuality are colonial imports are purely biased and chauvinistic; not academic. Such claims are religious and political biases. Religious bias is driven by the attempts of various religious groups, traditional and domesticated, to enshrine and enforce “morality” upon people. The second group maintains that all non-heterosexual acts and orientations are un-African and that they are colonial imports by anti-colonial imperialists. As a purely academic exercise, one will see in this work that lesbianism and homosexuality have been in existence with the people prior the colonial era. This is even discernible in the religious rituals and the cultural text of the Yorùbá people. A cursory examination of the Yorùbá traditional religious ritual praxes is sufficient to authenticate the fact that lesbianism and homosexuality are not colonial imports.

BEYOND PHYSICAL COPULATION: SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN YORÙBÁ TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

From my fieldwork, I have gathered that the transgenerational and transgender patterns of homosexual and lesbian behaviors are of great significance in many traditional African belief systems, especially among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria. As real as this is among the people, it is still a debatable issue because many of my respondents still deny the existence of lesbianism and homosexuality in the Yorùbá culture and society. This does not mean, however, that same-sex eroticism did not exist among the Yorùbá; it simply means that it did not exist as an institution.

Explicating the concept of *Ìyàwó* (wife) in the interface between spirituality and religious values among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria is germane to our discussion on the subject of lesbianism and homosexuality. I would say the male–female dichotomy is conceived as having two complementary halves of one whole (like the Chinese Yin and Yang) as opposed to perceiving one gender as dominating the other. Men and women in Yorùbá spirituality and religion spheres are more of complementariness than seeing women as subservient to men or vice versa. Among the Yorùbá, the priests or priestesses of a particular deity, regardless of the sex or gender of such deity are regarded as the wife of that deity (*Ìyàwó òrìṣà*). New initiates (male and females) of Yemoja, Ọṣun, Ọbàtálá, Ṣànṣònná, and Ṣàngó—to mention a few of the gods in the Yorùbá pantheon that possess people—are specifically known as “brides/wives of the god/deities” (*Ìyàwó òrìṣà*). Either male or female, they wear women’s blouses (*bùbá*), skirts (*ìrò*), and sash (*òjá*) that mothers use to fasten their babies. This indicates that the relationship between a deity and the possessed adherents (*ẹlégùn*) is similar to the relationship between the active and passive partners in sexual intercourse (Matory, 1994, p. 7). The deity is said to “mount” (*gùn*) those she or he possesses. The term *mount* is cryptic with meanings. It refers not only to possession, but to the action of a rider mounting a horse that is symptomatic of an extreme form of control and an act of copulation. The cross-dressing of male possession priests in the Yorùbá religious and or ritual contexts seems to represent, instead, the male adoption of a style and reproductive servitude attributed typically to the fecund *wives* of mighty husbands. Although the wife of the deity (priests and or priestesses as the case may be) might be of the same-sex with the deity, the duo is regarded as a couple, but mainly at the metaphysical level. This portends that within the ritual contexts among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria there is crossing of gender boundaries to express or perform the opposite gender roles. A similar observation has been made that *Ìyá Ṣàngó*⁴ becomes *Ṣàngó* himself in possession trance realizing sex and gender, which is a form of temporary gender transformation (Drewal, 1992, p. 190). It was gathered from the adherents of *Ṣàngó* in *Èḍe*, a community where the worship of

Ẓàngó is prominent in the southwestern part of Nigeria in 2007 that the initiation ritual creates the deity inside the initiates.⁵ The initiates, either Èlégùn Ẓàngó (the one mounted upon by Ẓàngó) or the Adóṣù Ẓàngó (the one that fashioned his or her hairstyle after the pattern of Ẓàngó), are joined to Ẓàngó through initiation, although they are males. Hence, they are called Ìyàwó òrìṣà (deity's wives). In a similar manner that married women join to their husbands these priests are regarded joined to Ẓàngó as husbands and wives. They are no longer free, but are yoked together with Ẓàngó in a marriage relationship in the metaphysical realm. This is a form of homosexual praxis. Matory (p. 175) made a similar observation that the verb *gùn* (to mount) often implies suddenness, violence, and utter loss of self-control—a connotation linking it paradigmatically with Ẓàngó's action upon his possession priests and upon the world. In other words, whenever Ẓàngó mounts upon his devotees, they have no will of their own and they are totally subjected to the will of Ẓàngó. Mounting in this context also connotes a sexual act in which Ẓàngó is seen as mounting the priests who are males and females (*Èlégùn Ẓàngó*). This practice is not limited to Ẓàngó religion among the Yorùbá, it is also the practice of most of the traditional religious cults.

In a similar vein, the initiation ceremony of priests and priestesses of deities in “Yorùbáland” is regarded as the ceremony that compartmentalized their unions as husbands and wives regardless of being of the same gender. All wishes and aspirations expected in a heterosexual marriage relationship are also expected to manifest in such a relationship between the deities and the initiates; especially if these initiates are priests or priestesses. The wishes and aspirations range from faithfulness, benevolence, and love, among others.

From my interview with an Ifá priest, I discovered that the idea of lesbianism existed in Ifá mythology.⁶ The story has it that *Òfurufú-ko-ṣe-feyinti* and *Láárúfín* were both females who slept together and that *Láárúfín* subsequently gave birth to *Òrùnmilà*. The myth concludes that this is why *Òrùnmilà* has no bone inside his body: because he was the product of a traditionally unsanctioned union. However questionable this myth is to a logical mind, in religious thought it has merit for a cultural analytic standpoint. Also, it validates the reality of the idea of lesbianism in Yorùbá thought and belief system.

The idea of devotees of a particular deity among the Yorùbá is not limited to their traditional religious experience; it has been equally transferred to Christianity as one of the major domesticated religions in their society. This is discernible in one of the worship songs they sing to show their emotional attachment to Jesus Christ in bride-groom relationship, regardless of gender of the singer. One of the songs goes thus:

Alárinà ni Èmí Mímó jé (The Holy Spirit is the Intermediary)⁷

Èmi jé aya Jesù mi jé ọkọ (I am the Bride and my Jesus is the Groom)

Jòwọ mú mi dé ọdọ ọkọ mi (Holy Spirit please take me to my husband)
 Kí n lè bọ lówọ aninílára (So that I can be free from oppressors)

If this song is placed within its proper context, one can see clearly that the Christians in Yorùbáland who sing the song have adapted the structure of their traditional marriage contract and or process to their new religious experience. This is nothing other than marriage experienced at the metaphysical level between all Christians—male and female—and Jesus Christ. Alárinà, the go-between, is now equated with the Holy Spirit as the one who will act as intermediary between the bride (a male or female Christian) and the groom (Jesus Christ).

This kind of ritualized homosexuality and lesbianism is not only limited to the Yorùbá people. It is found among many cultures of the world (Kelly, 1977; Kimmel, 2006, p. 96; Schieffelin, 1976; Williams, 1936, p. 159). Gender-crossing homosexuality is equally present in the Hausa Bori cult and in Afro-Brazilian offshoots of West African spirit-possession religion. Donham and James (1986), in their popular anthropological work, pointed out that among the Maale of southern Ethiopia, some males crossed over to feminine roles called *ashtime*. According to them, these “biological” males dressed as women, performed female tasks, cared for their own houses, and apparently had sexual relations with men. Evans-Pritchard (1970) recorded that male Azande warriors of the northern Congo used to practice same-sex with the younger boys of ages 12 and 20, and that this practice went moribund at the incursion of colonization. Likewise, Murray and Roscoe (1998) remarked that lesbian acts—more specifically, long erotic relationships—existed among the women of Lesotho.

The aforementioned is proof that lesbianism and homosexuality have been part of the African culture, Yorùbá to be specific, prior the advent of colonial administration. Therefore, it is not foreign. The traditions are too well-entrenched to have been recently introduced.

Beside culture, it is worthwhile to examine the language use of the people to unravel the issue of lesbianism and homosexuality because language is both an expression of culture as well as a vehicle of cultural transmission. As argued by Apter (1998), “It is now becoming *de rigour* to locate verbal art and performance within socio-political relations of textual production, exploring the poetic and strategic values, dynamic ambiguities, and complex historicities” (p. 68). This is in line with Barber and de Moreas Farias (1989)’s “discourse and disguises.” Apter concluded that this has effect to

destabilize conventional distinctions between oral texts and social contexts precisely because oral literatures produce such instabilities-by remapping social categories, refashioning social identities, and by invoking rival histories and memories to shape and reorient social action . . .

it also reveals and discloses, giving active voice to hidden passions and secrets that are otherwise repressed. (p. 68).

In the following section, I locate the cultural text of the Yorùbá, Ifá orature, within religious, political and social (sexuality) contexts. I hope to analyze the text that was purposely fashioned by the Ifá priests to redress what they regard as anti-communal that has been in existence in the society prior to the incursion of colonial imperialism.

APPRAISAL OF YORÙBÁ CULTURAL TEXT

The large bulk of human communication is verbal communication. Language and culture are intimately related in that language is both a vehicle for and an expression of culture. The interdependence of language with social and cultural structures in a given society cannot be overemphasized. It is both a cause and an index of social and cultural structure and change. The interdependence of language, social, and cultural structures has been acknowledged by all social scientists, and this is germane to the understanding of the culture of a particular society. Language and literature play a key role in defining the nature, content and preservation of culture in a society. Individuals and groups draw a sense of identity and rootedness from the language they use. Language also frames the way individuals structure their thoughts. This is not to deny the fact that the dominant group or influence in a particular society may use language or literature to its advantage over the minority. The structure of social relationship in non-literate societies, transmitting their values oral, is quite different from what obtains in literate societies that record events and, thus, distinguish between myth and history.

Among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria, prior to the art of writing and reading transmission of cultural values and norms was mainly oral; and this makes their oral literature to be relevant in all ages. Summarily, explicating language use will make it possible to relate the social effects of art not only to its artistic merit, but will also elucidate the cultural practices of the people.

Too little is known about the history of lesbianism and homosexuality among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria due to lack of written records of the distant past and impulses of secrecy as the people consider such practices shameful and offensive. Even if these acts are present in the culture, they are concealed from public exposure. This is in consonance with the observation of Becker (1963) that, "Before an act can be viewed as deviant, and before any class of people can be labeled and treated as outsiders for committing the act, someone must have made the rule which defines the act as deviant" (p. 162).

To the lesbians and gays what the non-practitioners regard as deviancies is normalcy. This notion produces conflict of interests and principles in many instances over moral and ethical values. This idea has been succinctly captured by Grenberg (1988): “Clashes among groups can occur over moral values as well as over conflicting interests. As long as a group thinks that its moral code applies only to itself, it will make no effort to impose it on others” (p. 6).

For the fact that lesbianism and homosexuality are well depicted in oral literature of the Yorùbá people, it is sufficient to say that it is a known practice among them; it is only abhorred by the masses. For example, homosexual identity is seen in a proverbial saying that goes thus: “*Ó ranjú kankan bí ojù adófurò*” (He strains his eye bulbs like a man fucking anus). This indicates that the person(s) that formulated the previous witty saying is familiar with one of the practices of homosexuality that is culturally considered anti-heterosexual. Among the Yorùbá, the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality is a powerful force in the social construction of lesbianism and gay as “deviants.”

Although⁸ the Yorùbá culture forbids and detests both lesbianism and homosexuality, this is not to say that the two acts, especially homosexuality, are absent from the people as earlier stated. For example, one of my respondents (now 47 years old) told me that he practiced homosexuality with his roommates while he was in high school between 1979 and 1982. According to him, “We were doing it as a normal thing and we saw it as a comfortable opportunity to express our sexual intrigue since we were not married as at that time. You see, sexual desire cannot be permanently suppressed, especially by culture.” The testimony of this respondent who was practicing homosexuality as far back as 1979 proves that it is a practice that exists among the people, although unpopular. It was also gathered that many students, especially in boarding schools do it too and stop when they leave school. The political and communal aptitude of the Yorùbá people is to shun publicly lesbianism and homosexuality. This is not unconnected with the fact that the society faces moral panic at the time of enshrining what they thought was a moral code regarding the issue of sexuality. Cohen (1972) argued that, every now and then, society faces short sequences of moral panic in situations when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges and becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (p. 9). In a bid to face the presupposed challenges of moral panic the Yorùbá people have employed the weapon of religion oratory, being the traditional instrument that is given a high regard in the enforcement of societal rules and regulations prior to colonization. It has been noted by Howard Becker (1963) that the enforcement of society’s rules is an enterprising act and that occurs when those that want a rule enforced, usually to some sort of gain to their personal interests, bring the rule infraction to the attention of the public. The

rule infraction, brought to the attention of those in positions of authority, is dealt with punitively by the entrepreneur.

Instead of regarding all sexuality and all attitudes toward sexuality as socially constructed with specific agendas in mind, the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria construct sexuality as heterosexual. This is depicted in the following excerpts taken from Ifá literature, Ìwòrì-wòfín and Ìwòrìwòdí, respectively:

Epo seé jesu
 Iṣu seé jepo
 Àkàsò ló dùn ún gàkà
 Obìnrin se é basùn jòkùnrin lọ
 Ọkùnrin se é sùn tì jòbìnrin lọ-5
 Bọkúnrin bá n bọkúnrin ín sùn
 Bí i kókó, bí i oówo ni
 Bí ikù, bí àgbààrín
 Bóbìnrin bá n bóbìnrin ín sùn
 Bí èpètè, bí òórùn-10
 Bí ẹròfò, bí èéí
 Bọkúnrin bá n bóbìnrin ín sùn
 Bóbìnrin bá n sùn tọkùnrin ín
 Bí ẹni n fọlá yunpun ni
 Bí ẹni n fọlá yunra ni-15
 Igi Ọfún-Rẹtẹ ló ró gangan-òlèlè
 A díá fún Àpọn-Àko
 Níjọ tí n lọ lèè f'Ọlélẹ ọmọ Ọlọfà ọya
 Àpọn p'Ọlélẹ kò jé o!
 Kò ju ohun t'Ífá n se lọ-20
 Àpọn p'Ọlélẹ kò jé o!
 Kò ju ohun t'Ébọra n se lọ.⁹
 (Boiled yam is good to be eaten with palm oil
 Palm oil is good to be eaten with boiled yam
 Ladder is good to climb a barn/rafter
 It is pleasant for a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman
 It is pleasant for a woman to have sexual intercourse with a man-5
 If a man is having sexual intercourse with another man
 It results into lumps, boils and yaws
 It results into various diseases
 If a woman is having sexual intercourse with another woman
 It results into murk and fowl odour,-10
 It results into mud and dirt
 (But) if a man is having intercourse with a woman
 (Or) if a woman is having intercourse with a man
 It makes them feel they are on top of the world
 It makes both of them to have unlimited bliss-15
 It was the penis of Ọfún-Rẹtẹ that became extremely turgid and stiff

Ifá divination was made for a chronic Bachelor (*Àpón-Àko*)
 On the day he was going to propose to *Òlélé* the daughter of *Olófà*
Àpón-Àko proposed to *Òlélé* but she declined
 Such a problem is not too big to be solved by Ifá-20
Àpón-Àko proposed to *Òlélé* but she declined
 Such a problem is not too big to be solved by Ifá (*Ebora*).¹⁰

This Ifá literature, usually performed by an Ifá priest, detests both lesbianism and homosexuality. The effects of homosexual acts can be seen from lines 7 and 8, which is a disease of diverse sorts—lumps, boils, and yaws. Likewise, the effects of lesbianism, according to them can be seen from lines 10 and 11, which are murk and fowl odor, mud, and dirt. Murk, foul odor, mud, and dirt are used metaphorically to connote all ills and prejudice that the society ascribe to non-heterosexual behaviors. Among the Yorùbá people, as evident in their lore, lesbianism and homosexuality are understood as harmful not only to those that engage in these acts, but also to the society as a whole. The assumption behind it was that lesbianism and homosexuality are dirty and, on the next level, unnatural, and pathological. The two, are designated as “risk groups.” Many of my respondents (names withheld) even opine that homosexuality and lesbianism are a result of occult activity.

In contrast to lesbianism and homosexuality, heterosexuality is being appraised as well pleasing not only to the community, but to the people who engage in it. This is discernible from lines 12 through 15, and this is regarded as something that will make those that engage in it to feel on the top of the world (line 14) and it will make those that practice it to have unlimited bliss. It is culturally believed by the Yorùbá people that homosexuals extract more pleasure from sex because their sex is nothing but pleasure, whereas heterosexual sex is regarded as the only source of moving the society forward through their procreative praxis.

It is equally clearly discernible from the aforementioned Ifá literature that gender roles usually dictate that each gender is better at certain specific tasks necessary to run a happy household, and that same-sex couples or sexual relationship cannot function well or be as happy as heterosexual relationship. Hence, homosexuals are more constrained by gender roles than their heterosexual counterparts within the same community. To the Yorùbá, all forms of sex that were not in the service of procreation are detested. In other words, the only permissible (non-punishable) form was sex aimed at reproduction. This is encapsulated in the following Ifá texts:

Ó yèdí pẹ́ẹ́ (She shakes her vagina)
 Ó bọ́ pórọ́ (It [baby] falls to the ground)
 Ọmọ tuntun lèrè àyèbò (A new baby is the profit of sexual intercourse)
 Ìgbà ìdí dí méjì lá dọlómọ (It is whenever two sexual organs [opposite genders/sexes] meet that we have a baby)

Also, in Odu Ìwòrì-Òbàrà (Ìwòrì-Òpàjùbà), we have similar evidence:

Ó dó o ganngan ná (He had sexual intercourse with her)
 Ó kàn án ganngan ná (He had erection with her)
 A díá fún Ìwòrì (Divination was made for Ìwòrì)
 Tó ti ní dó aya rẹ lódró (He fucks her wife in a standing position)
 Ó fẹyintí ó ní fẹkún şèràhùn ọmọ (He weeps and laments for lack of children)
 Wọn ní ẹbọ ni kó wá şe (He was told to offer sacrifice)
 Ó gbọ rírú ẹbọ ó rú (He consented to the prescription and it worked for him)
 Ó gbọ èrù àtòkẹşù ó tù (He consented to offering sacrifice to the Èşù and it worked out)
 Ìwòrì o ò si bẹrẹ (It is better for you Ìwòrì to bend down [when fucking])
 A ti şe ní dóni lódró ganngan? (How palatable it is standing when fucking)¹¹

The previous text portends that procreation is the hallmark of sexuality while materialization of the love of a couple is left out by this cultural framework that hinges on heterosexual normative. The norm is based on an axiom that there are two sexes, male and female (a biological axiom), and that the two are complementary; hence, sexuality or sexual desires are both perceived as the linear consequences of the complementariness of the sexes and not just only of the complex cultural processes. The Yorùbá society in their folklore upholds that lesbians and homosexuals are social degenerates because the forms of sexuality they practice can by no means produce offspring, meaning that they are destined to expire within one generation.

Drewal (1992, p. 186) rightly captured the importance that Yorùbá attach to childbearing, as opposed to homosexuality:

The ontology of the human's spirit journey between the otherworld and earth and the value Yoruba place on progeny also explain why homosexuality as a way of life is absent from Yorubaland. Although homosexual relationship is known to exist, it would be inconceivable for Yoruba not to perpetuate the spirits of their forebears. Both men and women's significance in life is judged by the number of children they bring into the world. To have no children is regarded as a great human tragedy. (p. 186)

Another Odù Ifá, Ìwòrì-Wòdí that mainly forbids lesbianism in the Yorùbá culture goes thus:

Ìbá şe báyií làá şelú
 Ìlú ìbá dùn?
 A díá fún wọn nílúú Ìwòrì-Wòdí

Níbi wọn ní kí wọn lé ọmọ-òsú wọn jáde
 Èyí tó lẹkọ tán tó loun ò lẹkọfẹ fẹ mọ-5
 Tí yóò máa lẹdí mọ gbogbo obìnrin egbé rẹ kiri
 Ìwòrì-Wòdí ẹe bí nnkan rere loun ní ẹe
 Wọn ní ebo ni kó wáá ẹe
 Obìnrin tó bá ní fẹbìnrin egbé rẹ
 Èyin ò mò pé ó ní lẹ wòkú ìdí- 10
 Njé tó bá ẹe báyii làá sèlú
 Ìlú ìbá dùn ná?
 (Had it be that is the way we administer the community
 The community would be unbearable for the people?
 Divination was made for the people of Ìwòrì-Wòdí
 They were instructed to drive out their married daughter
 The one that was married and said has divorced her husband-5
 And she arouses sexual appetite of her fellow women around
 Ìwòrì-Wòdí thought that she was doing something good
 She was told to offer sacrifice
 Any woman who engages in sexual intercourse with fellow woman
 Don't you know she is (only) gazing at a dead genital? 10
 Had it been that is the way we administer the community
 The community would be unbearable for the people?)

The notion of lesbian love in the cited Yorùbá oral literature almost always requires audiences to infer the relationships. This portends the repressive legacy of the Yorùbá as encapsulated in their orature. The previously mentioned oral literature regards heterosexual pleasure as normal and natural against lesbianism.

From this previous Yorùbá cultural text, one can clearly avow that the breakdown of heterosexual marriage institution that is not unconnected with gender power relation necessitated a woman who previously identified as a heterosexual tried sleeping with women. That could be seen as an expression of her condescension with an inherently sexist and patriarchal society, and concluded that the most effective way to overcome sexism and attain the equality of women would be to deny men any power or pleasure from women, including sexually. Placed in a proper context, this act is nothing other than a lesbian-feminist act, a term chosen by women to describe any woman who dedicated her approach to social interaction and political motivation to the welfare of women (Rothblum & Brehoney, 1993). The woman in question might be oppressed by her male counterpart and the best option for her to be liberated was separation. In the real sense, sexual desire was not her main focus; rather, her focus was on politics; but to be independent from men as oppressors, and she strove to physically, socially, and economically separate from traditional male-centered partners.

In the previous Ifá literature (line 4), one can see that lesbians are to become social outcasts and that they should be objects of ridicule,

discrimination and may find themselves on the receiving end of near-constant insults from otherwise upright society members, even members of their own households. It is largely the society that determines the fate of homosexuals whether their lives will be a difficult and full of prejudice and discrimination or not. Sexuality in the previous context has become a site of moral and political negotiation that is also germane to gender relations, corresponding to self-identity and reproductive imperativeness. The Yorùbá people place high value on procreation and the continuity of the society and is, thus, tied to heterosexuality that would result in childbearing. “Dead genital” (line 10) indicates that sexual arousals between lesbians cannot produce children; hence it is regarded as dead. Not only this, the Yorùbá people opine that an erotic act between lesbians is fake and lifeless. Undeniably, lesbians and homosexuals are a social category within the community. But, the society depicts them as brutes who should not be allowed to exercise their sexual rights; as this is considered inimical to the peace and stability of the society. It is a fact that the spread of HIV/AIDS traversed society at large. Then, it must be acknowledged that the image of lesbians and homosexuals as HIV-positive women and men, respectively, therefore situated them much more undeniably within the social mainstream of the community. They are members of a community, rather than deviants and faceless brutes on the periphery of communal life.

It is high time that scholars in diverse fields engaged in rigorous academic exercise instead of erroneously joining others in stereotypic designation of lesbians and homosexuals. This is because stereotyping has elements of segregation, exclusion and bias. This view corroborates Hall (1997):

Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the “normal” and the “deviant,” the “normal” and the “pathological,” the “acceptable” and the “unacceptable,” what “belongs” and what does not or is “Other,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” “Us and Them.” (p. 258)

Kuhar (2003) maintained that, “Stereotypes are further important for their cognitive-linguistic function, since they simplify communication within a specific group with regard to other groups, strengthen the feeling of belonging and simultaneously alienate other groups” (p. 51).

This is in line with the observation of Van Dijk (1990), who argued that three types of long-term memories that are involved in the production of stereotypes: semantic memory, episodic memory, and the control system. He also maintained that semantic memory is the social memory that stores the collective beliefs of a specific society. These beliefs are organized as attitudes toward something, and represent a cognitive basis for the processing of information about the members of external groups.

At this juncture, it must be pointed out that there is a serious conflict between fundamental human rights and homophobia. Homophobia manifests itself in different forms, for example homophobic jokes, physical attacks, discrimination in the workplace, media representation, and principal being the jury against the gays and the lesbians. Homophobia continues to be a major barrier to ending the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Negative feelings or attitude toward non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationships, and community leads to homophobic behavior and is the root of the discrimination experienced by many LGBT people all over the world.

Wande Abimbola's position on homosexuality is worthwhile in this regard. This can be deduced from his response to Ivor Miller's question on the issue of homosexuality:

To start with, homosexuality was never a part of our (Yorùbá) traditional culture; but it could be found today in some urban areas, such as Lagos. A babaláwo must not impose his way of life on anyone. Who are we to probe into the personal life of another person? If a person wants to impose his or her own lifestyle, one might distance oneself from that person, but whether he is a homosexual or heterosexual, we may not know. If we have a rule about this, we have to probe every person's private life. Supposing they don't even tell us the truth then we may not succeed.¹²

Although he is an exponent of Ifá, known throughout the world, his position on reactions to issues surrounding homosexuality is quite objective and it also reflects his dynamism.

In many countries, stigma and discrimination prevent men who have sex with men from accessing vital HIV prevention, treatment and care services. Tackling homophobia can help overcome this, and can encourage gay men to be tested for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. One of the best ways to tackle this is having accurate and deeper knowledge and understanding about homosexuals and lesbians. Also, change must be seen in cultural attitudes if homophobia is to be adequately addressed among the people. We need more understanding about the practices of homosexuals and lesbians to be properly informed, and this will eventually determine our reactions to and interaction with them in the society.

CONCLUSION

This article actively combats the pervasive opinion or argument that homosexuality is a decadent, bourgeois Western innovation forced on colonial Africa by White men or, alternately, by Islamic slave traders. Yorùbá stereotypes of homosexuality are tremendously negative. There is the need for more scholarships on influence of social factors on sexual preference,

the social organization of sexuality, and people's perception of sexuality. One can surmise that in the distant past, heterosexuals sought some sorts of advantages by repressing lesbians and homosexuals in the Yorùbá society. In the past, lesbians and homosexuals have been invisible among the Yorùbá due to cultural pressure and denial of fundamental human rights. The atypical woman or man, who engaged in sexual act with another woman or man would either learn to hide it well, or if she or he dared to be open, would be identified a freak and driven to the outskirts of society. This article, based on literary analysis of Yorùbá cultural texts, seeks to reaffirm that the belief of many Africans that homosexuality is exogenous to the history of their people is phoney. Also, it portends that a belief of such has real social consequences, especially, the stigmatization of those who engage in homosexual behaviors or who are grappling with glut identities.

The current stigmatization of lesbians and gays among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria is a way of reinforcing and perpetrating the stigma historically and mythically associated with lesbians and gays, with its negative consequences. The prejudice, discrimination, and stereotype are tied to forms of homophobia and heterosexism in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and interpersonal relationships, regarding the latter as the norm.

In conclusion, various news about homosexual's existence in Africa especially Nigeria is real; whether the jury permits them or not. Understanding the practices of homosexuals and gays is germane to the development and future of the country and these must be lain unclothed. The culture of silence and prejudice against homosexuals might not help the nation. It must be admitted that they exist, even prior the incursion of colonial imperialists, and they should be allowed to come out. Coming out helps homosexuals remove the mistaken assumption that they are heterosexual. Although coming out can also advertise their status as a target for discrimination and prejudice, it also raises awareness of homosexuals' existence and provides opportunities for homosexuals to inform others and can also influence government policies targeting homosexuals. People believe it is a Western construct because it only became a prevalent issue after Western influence, hence the debate over and acceptance of homosexuality. Although it may have roots in the West (be a Western construct), we must be sure to note that it existed before. Also, the dearth of information on the issue indicates that it was most likely not a serious or highly debated or discussed topic, affirming the previous statement.

NOTES

1. See Vogt (2006).

2. The 12 states that have adopted the Shari'a penal code are Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara. However, the Shari'a penal code does not apply to non-Muslims.

3. See same Sex (Prohibition) Act, 2006.

4. Ìyá Ẓàngó is a female adherent or priestess of Ẓàngó, the Yorùbá deity of thunder and lightning. The deity, Ẓàngó, is conceived as a male. But, during the trance possession, the woman, Ìyá Ẓàngó, is no longer seen as a woman; she has been seen to marry Ẓàngó at the metaphysical level, and has even become a man. This, in my opinion, is a form of gay practice, but at the metaphysical level.

5. The following members of the Ẓàngó cult were interviewed in Èdẹ on August 3, 2007 at the Ẓàngó palace shrine: Chief Ẓàngóḍòkùn (male), Jagun Ẓàngó of Èdẹ, 100 years; Mr. Ẓàngókànmí, Agbájere of Èdẹ, 55 years; and Mr. Oyáwólé Ọlọya, member of Ẓàngó cult, 65 years. All of them share similar views on the issue of Ẓàngó becoming the husband of Ẓàngó priest when the former mounts the latter.

6. This interview took place with the Àràbà of Ifá of Modakeke, Chief Adewole Ifarinwale, October 2010.

7. *Alárinà* (intermediary) is the title of the person (male or female) who goes between the prospective couples in the traditional marriage institution among the Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria.

8. This was gathered from some respondents. All respondents in the high school maintain that those who practice it do it for curiosity and boredom.

9. Similar Odù can be seen in Ifatunmbi (2006).

10. This same text is seen in Ajibade (2009, pp. 34–37).

11. On this, Popoola and Fakunle (2008) maintained that, “Ifá advises against the standing position of one or both partners during sexual intercourse, more so when conception is desired” (p. 104).

12. This was taken from the interview conducted with Wande Abimbola, the Àràbà Àgbáyé, an Ifá exponent in 2009 (see <http://afrocubaweb.com/abimbola.htm>).

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