

OJORHV

OGUAA JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND
HUMAN VALUES

A publication of the Department of Religion and
Human Values

University of Cape Coast, Ghana

(ISSN: 2026-6340)

Volume 5 Issue 1 (2019)

**Biologism and Gender-based Violence in
Contemporary Africa: Articulating a Panacea
from Traditional Yorùbá Sexuality.**

Dr. Dasaolu, Babajide Olugbenga
Department of Philosophy,
Olabisi Onabanjo University,
P.M.B. 2002, Ago-Iwoye.
Ogun State, Nigeria.
babajidedasaolu@gmail.com

Abstract

Biologism is a theoretical conjecture which renders the 'nature' of persons in bodily processes and physical manifestations. Whilst dauntless scholarly contentions in the Western tradition have served sharply to indicate the flaws and limits of biologism, it is disturbing that biologism has become a dominant framework for the articulation of gender relations among contemporary Africans. This outlook derives perhaps, from the overwhelming influence wielded by Christianity and Islam on the minds of the contemporary African. However, a critical scrutiny of these religions reveals that not only do they endorse biologism but that they are replete with instances and verses in their scriptures that promote gender-based violence and patriarchy. In the face of these propositions, this research portends to revive the traditional *Yorùbá* account of gender relations as a plausible instance of ideas that are originally African, and capable of use for surmounting contemporary challenges. As a consequence, the study contextualizes the discourse within traditional *Yorùbá* culture relying on the *Ifá* corpus. It affirms that biologism had no apologists among the traditional *Yorùbá*. It further avers that gender construction among the traditional people is neither antagonistic nor hegemonic but flexible and complimentary. Hence, the recommendation that this indigenous perception be reinvigorated in contemporaneous times to check the discrimination

and subordination of women and homosexuals in Africa is the onus of this drudgery.

Keywords:

Biologism, Gender, Traditional Yorùbá, Ifá, Africa.

Introduction

At the announcement of the birth of a son, the Muslim harps: “*Allah Akbar!*” The birth of a son commands such an utterance in the Arab culture. It is the case that for each of the Arab-Islamic and Judeo-Christian cultures, the man is given more gender priority and status vis-à-vis the woman. To therefore make mention of the gay or the lesbian will be treated as heinous. “God created all animals in a pair – male and female,” they would say. This perception is redolent both within the passages of the *Holy Bible* and *Al-Qur’an*. Perhaps this accounts for the diffusion of this perception of gender and sexuality to other parts of the world, where these books have become dominant.

The above is rendered obvious since it has been contended that Christianity and Islam have exerted their impressions on African minds, albeit negatively.¹ The influences wielded by these religions and their institutions on the African mind, is one of the competing factors that accounts for the neglect of their rich cultural heritage which has the potential of providing viable alternatives for contemporary challenges.² To my mind, the admission of these foreign religious institutions initiates a gender-relations status quo that is detrimental to women and homosexuals. This is owing to the fact that women have been passed as inferior to men in almost all fronts, the homosexual even worse. There are instances in the revealed scriptures of these foreign religions that endorse and instill patriarchy and frown at homosexuality thereby legitimizing gender-based violence.³ It is also a clear notion that biologism has been the

¹S. B, Mala, Z. I., Oseni, *Religion, Peace and Unity in Nigeria*. Ibadan: NASR, 1984), pp. 2-3

²Authors who share this outlook are not limited to: S, Imbo, O. ‘p’Bitek On Western Scholarship on African Religion’, In Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*. (New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2004). Pp. 363-373; O. p’Bitek, *Africa’s Cultural Revolution*. (Nairobi: Macmillan Books for Africa 1963); E. Ofuasia, “On the Postmodern Groundwork of Yorùbá Ethno-Epistemology and Ifá Divination.” *LASU Journal of Philosophy*. (2018). Vol. 1

³For instance, in Genesis 12: 10-20, Abraham finds Sarah expendable. Elsewhere, Lot proposes to rapists, his daughters as to protect his male guests (Gen. 19:1-11). King David refused to punish Amnon’s sexual assault on Dinah (2 Samuel 13). Women have been encouraged to learn in silence (1 Timothy 2: 11-12), just as they

underlying tone for the articulation of sexuality in these foreign religions.

In the pages that follow, I will argue using Queer Theory as my theoretical framework to that the of male-female binary initiated by biologism is flawed and nothing but a social construct. Afterward, how the male-female (and none-other-sex) construct downgrades women and homosexuals thereby promoting gender-based violence, will be explored. In a later part of this inquiry, I will explore *Yorùbá* traditions on sexuality to point out two non-discriminatory traditional ways of dealing with gender and sexuality in contemporary Africa. The first is the affinity of *Yorùbá* traditions to the Queer Theory and its open-minded outlook and tolerance of homosexual persons. The second, how, traditional *Yorùbá* society, using the *Ifá*—a forgotten heritage of patriarchy as cue, does not in any way endorse gender-based violence and discrimination against homosexual persons.

Biologism and the Justification for Gender-Based Violence against Women and Homosexuals

The first task here is to disinter what biologism entails. Next, I will distinguish ‘sex’ from ‘gender.’ Furthermore, I will show how biologism informs gender roles; how it eliminates homosexuality; and how it is employed as a yardstick for violence on gender basis in revealed scriptures.

Perhaps it is crucial to commence with the notion that “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.”⁴ To expatiate further, it may be perceived as “a certain kind of essentialism that locates women’s “natures” in the cycles of

have been implored to submit fully to the man (Ephesians 5:22-3). Leviticus particularly targets homosexuals. It passes it as abomination, homosexual activities (Leviticus 18:22). The Bible out rightly justifies the death penalty on homosexuality in spite of providing no critical and comprehensive explanations for its cause and motivations in the human nervous and reproductive organs (Leviticus 20:13). *Al-Qur’an* frowns at homosexuality. *Surah* 7: 78-84 is suggestive of the story of Lot which is similar to the one rendered in Genesis. Regarding patriarchy and gender, *Surah* 2:228 portrays that men are better than women in status. This locus is corroborated in *Surah* 4:34 thus: “Men are managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other.” *Surah* 4: 11 maintains that women will always get half of what a man gets in inheritance.

⁴K. A. Rodier, “Biologism and Simone de Beauvoir: A Phenomenological Re-Reading of “The Givens of Biology”” M.Phil Thesis Submitted to Department of Philosophy. (University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada. 2007), p. 10.

menstruation, reproduction, lactation, and other bodily processes.”⁵ Hence, to be a woman is to be able to undergo these natural processes when a man does not. This is what Foucault means by “being by nature.”⁶

It has been argued that this biological perspective to human sexuality not only informs the idea of *only* two sexes but that one of them is inferior to the other. Taken together, they inform the social roles adduced to the sexes. This view has been validated by Simone de Beauvoir who finds biologism culpable for the popular outlook that the women are lesser, naturally, than the man. For her “the female is the victim (*proie*) of the species. During certain periods in the year, fixed in each species, her whole life is under the regulation of a sexual cycle.”⁷ De Beauvoir’s point is that biologism does the woman no good since it validates patriarchy. On patriarchy she harps: “since he did not accept her, since she seemed in his eyes to have the aspect of the *other*, man could not be otherwise than her oppressor. The male will to power and expansion made woman’s incapacity a curse.”⁸ From this, social roles or expectations are then ascribed to sexes.⁹ This distinction is important for the demarcation of ‘sex’ from ‘gender.’ Whereas 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.”¹⁰ In the words of Jane Flax:

Gender is a category meant to capture a complex set of social relations. Gender is not one or many things, but refers to a changing set of historically social processes. Gender both as an analytical category and social process is relational. That is, gender is a complex whole constituted by and through interrelated processes.¹¹

The principal occupation thus far has been to analyse how biologism informs the understanding of sex (as either male or female) and the social roles expected of them. These social roles, I

⁵Ibid., p. 10.

⁶M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. (New York: Vintage Books 1990), p. 68.

⁷S. De Beauvoir, *Second Sex*. Trans H.M. Parshley. (New York: Random House 1989), p. 20.

⁸Ibid, p. 78.

⁹A. Fellner, *Bodily Sensations: The Female Body in Late-Eighteenth Century American Culture*. (Vienna: University of Vienna 2006), p. 47.

¹⁰G. Pamperl, “The Subversion of Gender: Representations of New Women in Literature of Fin de Siecle”. Mag. Phil. Universitat Wien 2008. p. 5.

¹¹J. Flax, “Gender as a Problem: In and for Feminist Theory.” *American Studies*. 1998 31 p. 40.

already hinted, may be captured by the term 'gender.' Furthermore, biologism seems to propose that naturally the male is an improved version of the female, hence superior.

Upon critical examination however, it is the case that the binary outlook of sex as either male or female *alone* is the opposite of the truth. It is difficult to class homosexuals into either, hence the social roles for them become complex. It is also the case that the violence meted out to women is supported implicitly by biologism since it has been proposed that they are naturally weaker. Biologism also accounts for the violence extended to homosexuals since they do not fit into either of the binary – male and female. This is actually where the idea of biologism intersects with the inspirations on sexuality within the pages of the *Holy Bible* and *Al-Qur'an*, which I had earlier relayed. The incursion of these scriptures into Africa, to my mind denounces traditional African beliefs on sexuality to deepen patriarchy and gender-based violence on African women and homosexuals. None of these comments are made to indicate the lacking of patriarchy of violence against women in traditional Africa. My point however, is that there are no religious texts with abundance evidence and validations in that connection. As a way of corroborating this claim, I appeal to passages of the *Ifá* corpus, an ancient storehouse of *Yorùbá* “knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, religion, customs, politics, technology law and other living capabilities acquired by the individual as an indigenous member of the Yoruba race.”¹² In a related development, the corpus has been suggested as the domain of “...the respectable, holistic and comprehensive *Yorùbá* culture...”¹³

Owing to the foregoing, I admit that traditional *Yorùbá* culture is patriarchal. There is however no explicit justification in the sacred texts of their religious beliefs that justify violence against women and homosexuals. Hence, in clear terms, the *Ifá* corpus makes patriarchy unrelated to biologism in *Yorùbá* culture. Even when patriarchy and violence against women were endemic as portrayed, for instance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the religious texts are not replete with pages for such agencies. Perhaps this is what Michael Kimmel has in mind when he puts that “what it means 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

¹²O. A. Balogun, “A Philosophical Defense of Punishment in Traditional African Legal Culture: The Yoruba Example.” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2009 3(3), p. 44.

¹³E. Ofuasia, “Interests of Non-human Animals in *Yorùbá* culture: A Critique of *Orúnmilà*.” *Bangladesh Journal of Bioethics*. Vol. 9 (2), p. 16.

living.”¹⁴ If you live in the Middle East around the time *Yahweh* called Abraham out from his kinsmen, you may find nothing absolutely wrong with homosexuality. This reminds one of Lot in the City of Sodom and Gommorah (Genesis 19: 1-11). At this time homosexuality was considered positively. At the time of Moses and writing of *Leviticus*, same-sex activities were then perceived as an abomination. Change is responsible for this shift. Analogously, the *Ifá* literary of the *Yorùbá* people serve as a veritable source that divulges how the culture has its unique understanding of sexuality which does not endorse or justify violence against women and homosexuals. It is striking however, that the perspective to sexuality and gender relations in the *Holy Bible* and *Al-Qur'an* has replaced African traditional views on sexuality. Traditional African sexuality, especially the *Yorùbá* paradigm is analogous to Queer Theory which seeks to counter gender-based violence and break the binary view of sex. It is therefore pertinent to engage Queer Theory closely.

The Queer Theory “focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire.”¹⁵ Jagose’s idea is that sex and the social roles ascribed to them are not so easy and straightforward. Biologism may make this look easy but Jagose thinks otherwise since it does not explain adequately, the place of gays and lesbians within owing to its binary. Sex is not just ‘male’ and ‘female,’ Queer theorists contend. Biologism strengthens the ties of patriarchy and discriminates against homosexuals since they do not conform to the rigid dual ascription of sex as ‘male’ or ‘female,’ nothing else. Hence, Jagose puts 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.”¹⁶ This is also a view that is shared by Elisabeth Dorner who perceives Queer Theory as “an area of studies whose main concern is the invalidation of binarisms like heterosexual/ homosexual, licit/illicit, man/woman or masculine/ feminine.”¹⁷ Queer Theory as relayed by Dorner aims to pull down the widespread and accentuated humans are either male or female. It is an improvement on the shortcomings of biologism since it seeks to explain the place of homosexuals who do not fall within the strictly defined binary of male and female. Given the fact that in the attempt to construct gender, sex is not a sufficient affair, Queer Theory seeks to initiate

¹⁴M. S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), p. 3.

¹⁵A. Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York University Press 1996) p. 11.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁷E. Dorner, *The Deconstruction of Binarisms in Feminist Science Fictions*. Dipl. University of Vienna, 2003. p. 8.

the viewpoint that persons that do not fall into the rigid construction of gender are not to be excluded from the category of normal humans.

Although Queer Theory became prevalent as an orientation among some prominent scholars,¹⁸ Pamperl however, affirms that its use may be traced to the initial exposition provided by Michael Foucault.¹⁹ It therefore does not come as a surprise for David Gauntlett to perceive Foucault as the pioneer of the Queer Theory.²⁰

While attempting to dislodge the outlook that sex is insufficient to determine someone's gender, Michael Foucault argues that sex was seen to be the "cause of any and everything."²¹ With a thorough account of the history of sexuality, Foucault avers that:

The most discrete event in one's sexual behaviour - 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.²²

Clearly for Foucault, understanding of sexuality is not a natural or fixed identity but is something whose meaning changes in tandem with cultural and historical codes. He makes this clearer by claiming:

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

¹⁸Among these are: J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of the Identity*. (New York: Routledge 1990); D. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. (New York: Routledge 1989); and E. K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. (California: University of California Press 1990).

¹⁹G. Pamperl, "The Subversion of Gender: Representations of New Women in Literature of Fin de Siecle". Mag. Phil. Universitat Wien 2008, p. 11.

²⁰D. Gauntlett, *Media, Gender, and Identity: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge 2008).

²¹M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. (New York: Vintage Books 1990), p. 65.

²²Ibid., p. 65.

which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.²³

The above claim is striking if brought against sexuality and the historical conditions flourishing in the Middle East and religions and cultures whose revealed scriptures influence humans by the millions today. In the *Holy Bible*, just as it is in *Al-Qur'an* God created all things in the binary of male and female.

Specifically, the story of creation in *Genesis*, the epistles of Apostle Paul, and interpretations of sin based on *Genesis* chapters two and three have led to the conclusion that women (beginning with the disobedient Eve), are more inherently sinful and sinfully responsible than men. There are also harmful Christian theological traditions on suffering and forgiveness that enjoin those suffering from gender-based violence to endure unjustly.²⁴

In the Islamic tradition, passages of *Al-Qur'an* too have served to base gender on the male-female binary and endorse patriarchy too. Specifically *Al-Qur'an* 4:34 reveals:

Men are in charge of women by (right of) what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend (for maintenance) from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. But those from whom you fear arrogance – (first) advise them; (then if they persist), *forsake them in bed; and finally strike them*. But if they obey you (once more), seek no means against them. Indeed Allah is ever Exalted and Grand (Emphasis mine).

The foregoing needs no serious elaboration, since I already hinted at some of the verses of each of the scriptures hitherto. Cases of violence against women and homosexuals that are religiously induced most times, carries less weight in the face of the law. Granted, this does not hold in all places and at all times, it is equally not false that women are usually the victims.

²³Ibid., pp. 105-6.

²⁴J. A. Carter, *Call to Action: Women, Religion and Power*. (New York: Simon and Schuster 2014), p. 21.

The assumption of these revelations is that since there are only two main sexes: man and woman, gender construction may only ascribe to these alone. This assumption is further validated by the perception that since 'sex' is fixed 'gender' too must be fixed. However, it is one of the main thrusts of Queer Theory that the notion of sex as the natural, fixed and inevitable marker between male and female is a consequence of cultural factors. Hence, 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, behaviour, and emotions, we attempt to convince others of our masculinity or femininity."²⁵

It is the contention of Queer Theory that 'sex' and 'gender' cannot derive from biologism. Michael Foucault 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.²⁶

Judith Butler too sympathizes with the foregoing and counters the traditional outlook of gender-based-on-sex. Butler argues 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.'²⁷ 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."²⁸ This is the gap left open by Queer Theorists for homosexual persons too admitted as complete persons lacking any

²⁵M.S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), p. 103.

²⁶M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. (New York: Vintage Books 1990), p. 154.

²⁷J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of the Identity*. (New York: Routledge), p. 12.

²⁸D. Gauntlett, *Media, Gender, and Identity: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge 2008), p. 137.

form of sexual deformity. One of the core conjectures of this study is that the duo of biologism and foreign religions inform gender-based violence. Up till now, we have not concerned with the meaning of gender-based violence as well as the statistics that make it a cause for alarm. This is what we shall concern with shortly.

Gender-based violence is bodily, carnal or expressive injury aimed at a person in order to create or maintain power and control. This power and control is linked to gender, sex and sexuality.²⁹ It is also the case that “some people hurt other people because of *biological characteristics*, because of perceived or self-identified *gender* or sexual orientation, or because of their difference from social or religious definitions of masculinity and femininity.”³⁰ Tiffany Howard too observes: “Sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) is a phenomenon that knows no socio-economic or political boundaries. It is a manifestation of the dysfunction within communities and it transcends all areas of society, cutting across race, class, religion, state boundaries, and age.”³¹

Gender-based violence occurs in a multitude of ways and may be experienced at any point in a person’s life. People of all classes and of all ethnicities in all nations suffer violence inflicted on them by others for reasons based on gender. While many different people, including men and boys, are affected by gender-based violence, women and girls are especially targeted.³² It is pathetic to state that globally, 30 percent of women over the age of 18 have experienced sexual or physical violence at the hands of a current or former intimate partner.³³

Girls are especially susceptible. Of the 18.2 percent of women who have endured rape or attempted rape, 12.3 percent of those were younger than age 12 when they were first raped, and 29.9 percent were between the ages of 11 and 17.³⁴ Girls within the age

²⁹Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) “Gender-Based Violence.” 2015 Available at <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages> p. 1.

³⁰Ibid., p. 1.

³¹T. Howard,(2011). “Bombshells with Black Faces: Examining the Intersection between Terrorism, State Failure, and Sexual Gender Based Violence.” 2011 p. 4 Available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2015945>.

³²World Health Organisation (WHO). “Violence against Women: Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Against Women,” WHO, last modified October 2013, www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en.

³³P. Tjaden, and N. Thoennes, *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice 1998), p. Iii.

³⁴Ibid., p. 11.

range of 16-19 are four times more likely than the overall population to be the victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault.³⁵

In addition to women, girls and homosexual persons also live with the memory and/or the fear of gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence.³⁶ Three-fourths of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and gender non-conforming have been targets of some form of violence related to gender, sexuality and intimacy.³⁷ There is increasing awareness of sexual and physical violence against men and boys, particularly in sports teams, prisons, hospitals, and in churches and schools.³⁸ Though much less pervasive, women, girls and gender non-conforming people also may carry out gender-based violence; for example, intimate partner violence can be against men by women. Gender-based violence also includes intimate partner violence within same-gender relationships, as well as some forms of elder abuse.³⁹

None of the above is meant to imply that there are no cases of violence perpetrated against men by women. My point is that statistics show that women and homosexuals are more susceptible to gender abuse. In addition, patriarchy and religion, as I had reasoned earlier, have served sharply to provide the ideological backing for male hegemony to inflict violence on women, the so-called weaker sex. The case of the homosexual is even worse. S/he is still haunted by both citizens and government. This is in spite of the appeal by the international community that there should be no form of discrimination at gender non-conforming individuals. In some other instances, some African countries have been stashed of grants and aids for failing to end the discrimination and criminalisation of homosexuals.

While addressing the erstwhile president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, Uhuru Kenyatta explains: "There are some things that we must admit we don't share (with the US). Our

³⁵World Health Organisation (WHO). "Violence against Women: Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Against Women," WHO, last modified October 2013, www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en.

³⁶J. M. Grant, L. A. Mottet, J. Tanis, J. Harrison, J.L. Merman and M. Keisling, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2011), p. 3.

³⁷S, Chestnut, E. Dixon and S. Jindasurant, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2012* (New York, N.Y.: National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs 2013), pp. 10-3.

³⁸L. Stemple and I. H. Meyer, "The Sexual Victimization of Men in America: New Data Challenge Old Assumptions" *American Journal of Public Health*. 2014 104, no. 6 p. 19.

³⁹Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) "Gender-Based Violence." 2015 Available at <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages> p. 1.

cultures, our societies don't accept."⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ Homosexuality has also been perceived as "a disease of the morally corrupt West."⁴² It has been perceived as 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.⁴³ As a result, strict penal codes have been instituted against homosexuals in several places in Africa. In Nigeria for instance, there is a fourteen-year jail term staring at homosexuals.⁴⁴ The punishment is even stricter in the Sharia North where death penalty obtains.

At this juncture one may ask: How did traditional Africans perceive the discourse on gender and homosexuals? Were they more tolerant and gender-sensitive vis-à-vis contemporary Africa? Are there positive values on gender discourses among traditional Africans that may be revived to dispel gender-based violence against women and homosexuals? These are the questions I seek to engage in the remainder of this essay.

Gender-Relations in Traditional *Yorùbá* Society: Making a Case for Women and Homosexuals

I will be using traditional *Yorùbá* reflection on gender as a primary source to retrieve an indigenous African dimension to the discourse. In some instances, the documentation of the ancient wisdom of the people as presented in the *Ifá* corpus will be explored for ease of reference and justification of claims.

Among the *Yorùbá* who are aboriginal to South-West Nigeria (though some were taken as slaves to the Caribbean), there is a thriving culture and identity that has withstood the impression of modernity. In a rapidly interpenetrating world, there have been

⁴⁰B. Alimi, "If you say being Gay is not African, You don't Know Your History". *The Guardian Newspaper*. 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/09/being-gay-African-history-homosexuality-christianity.html>.

⁴¹J. Moyo, "Worse than dogs and pigs: Life as a Gay Man in Zimbabwe." *Reuters*. 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-rights-lgbt-Worse-than-dogs-and-pigs-Life-as-a-Gay-Man-in-Zimbabwe-idUSKCN1BF03ZSeptember4>.

⁴²N. Kahn-Fogel, (2013). "Western Universalism and African Homosexualities". *Oregon Review of International Law*. 2013 15 p. 316

⁴³E. Oduwole, *Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society*. 79th Inaugural Lecture. Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. 2018. p. 14.

⁴⁴Ibid, p. 14.

foreign influences that have shaped or in some cases replaced traditional *Yorùbá* world-view. From the first encounter with the outside world, the experience of colonisation by the British government and the consequent civilisation that followed, aspects of *Yorùbá* culture have received modifications and/or in some instances eradication. It is however my confidence that in spite of the impact of Euro-Christian and Arab-Islamic values on *Yorùbá* world-view, there are some aspects that may be revived for contemporary relevance. This is the case especially as it pertains to the discourse on sexuality.

It is pertinent to disclose that the *Yorùbá* gender world-view is not strictly guided by the binary of male-female initiated by biologism. This is what Oyeronke Oyewunmi means when she observes: “the Yoruba world is not dichotomized into male and female.”⁴⁵ In this connection, Oyeronke Olajubu amplifies:

The existence of gender constructs among the Yoruba may be discerned from their mythology, which presents expectations for the female and male in the society at both the mythical and practical levels. These expectations are determined by the people’s living experiences. For example, female principles are generally regarded as symbols of coolness (*ero*), whereas male principles are construed as representing toughness (*lile*). This underlines the people’s conception of female (*abo*) and male (*ako*). Hence, the people say, *K’odun yi y’abo fun wa o*, “May this year be female for us” or “Bring us all that the female principle stands for.” The converse implication of this expression is the avoidance of a “male year,” which might be tough and unpleasant.⁴⁶

It is the belief of the above understanding of nature that translates into the social expectations of the masculine and feminine personality. The implication of Oyeronke’s view is that among traditional *Yorùbá*, the female principle is accorded respect and honour for social and spiritual well-being. Granted, the traditional *Yorùbá* society is patriarchal with emphasis given to the men. It

⁴⁵O. Oyewunmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997), p. 45.

⁴⁶O. Olajubu, “Seeing Through a Woman’s Eye: Yorùbá Religious Tradition and Gender Relations.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 2004 20 (1) p. 43.

however persists, the perception, women too can take up manly responsibilities, especially, when they have distinguished themselves or in the absence of males. On first showing this may seem to vindicate both patriarchy and biologism within the *Yorùbá* scheme. A deeper look however shows that the former is present whereas the latter is lacking. It is because of the dearth of the latter that allows for flexibility in gender roles among the people. This point is made more manifest with placed side by side with the Abrahamic monotheisms on gender roles. Many instances of this nature suffice in several *Yorùbá* societies. Hence:

An example of this is the expectation that males will succeed their fathers as heirs and the need to offer an explanation when this is impracticable. The heir is known as *arole*, and the explanation for exceptions to the rule is recorded in sayings such as, *Bi o ni di obirin ki je Kumolu*, "If there is no special reason, a woman would not be named Kumolu." In Yoruba cultural idiom and practice, Kumolu is a name signifying that the family of the female so named has no male heir apparent, because all the male children have died. Moreover, a woman who performs feats, especially physical ones, is described as *obinrin bi okunrin*, "a woman like a man."⁴⁷

The above also reminds one of the practice among the *Yorùbá*, wherein a woman is addressed as though she were a man/husband by other women. While speaking on her experience in this guise, Oyeronke Olajubu explains:

Specifically, I am a wife in some contexts, but at other times I am a husband to other women. Whereas my position as a wife is based on my biological anatomy (in relationship to one male) and marital affiliation (my relationship to male and female members of my husband's extended family), my role as a husband is informed by my natal affiliation (my relationship to wives of male members of my natal family), which is independent of class or status.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 43.

⁴⁸Ibid., 48.

On the surface, the foregoing may appear to be an argument in circularity since I had already hinted that traditional *Yorùbá* does not concede to biologism. However, my point is that the masculine role is open for both men and women. It is not strictly and naturally a social construct for men even when they are stooges. Women too can enjoy the benefits of the roles of the masculine gender, since the traditional *Yorùbá* system is patriarchal and not matriarchal. The aim of all these is to sanction that biologism and the unconditional and rigid social roles ascribed to the sexes is conditional and flexible among the traditional *Yorùbá*.

Owing to the arguments marshaled thus far, it is valid to deduce that for the *Yorùbá*, gender is not an affair that is strictly informed by sex. This brings the traditional *Yorùbá*, closer to the discourse of the foremost Queer Theorists: Michael Foucault and Judith Butler. However, before drawing the parallels, it is important to explore instances of gender construction in traditional *Yorùbá* discourse on sexuality. I will begin with the general acceptance in the tradition of the people, how humans are created. Some words before I engage with *Yorùbá* folklore, myths and fictions, which I will employ to back my claim in the pages that follow may be frowned against. However, I think that derives from the uncritical and assumed method of scientific materialism and its insistence on facts. These “facts are theory-laden.”⁴⁹ Karl Popper shares this stance too as he furthers that almost all theories are informed by myths For Popper:

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.⁵⁰

With these preliminary statements to justify my expedition into *Yorùbá* folklore, I commence with the admission among the people, the locus: “*Olódùmarè ní ó n fún éniyàn ni omọ*” (*Olódùmarè*, the Higher God is the giver of children). Implied here is the outlook

⁴⁹K. Harris, *Education and Knowledge: The Structured Misrepresentation of Reality*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1988), p. 27.

⁵⁰ K.R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1963), p. 36.

that sexual intercourse though necessary, is not a sufficient condition for conception. The additional sufficient condition is the role played by *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs* during and after sexual intercourse. It is from this belief 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 feraku" (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. The role of the *òrìṣàs* (deities) from this point onward is important. Hence, I will rather focus on the primordial deity called *Òrìṣànlá*. Who is *Òrìṣànlá*? How important is this entity toward the creation of a human?

There is a general consensus among scholars⁵¹ on the discourse on destiny in traditional that *Yorùbá* thought system that *Ọ̀bàtálá* or *Òrìṣànlá* (one of the primordial divinities in the *Yorùbá* world-view (fond of drinking palm wine) fashions a human body (*ara*) out of clay or sand. Meanwhile, *Olódùmarè* (Higher God) gives life-force or soul (*Èmí*) to the 'craft' of *Òrìṣànlá*. The animated *ara* then proceeds to *Ajàlá's* abode (another primordial divinity who makes *Ori*) to make a choice of *Ori*.

Established that *Òrìṣànlá* is the primordial divinity that casts a human body, it is very likely that he may cast inter-sex persons. Although, this is a point that has not been given emphasis in *Yorùbá* scholarship, such a possibility is not to be overruled. Hence, *Òrìṣànlá* may omit the genitals of a woman, thereby creating confusion of the sex of the person. Depending on his mood, *Òrìṣànlá* could mould a woman with stronger bones and muscles that will make her more masculine. He may also mould women without womb. Furthermore, and in the most severe cases, he "may not carry the function of molding the *ara* of the human person"⁵² and this could lead to miscarriage for the gestating woman. These are perhaps some of the ideas that inform the traditional *Yorùbá* position on sexuality. It therefore does not require much to argue that traditional *Yorùbá*

⁵¹See A. B. Balogun, "The Concepts of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation." *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. 2007 16(1): 116-130; A.B. Ekanola, "A Naturalistic Interpretation of the Yoruba Concepts of Ori." *Philosophia Africana*. 2006 Vol. 9 (1): 41-52; S. Gbadegesin, "Toward a Theory of Destiny." K.Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*. (New York: Blackwell 2004); E. Oduwole, "The Concepts of Ori and Human Destiny." *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, 1996 Vol 1 Nos. 1 & 2; E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. (London: Longman Ltd 1962); E. Ofuasia, "Ori in Yoruba Thought System: A Humean Critique". *Journal of Pan African Studies*. 2016 9(10): 185-200.

⁵²O.A. Shitta-Bey, "The Humanity of the Foetus: A Yoruba Perspective." *African Journal of History and Culture*. 2015 7(2) p 54.

sexuality is one that recognizes that aside the male and female sexes, there could be other sexes that emanate from the craft of *Òrìṣànlá*. This is precisely why in the *Yorùbá* language, there is not gender-specific pronoun for the male and female sexes.⁵³ In addition, “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.”⁵⁴ It is therefore incontestable that:

Identity construction among the Yoruba comprises diverse elements, central to which is seniority. This is informed by the constant shifts of a person’s social position in the society. Consequently, the social identity of the individual is relational in the society. Females and males are perceived as belonging to different strata, as is explicated in Yoruba sayings such as *Egbe eye l’eye n wo to*, “Birds of the same feather flock together.”⁵⁵

This reveals that the social roles or expectations of a person are not predetermined by their sex. There are certainly other conditions which allow the respect and dignity accorded to women redolent in almost all verses of their *Ifá* literary corpus. I will engage entertain one of the narratives in *Yorùbá* cosmology which stresses the complementary roles the male and female gender play in the management of the affairs of the society.

In one of the chapters (*Odùs*) of the *Ifá* corpus titled *Ọsa-Otura*, it is relayed that the Higher God *Olódùmare* delegated sixteen male and just one female (the goddess *Ọsún*) primordial divinities to order the world.

Upon reaching the earth, these divinities excluded the female from decisions, sacred knowledge and oaths. “When Osun could bear it no longer, she congregated the women on earth and formed the *Iya Mi* group, a society of powerful women. With their hitherto unusual *ase* (life force), they interfered with the plans of the male deities. Consequently, there was chaos with humans and nature.”⁵⁶ After exercising all powers with no avail, these male divinities

⁵³O. Oyewunmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997), p. 48.

⁵⁴O. Olajubu, “Seeing Through a Woman’s Eye: Yorùbá Religious Tradition and Gender Relations.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 2004 20 (1) p. 42.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 50.

returned to *Olódùmarè* to explain their difficulty. Realising there are sixteen instead of seventeen, the Higher God asked after the seventeenth. They replied that she has not been considered fitting because she is female. At this point, *Olódùmarè* instructed them to meet, apologise and include *Ọsún* in the grand plan, otherwise their efforts will be otiose. Upon heeding the admonition of the Higher God, “the sixteen deities went back to plead for Osun’s forgiveness, which she granted after receiving the promise that no longer would she be excluded from all functions and proceedings on earth.”⁵⁷

This is a clear instance in the sacred text of the people’s spirituality how respect and dignity is given to the woman even in a patriarchal set up. *Ọsa-Otura* illustrates the admonition for the *Yorùbá* not to project the woman as *the other* – the one that is not needed for things to run normally. The idea of duality and complementarity runs deeply in the people reflections on the social expectations of gender. Intuitively, this fuels the lack of any form of justification in their tradition and *Ifá* corpus for gender-based violence which is present in Islam and Christianity where the man is perceived as the head but the woman as a submissive subordinate.

Since the thrust thus far has been to use *Ọsa-Otura* to explain the recognition of women in life and social cohesion thereby nullifying biologism, it is also crucial to explore the discourse on homosexuality and the traditional *Yorùbá* view of it.

I will begin by stating that among the traditional *Yorùbá*, the reality of homosexuality is well understood and tolerated, owing to the belief in the creation process which I already hinted above. However, in spite of the fact that homosexuality was tolerated, this tolerant approach hardly obtains in contemporary *Yorùbá* society owing perhaps to the dominant influence of biologism and the Abrahamic monotheisms. Egun Oduwole is one scholar who is versed in traditional *Yorùbá* sexuality but with misleading rendition on the subject of homosexuality. For Oduwole homosexuality “was generally considered to be unacceptable.”⁵⁸ This claim, when pursued critically will be proved to be false. Oduwole provides an unfair proposal when she explains that the *Ifá* corpus “gives a vivid account of homosexuality and points to it as an exercise in futility.”⁵⁹ What this implies is that sex the principal aftermath of sex is reproduction. I find the position that homosexual affair is an exercise in futility both erroneous and misleading. As it pertains to homosexuals, Oduwole cites the *Yorùbá* saying that “His eyes are like

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁸E. Oduwole, *Philosophy and the Challenge of Relevance in African Society*. 79th Inaugural Lecture. Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. 2018 p. 15.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 14.

the eyes of one who has anal sex” to condemn the act as undesirable. A critical exploration will indicate the *Strawman Fallacy* – homosexuals have not complained about this act. Analogously, it needs to be divulged that heterosexual intercourse too may be accompanied by grave discomforts, ‘tears’ and even bleedings on the extreme. Consequent of these, I find Oduwolé’s account, fall out of the portrayal of the third gender in traditional *Yorùbá* society.

It is imperative to consider that *Yorùbá* history has no record of homosexual discrimination and stigmatization as replete in modern times. Toleration of homosexuality is not unique to the traditional *Yorùbá* alone. This is not calculated to offer that the entire cultures in Africa, south of the Sahara permit homosexuality. My point is that there are some other African traditional cultures, aside the *Yorùbá* that are tolerant. The practice persists among the Hausa and parts of Uganda. According to the finding of Mathew Paige “...*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.”⁶⁰

Conclusion

In this essay, I have been able to challenge the usual ascription of gender as a derivation from sex is flawed and inconclusive. I have also argued that gender construction in the *revealed* foreign religions that endorse gender violence and discrimination against women and homosexuals have based their ideas on biologism, which I demonstrated to be inadequate. It is from these ideological premises that I realize that in contemporary Africa, the gap between modernity and tradition, wherein the former shades the latter, the shelving of useful ideas from the latter has been relegated. I have used the traditional *Yorùbá* discourse on gender to show that there are some positive aspects of the African culture that can assist peaceful and mutual coexistence among the genders in contemporary Africa. Unless this is done, the backlashes, violations, disrespect accorded to women and homosexuals, being gazed from biologism in the foreign religions will continue unchecked thereby endangering the lives of people who are being true to what/who they *really* are.

⁶⁰M. Paige, “Is Homosexuality really Not African?” *Odyssey*. 2016 Available at <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/many-politicians-in-Africa-claim-homosexuality-sint-African-when-infact-it-is.amp>.

