

Òrìsànlá Made Me Thus: Arguing for Homosexuality Using the Yorùbá Thought-System as Paradigm

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Abstract

Homosexuality has come under serious rebuttals with grave consequences especially in Africa. Most African heads of government have instituted strict penal codes against homosexual persons. Their argument being, homosexuality is 'un-African'. Unfortunately, biologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, and even sociologists have yet to come to a conclusive and decisive causative factor for homosexuality in humans. In a related fashion, scholars versed in traditional Yorùbá culture have shown that though there were instances of homosexuality in traditional Yorùbá societies, they were perceived as a threat to family values and procreative potentials. Most of these intellectuals have employed the Ifá corpus and Yorùbá proverbs for succor. In this research, I aim to employ the traditional Yorùbá thought-system to propose a causative factor for homosexuality, one that is consistent with commonsense and the peoples' spirituality. I also intend to argue against the popular belief that Ifá can serve as a basis to justify the rejection of homosexuality among the traditional Yorùbá. I will then submit that homosexuality was a phenomenon that the Yorùbá forbearers understood and tolerated. To be a homophobic Yorùbá, in the 21st century is an aftermath of the influence wielded by Western values on African mind as well as the dearth in the knowledge of customs and tradition that operated in Yorùbá society before contact with non-Africans.

Keywords: homosexuality, science, Yorùbá, Africa, philosophy

Introduction

My primary intention in this study is to employ the method of analysis and hermeneutical interpretation to argue that the traditional Yorùbá world-view on sexuality was not homophobic. I will also show in the pages that follow that there is plausible cause for homosexual behaviours that allowed the traditional Yorùbá to understand and tolerate the phenomenon better than the modern Yorùbá. This is striking once we recall that efforts to conjure a scientific explanation have met gridlocks. In addition, I will argue against the now canonical use of the Ifá corpus by some scholars who evince that homosexuality is an exercise in futility and/or that homosexuality was not tolerated within traditional Yorùbá society. All these are calculated to show that homosexuality is a sexual orientation just like heterosexuality. If traditional

Yorùbá society could manage and tolerate it, it is surprising given the level of technology and knowledge available to the modern *Yorùbá* to be homophobic and in support of anti-homosexual laws and restrictions. However, before anything else, it is imperative to unclad the lack of consensus in the scientific community, the cause of homosexual behaviours in humans. This is the occupation of the section that follows.

Homosexuality: The Futile Search for an Efficient Cause

Here, the principal questions are: what exactly does science tell us about the cause(s) of homosexuality? How tenable or plausible is it or are they? Perhaps it is better to take flight with biologism – “. . . the view that human behavior 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” (Rodier, 2007:10). The understanding here is that homosexuals have been determined by the genes and hormones in their bodies to have sexual orientations or affiliations as they do. In other words, they have been programmed by genetics to be thus. Natalie Angier (1993a, 1993b); Christopher Daly (1993); Curt Suplee (1995); Jamie Talan (1994) are few minds who have used media as a medium to publish these scientific findings. However, this perspective has come under scrutiny. The works of Stanton L. Jones and Don E. Workman (1989) and Richard C. Friedman and Jenifer Downey (1993) have served sharply to show that there is no conclusive scientific judgment “that homosexual orientation or attraction (much less behaviour) is biologically fixed or immutable” (Wardle, 2007:1001). In a related development, psychiatrists Richard C. Friedman and Jenifer Downey (2002:39) observe that:

At clinical conferences one often hears discussants commenting that ‘homosexuality is genetic’ and, therefore, that homosexual orientation is fixed and unmodifiable. Neither assertion is true...The assertion that homosexuality is genetic is so reductionistic that it must be dismissed out of hand as a general principle of psychology.

Other renowned minds that have made profound efforts to seek what science claims to be the cause(s) of homosexual orientations in humans are: Simon LeVay (1991); William Byne and Bruce Parsons (1993); as well as Simon Burton (2006). The widespread accentuated but unfortunate outcome is that there is no proper scientific evidence to serve as effective causation for homosexual orientation in humans. This ignorance of a causative factor from scientific investigations has fueled the general public with diverse causes, leading to malicious treatment and estrangement of homosexuals in several places in Africa. As a consequence, there has been the emphasis, mostly by

African heads of government that homosexuality is "...un-African, a disease of the morally corrupt West" (Kahn-Fogel, 2013:316). In the next section, an exploration of the African response to the homosexual orientation will be the hub of attention.

Homosexuality: 'Un-African' and Threat to Procreation and Tradition

Several African heads of government have proposed that homosexuality is alien to the African space-time. There is documented evidence wherein Uhuru Kenyatta's stance is reflective of this perception. While addressing the erstwhile President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, Kenyatta was reported to have said: "There are some things that we must admit we don't share (with the US); things that our cultures, our societies don't accept" (Alimi, 2015). The discernment here is that homosexuality is not a culture that Africa shares with the United States of America. The view that homosexuality is un-African has also been corroborated by Robert Mugabe who avers that homosexuals "are worse than dogs and pigs" (Moyo, 2012).

Consequent upon the foregoing, is the fact that many African states have proscribed homosexuality. In Nigeria, homosexuals are likely to bag a fourteen-year jail term. The punishment is even stricter in the Sharia North where death penalty obtains. In spite of the lack of scientific consensus regarding the cause of homosexuality, Kehinde Obasola opines that "homosexuality is an adaptation, not an inborn trait. It is a distortion of the biological and psychological components of the body" (Obasola 2013:83). Throughout his thesis, the genetic and biological justification for this assertion is missing. However, he is willing to grant toleration. This toleration however "...should not translate to condoning the pseudo-dichotomy of homosexual orientation and homosexual desires which are unarguably opposed to the creator's original will" (Obasola 2013:83).

Homosexuality has also been perceived as "a disease of the morally corrupt West" (Kahn-Fogel, 2013:316). It is a status quo with implications that can erode core family values and a distortion of the God-given ability for procreation and preservation of the species (Oduwole, 2018). Perhaps this is what fueled the contention 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 (Umukoro, 2009).

Prominent African philosopher, Egun Oduwole (2013, 2018) too entered the discursive fray. Oduwole (2013) just like Bisi Alimi (2015) and a host of others have countered the widespread but accentuated perception of homosexuality as 'un-African' to be fallacious. I am in agreement with them. To my mind, the outlook that homosexuality is un-African is either propaganda as to criminalize homosexuals and/or an expression of the ignorance and lack of in-depth history of African sexuality on the parts of African policy makers and heads of government. However, even in the face of this showing, Oduwole still endorses the criminalization of homosexuals. In her words:

Homosexuality is not as alien to traditional African societies as some people would want us to believe. However, it is equally clear that while there were traces of the phenomenon in indigenous Yoruba society, for example, it was generally considered to be unacceptable. Hence, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2014 in Nigeria is consistent with our cultural values (emphasis mine) (Oduwole, 2018:15).

Oduwole makes two powerful but misleading claims in the foregoing excerpt. I will summarily attend to each of the claims to extrapolate my position against her argument.

Her evidence that homosexuality "...was generally considered to be unacceptable..." (Oduwole, 2018:15), in indigenous Yorùbá society derives from *Ódù Otùrá Gori-irete*, one of the many *ódùs* (chapters) of the *Ifá* corpus whose rendition in English language is thus:

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 fulfilment
Divination was cast for Erijobogbile
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

Oduwole is sure that this *Ódù* “gives a vivid account of homosexuality and points to it as an exercise in futility” (Oduwole, 2018:14). However, it is strange how her perception that homosexual affair is an exercise in futility is enshrined in that *Ódù*. Even if, for the sake of argument, we admit Oduwole’s conviction that homosexuality is an exercise in futility perhaps because procreation does not ensue, then Oduwole must be willing to accept that heterosexual women with *Mullerian agenesis* have no business with sexual intercourse since that too will be an exercise in futility. Clinically validated barren women and women past menopause who are heterosexuals will also, on the account of Oduwole, be performing exercises in futility. Her reasoning may even imply that they need not make love again. In retrospection, Oduwole may offer the rejoinder that the *Ódù* reveals that a man-woman sexual intercourse is more enjoyable and fulfilling than a homosexual intercourse. She may use the *Yorùbá* saying that, ‘*O ranju kankan bi oju adofuro*’ (i.e. he keenly dilates his eyes like someone who engages in anal sex) to justify this seeming lack of enjoyment. However, this reasoning too is flawed. First, for someone to dilate his eye balls while performing an act (like an *adofuro* does while in the act) is suggestive of the fact that the person is passionate about what he is doing. Someone who is zealous about what he is doing is probably enjoying the act. The import of this is that it cannot be true that the homosexuals are not deriving enjoyment from their action. In any case, no homosexual has come out to say that he lacks enjoyment and fulfillment while performing the act. To feed this proposition and presumption into their sexual orientation and then criticize same clearly indicates the Strawman Fallacy. Analogically, there are reported cases of vaginal intercourse where the woman complains of discomfort and pains, sometimes accompanied with bleeding. Clearly, enjoyment and fulfillment in sexual intercourse is an argument that may be deployed to both homosexuals and heterosexuals. It is not a yardstick to relegate or denounce the former and be mute regarding the latter. As a result, I think that using the *Ifá* corpus and *Yorùbá* maxims as bases for the rejection of homosexual practices in traditional *Yorùbá* societies is flawed and inadequate. I will amplify this position in the next section. For the moment, I am concerned with Oduwole’s second erroneous and misleading assertion. Oduwole (2018:15) maintains that “the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition

Act of 2014 in Nigeria is consistent with our cultural values.” She seems to assume here that Nigeria is a homogenous political entity, where what holds in a predominantly Christian South with diverse ethnic groups also obtains in a predominantly Muslim North where the Sharia law operates. It is on the basis of this that Oduwole assumes that the said Act is consistent with African cultural values. This assumption is a deliberate fall into the fallacy sweeping of generalization. This is because the general claim itself is not plausible when we consider that the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2014 is only applicable in Nigeria, and not the rest of other societies in Africa. The claim that homosexuality is inconsistent with African values is itself consistent with committing the fallacy of Converse Accident. Moreover, examples abound in many societies in Africa, including Nigeria where evidences of homosexual activities are acknowledged as normal within some traditional African societies.

Among the traditional Hausa in the present day Northern Nigeria and the *Lango* people of Northern Uganda, for examples, there were men identified as *yan duada* and *makudo dako* respectively. In the words of Mathew Paige (2016), *yan duada* “... were effeminate men and were considered an option for other men to marry. Other traditions were found in the *Nilotico Lango*. There was the third gender *makudo dako*, which were people of the male sex who dressed as women, and treated as women. Marriage between men and *makudo dako* was a common practice.” Similarly, among the traditional *Yorùbá*, the terms *adofurò* and *lakiriboto*, are suggestive of gay and inter-sex persons respectively. There were no strict penal codes against these humans. They were respected and accorded their own rights as human beings. There were neither Sharia laws that made them death row candidates nor imprisonments of a decade and four years.

Accounts of many castrated male slaves, either bought or captured as spoils of war, that were used as sex objects by traditional warlords to bolster the efficacy of their spiritually insulated voodoo, give glimpses of reality that, in fact, Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer (LGBTQ) engagements were once activities of pride and powers in traditional Africa. Those words, such as the Yoruba's *adofuro*, Hausa's *yan daudu* or even powerful and ordinary individuals who were openly gay in pre-colonial Africa are assertions to the fact that African cultures and languages are not emphatically gender-specific. In spite of the vilification that has tended the LGBTQ activities in

post-colonial Africa, traditional accounts suggest that the problem of gender identity was not a complex one, as pangenderism was warmly embraced. What has shaped sexual thoughts, perceptions and acts today can be said to be the influences of both Christianity and Islam.

So far, I have been able to establish two crucial points. First, that there is no scientific consensus regarding the cause of homosexual behaviours. Second, that attempts to demean homosexuality as un-African and the consequence of stigmatizing and prosecuting such persons falls short of both scientific and Afro-cultural backing. Now, I will put up an argument in the section that follows, one that makes the traditional *Yorùbá*, tolerant but non-homophobic, which may assist in the safeguarding of the human rights and respect of homosexuals in contemporaneous times.

Traditional *Yorùbá* Myth of Creation: Homosexual Lessons for Contemporary Relevance and Application

Before the advent of colonialism and its impression on the African mind with Arabic and Western values, cultures and religions, there were allegories used to explain why things are the way that they are. These allegories or myths have served as a way of understanding the world, for social cohesion and mutual coexistence. A critic may at this junction question my choice of myths as a basis even when I had already ceded that there is no scientific consensus on homosexuality. Hence, I need to provide an explanatory justification before exploring the indigenous *Yorùbá* creation myth as a plausible reason why there were no homophobic acts in pre-colonial times. While speaking on the role that myths play in the development of scientific theories, Karl Raimund Popper states that:

I realize that such myths may be developed, and become testable; that historically speaking all – or very nearly all – scientific theories originate from myths and that a myth may contain important anticipations of scientific theories. Examples are Empedocles' theory of evolution by trial and error or Parmenides' myth of the unchanging block universe, in which nothing ever happens and which if we add another dimension becomes Einstein's block universe... (Popper, 1963:36).

Clearly, several factors militating against the development of African science will have made the development of African myths into testable scientific theories impossible. Factors as poor understanding or complete ignorance of indigenous cultures and tradition, the aftermath of Arab-Islamic and Euro-Christian values, education, religions, culture and traditions are foremost. However, my contention is not to engage with these. My point is that the *Yorùbá* creation myth is pregnant with some testable truths which

render homophobic ideas obsolete. This is why I will next concern myself with the myth of the creation of humans as rendered in traditional *Yorùbá* thought-system.

For the sake of argument, if there is any truth in the role that sexual selection plays in reproduction, it is minimal. This claim is incontestable if one recalls that there are several cases of sexual relations that do not lead to conception, pregnancy, gestation and then finally, delivery. In the words of Olanrewaju Shitta-Bey, “it is a scientific fact that sexual intercourse does not necessarily result into pregnancy even when the spermatozoa of a man and the ovum of his female counterpart are medically proven to be satisfactorily active” (Shitta-Bey, 2015:54). It is therefore not uncommon to have many sterile personalities among species in the plant and animal kingdoms. Contrary to the claim of Charles Darwin (1949), the traditional *Yorùbá* contests that sexual selection plays minimal role as the impact of other factors have not been taken into consideration. In plain language, sexual intercourse as an aftermath of the evolutionary theory of sexual selection does not guarantee reproduction and ultimately the preservation of the species. If the *Yorùbá* evolutionary theory and the role of *Olódùmarè* (Higher God) and the *òrìṣàs* (divinities) are used to assess this reality, it becomes clear that even the traditional *Yorùbá* theory has more consistency over Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural and sexual selection. It is as a result of this that, a re-interpretation is needed for the *Yorùbá* human creation account in order to put in the proper perspective, the role of *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs* in the affairs of the universe.

It is not to be contested that the saying: ‘*Olódùmarè ní ó n fún èniyàn ni ọmọ*’ (*Olódùmarè*, the Higher God, is the giver of children) is ubiquitous among the traditional *Yorùbá*. It is this additional condition that the traditional *Yorùbá* adds to the role of natural and sexual selection. This condition is the role played by *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs* during and after sexual intercourse. It is from this truth that when *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs* bless the union of a man’s sperm cell and a woman’s egg cell after sexual intercourse or manipulation over a petri dish (if it is a biotechnological process), that the *Yorùbá* may utter: ‘*O ti fẹrakù*’ (conception has occurred in her/it). This is seen by the *Yorùbá* as a sign that *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs* have granted their request toward procreation. One point must be noted here though! There is a large gulf between ‘*O ti fẹrakù*’ (conception has occurred in her/it) and ‘*O ti l’ọyun*’ (pregnancy has occurred in her/it) for the traditional *Yorùbá*. This is “because there are stages/processes involved between the moment of conception and the delivery of the baby (for instance, Orisanla may or may not carry the function of moulding the *Ara* of the human person)” (Shitta-Bey, 2015:54). A proper and detailed account of the evolution of the foetus

has been documented by Olanrewaju Shitta-Bey (2015). I will not pursue that further to avoid digression from the focus of this research but rather consider the primordial deity called *Òrìṣàńlá*.

According to oral tradition, *Ọ̀bàtálá* or *Òrìṣàńlá* (one of the primordial divinities in the *Yorùbá* world-view) fashions the human body (*ara*) out of clay or sand [(Balogun, 2007); (Ekanola, 2006); (Oduwole, 1996); (Idowu, 1962); (Gbadegesin, 2004) (Ofuasia, 2016:187). Meanwhile, *Olódùmarè* (Higher God) gives life-force or soul (*Èmí*) to the 'craft' of *Òrìṣàńlá*. The animated *ara* then proceeds to *Àjàlá's* abode (another primordial divinity who makes *Orí*) to make a choice of *Orí*.

Established that *Òrìṣàńlá* is the primordial divinity that casts a human body, it is very likely that he may cast inter-sex persons. He may omit the genitals of a woman, thereby creating 'confusion' over the sex of the person. Depending on his mood, *Òrìṣàńlá* could mould a woman with stronger bones and muscles that will make her more masculine. He may also mould women without womb. Furthermore, in the most severe cases, he "may not carry out the function of moulding the *ara* of the human person" (Shitta-Bey 2015:54) or external human factors such as physical violence and inappropriate medications, could lead to miscarriage for the gestating woman. These are perhaps some of the ideas that informed the traditional *Yorùbá* position on sexuality. It, therefore, does not strike one that traditional *Yorùbá* sexuality is one that recognizes, aside the male and female sexes, that there could be other sexes that emanate from the craft of *Òrìṣàńlá*. This is precisely why in the *Yorùbá* language, there is no gender-specific pronoun for the male and female sexes (Oyewunmi, 1997). Furthermore, "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" (Olajubu 2004:42).

The climax of this study has served to reveal that among the indigenous *Yorùbá*, there is a likely understanding of homosexual and intersex persons as the crafts of *Òrìṣàńlá*, in a similar way that *albinos* can be likely crafted. It may, therefore, be inferred on the basis of this that traditional *Yorùbá* society is not a homophobic one. It was a kind of society where sex and gender are flexible and amenable.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the characterization and extent of three claims on homosexuality within the African purview. First, that there is no scientific consensus regarding the cause of homosexuality. Second, that African leaders

and scholars who have upheld the anti-same sex marriage either have a poor understanding of African culture or are just homophobes who do not wish to have any interaction with homosexuals. These persons have also used the glorious past of Africa to gird their resolve that homosexuality is un-African. Third, that the traditional *Yorùbá* community like many other pre-colonial areas in Africa was not against homosexuals since there is no evidence affirming that homosexuals were punished, discriminated and persecuted as they are in recent times. Impliedly, my position is that homosexuality is not foreign to Africa and for the traditional *Yorùbá*, it is *Òrìṣàńlá* that stands as *efficient cause* for their being. It is, therefore, the recommendation of this research to revive the idea that it is *Òrìṣàńlá* that made the homosexual thus. Consequently, it is my admonition that an inclusive legislation which would foster everybody's fundamental rights, an inclusive education that teaches Africa's proper history against populist homophobia, must be developed and amplified to the effect that African cultures and languages are no strangers to homosexual behaviours and activities.

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