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DOI:

[10.1215/1089201x-3482075](https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-3482075)

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Pierce, S. (2016). 'Nigeria Can Do Without Such Perverts': Sexual Anxiety and Political Crisis in Postcolonial Nigeria. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 36(1), 3-20 .
<https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-3482075>

Published in:

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East

Citing this paper

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"Nigeria Can Do without Such Perverts"

Sexual Anxiety and Political Crisis in Postcolonial Nigeria

Steven Pierce

In August 2007, the hisbah, a quasi-official group enforcing Islamic law in northern Nigeria, raided a party at a hotel in Bauchi State. Hisbah raids are frequently provoked by events promoting vice—drinking alcohol, unseemly mixing of the sexes, and other forms of “sexual depravity.” In this case, the raid resulted in the arrest of eighteen men, who the government claimed had been wearing women’s clothing. The earliest media coverage suggested that the party had been a “gay wedding.”¹ The young men were put in prison and initially charged with sodomy, which in theory could warrant the death penalty though proof would be difficult absent a confession. Accordingly, charges were reduced to indecency, vagabondage, criminal conspiracy, and membership in an unlawful society. During their periods of imprisonment, the men were beaten and caned, but the case was adjourned until further notice on March 5, 2008.²

The incident was not terribly unusual in Nigeria or indeed across the continent. In an uncannily parallel case, nineteen young men in Khartoum were lashed on August 4, 2010, for wearing items of women’s clothing and dancing in a “womanly fashion” at another “gay wedding.”³ A public engagement ceremony touched off the well-known case of Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Steven Monjeza of Malawi in early 2010.⁴ Severe repression of people deemed “homosexual” in Nigeria and many other African countries has sparked vexed debates in Western countries over appropriate humanitarian responses, as with the case of a Nigerian footballer deported from Austria in May 2010, and debates in the United Kingdom over the appropriate scope of sexual questioning for applicants for political asylum.⁵ High-profile legislative initiatives threaten to codify savage repression of homosexuality. Most famously, Uganda’s proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill imposed the death penalty (or later, life in prison) for “habitual homosexu-

1. In the Nigerian press, “gay wedding” is frequently used as a catchall term for social events attracting significant numbers of homosexually identified attendees. See Gaudio, *Allah Made Us*.

2. See “‘Cross-Dressers’ in Nigeria Court,” BBC, March 5, 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7246935.stm.

3. “Sudan Sentences 19 Men for Wearing Women’s Clothes,” Reuters, August 4, 2010, www.reuters.com/article/2010/08/04/us-sudan-morality-conviction-idUSTRE6732GX20100804.

4. Press reports both Malawian and international describe the party as a “traditional” engagement ceremony. In an interview after their arrest, both Chimbalanga and Monjeza agreed they had intended to marry, but it is less clear how they or their guests conceptualized the nature of the marriage or the engagement. Tenthani and Low, “We Have Been Beaten in Jail.”

5. Canning, “Austria Deports African Gay Footballer.” The deportation sparked substantial protests against the government, which was accused of not following appropriate procedures, a charge the interior minister denied in parliament. www.Parlament.gv.at/PG/DE/J/J_05314/fname_185891.pdf.

ality.” After a long period of consideration, it was passed by parliament and signed by the president in 2014. Although the bill is currently overruled by the Ugandan Supreme Court on a technicality, the speaker of parliament promises to reintroduce it. In Nigeria, a Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill was introduced in 2006. In addition to actual marriages, even gatherings of homosexuals would have been criminalized. This bill also was tabled, but a more recent version was passed by the Nigerian National Assembly and signed by President Goodluck Jonathan in 2014. Despite South Africa’s famous constitutional protections, former Malawian president Joyce Banda’s support for repealing sodomy laws in her country, or quieter moderation from leaders like President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, it is inarguable that many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are in the middle of homophobic reaction.

But reaction to what? Wide-scale repression of same-sex sexual expression and ambiguous gender affect is a relatively recent phenomenon in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa. It is not clear why individuals perceived to be homosexual are attracting such opprobrium at this moment in history. The spread of acute homophobia in Africa has taken place in tandem with the emergence of small groups who identify themselves as gay or lesbian in the Western sense and who have formed gay rights organizations.⁶ In Nigeria these groups make up a vastly smaller percentage of the population than that of LGBT communities in Western countries.⁷ Soi-disant lesbian and gay male identities map somewhat imperfectly onto already existing, usually covert subcultures of men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women. These subcultures are often larger than the groups who understand themselves as gay or lesbian but are nonetheless quite small when com-

pared to the population as a whole. The vigor of recent forms of homophobia vastly outstrips any empirical *threat* the sexually conventional realistically face or direct experience they could realistically have. Thus, one might say upsurges in societal homophobia have gone along with an increasing incidence of African orientational homosexuality and with a broader awareness of other subcultures of people who can be interpreted as “gay” and increasingly stigmatized as such; these developments have moved in tandem with real changes in same-sex subcultures. However, it would be difficult to conclude that empirical people with same-sex proclivities are the main cause of homophobic social movements. There simply are not enough of them.

Increasing homophobia is often couched in religious idiom, which suggests that Christian and Islamic proscriptions of homosexual sex underlie the phenomenon. Its recent virulence thus might be linked to the explosive growth of reformist Islam and Pentecostalist Christianity since around 1980. The latter especially has created an infrastructure of churches and religious entrepreneurs who are particularly active and vocal in condemning witchcraft, homosexuality, and other forms of immorality.⁸ But religious change also is an insufficient explanation. Officials of more established denominations (such as Peter Akinola, former Anglican archbishop of Nigeria) have taken positions of leadership in homophobic movements, and it is not immediately obvious why new forms of religious practice would bear primary responsibility, especially if one were inclined to reject the claim that the real impetus is evangelical Christians’ ties to Western coreligionists whose commitment to political homophobia is of longer standing. The connection plays a role, but African Christians have long demonstrated their ability to find forms of religious practice suitable to their own circum-

6. At the time of this writing, the most prominent such organization is the Queer Alliance Nigeria, led by Rashidi Williams, along with the Nigerian branch of the Metropolitan Community Church, the House of Rainbow founded by the Rev. Rowland Jide Macaulay. Dorothy Aken’ova, executive director of the International Centre for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights, has been particularly vocal on the issue of LGBTI issues in recent years. Davis Maclyalla was extremely active particularly in Anglican religious issues during the first years of

the century. Despite going into exile in 2008, he is frequently quoted in the international press.

7. This statement is necessarily impressionistic in the absence of systematic studies. Green-Simms and Azuah nicely convey the complexity of the situation in an observation about the “real lives of Nigerians with same-sex desires—some who identify as gay, some who identify as bisexual, and some who did not align themselves with any particular sexual identity” (Green-Simms and Azuah, “Video

Closet,” 38). The work that best brings out the complexity of the situation, an ethnography of a group of men who participate in same-sex sexuality in Hausaphone northern Nigeria, is Rudi Gaudio’s *Allah Made Us*, a text that will be discussed at length below.

8. See, for example, Gifford, *Christian Churches*; Gifford, *African Christianity*; Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*; Burgess, *Nigeria’s Christian Revolution*; and Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*.

stances. The question is why political homophobia should find such an audience now.⁹

The question as such is far beyond the scope of this essay.¹⁰ Instead, I explore the terrain that such an explanation would encompass. Specifically, I am interested in how contemporary homophobia arises from a specific conjuncture of social transformations and emergent paradigms for understanding forms that sex deemed illicit. The present religious movements are notable for their reformist fervor, for which homosexuality is one possible object. But their critique of contemporary sin is both more interesting and more complex than a simple concern with (homo)sexual immorality. Although the empirical population of people who publicly identify as homosexual is too small to be a realistic preoccupation, and although the emergence of this group in some places postdates the first spasms of homophobic anxiety, an obvious precondition is an increasing societal recognition of the homosexual as a distinct category of person. Just as important is the contemporary crisis of the Nigerian economy, plagued by corruption, political mismanagement, and continuing austerity dating from the crash in oil prices in 1981. The conjuncture between religious homophobia, global paradigms of sexual orientation, sociopolitical crisis, and the emergence of communities potentially recognizable as homosexual are the conditions of possibility for contemporary events. To this extent, Nigerians who in some way identify with, participate in, or perform same-sex sexuality occupy an unsettling space, simultaneously liminal and central to the popular imagination, a queer space abjected by and subversive of normative mores. Rather than getting caught up in important questions about the ethics of naming, here I will concentrate on the intersection between the various regimes of knowledge creating today's impasses.

My argument is that while it is critically im-

portant to understand the lives of the women and men who are being attacked as "homosexual" in contemporary Nigeria, it is equally important to take seriously the concerns that have led to their stigmatization and to acknowledge that a tendency to blame Western homophobic ideologies—either recent forms of evangelical Christianity or longstanding antipathy to sodomy—is inadequate. Rather, contemporary homophobic discourse reveals a preoccupation with moral corruption intimately linked to a perceived crisis of social reproduction. I agree with, and will discuss below, many authors who have emphasized the importance of religion, political corruption, and many leaders' strategies of scapegoating, but I also argue that these would not have resulted in the contemporary situation without this popular sense of crisis.

Knowing Homosexuality

Recent forms of African homophobia pose thorny analytic dilemmas. On one hand, their target of "gays and lesbians" is largely phantasmic, which might suggest their closest analogs are movements targeting witchcraft or dealing with other forms of metaphysical danger. However, many (though not all) of the people arrested or attacked for homosexuality are indeed involved in some form of same-sex sexuality, though not necessarily the menacing gayness plaguing the popular imagination. If one wishes to address the question of *why* contemporary homophobia has emerged, and why it targets whom it does, one must ask about those targets' practices and subject-positions on their own terms while also exploring how they have been represented within and transformed by national, regional, and global discourses on orientational homosexuality and homophobia. The literature on African same-sex sexuality is still in its infancy, especially outside southern Africa; very little has been written by historians.¹¹ But even in

9. Others who have explored such questions include Bop, "Senegal: Homophobia"; Currier, "Political Homophobia"; Ireland, "Macro-Level Analysis"; Mutua, "Sexual Orientation and Human Rights"; Awondo et al., "Homophobic Africa?"; Coly, "Homophobic Africa?"; and M'Baye, "Origins of Senegalese Homophobia."

10. For a useful exploration of recent events in Uganda see Sadgrove et al., "Morality Plays."

11. Pioneering work includes Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives*; Donham, "Male-Male Sexual-

ity"; and Gay, "Mummies and Babies." More recently, excellent contributions include several essays in Tamale, *African Sexualities*; Gaudio, *Allah Made Us*; Nguyen, *Republic of Therapy*; and Ndjio, "Post-colonial Histories." An exciting generation of younger scholars points to a much larger literature in the near future. These include Dankwa, "Silent Trade," and Essien and Aderinto, "Cutting the Head." A much deeper historical literature exists for South Africa, most notably Van Onselen, *Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand*; Harries,

Work, Culture, and Identity; and Moodie and Ndatshe, *Going for Gold*. Marc Epprecht has emerged as the most distinguished historian of African same-sex sexuality, starting with his excellent history of same-sex sexuality and the emergence of homophobia in Zimbabwe, *Hungochani*. More recently, Epprecht has written a wider study of the emergence of the idea that Africa is a "heterosexual" continent, *Heterosexual Africa?*, as well as a ranging examination of the proposition that homosexuality is un-African and contrary to religious precepts.

the absence of such a historiography, some clues can be gained from specialists in other regions.

A key difficulty of dealing with homosexuality as a historical phenomenon is avoiding naturalizing the paradigm of sexual orientation as the sole and universal mode of same-sex sexuality. As David Halperin has argued, picking up and extending Michel Foucault, Western notions of the homosexual as a specific kind of individual emerged from a shift in the technologies of control: the homosexual was one species of deviant in an emerging economy of the moral sexual subject.¹² Much of Halperin's interest is in what came before this shift, and his suggestion is useful: it is impossible for contemporary commentators to deal with premodern homosexualities without taking modern paradigms as a point of departure. Rather, one must take other modes of same-sex sexuality as a method of denaturalizing and defamiliarizing orientational models that might otherwise seem natural and inevitable. He suggests historians of the premodern West have arrived at something of a consensus: four other and earlier modes of (male) homosexuality have been identified—effeminacy (which might or might not involve male-male sexual contact), age-graded sexual relations, male friendship/love, and what he terms *inversion*.

There is much to admire in this approach. It usefully brings together a host of taxonomic approaches that have been adopted by many comparative analysts.¹³ The drawback is that it can obscure other modes of experiencing and negotiating same-sex relations on their own terms. It also poses certain dangers in that too-easily equating ancient, medieval, or early modern European social forms with relatively recent practice outside the West assumes a troubling equation of the Western past

with the non-Western present. Even if such modes of analysis take the emergence of sexual orientation as a matter of heuristic convenience rather than a historical watershed, it is nonetheless difficult to take the emergence of a homosexual orientation as anything but normative, the conclusion of what one might call a process of modernization. If the emergence in Europe of orientational homosexuality was an outgrowth of modernity, the obvious implication is that non-Western societies have begun to be drawn into the same identities and practices through the modernizing effects of globalization.¹⁴

A somewhat different view emerges from what has been called a transnational turn to queer studies.¹⁵ Studies of same-sex sexuality in diasporic communities¹⁶ have been accompanied by increasingly rich ethnographies of same-sex subcultures in Latin America; the Middle East and north Africa; southeast Asia; South Asia; and China.¹⁷ Such scholars have demonstrated the necessity of ethnography for the understanding of sexualities, the ways in which space and the nation-state in particular have been critical in the recent histories of same-sex subcultures, and the centrality of political economy and international power.¹⁸ The issue of historical causality, however, is more elusive. In considering Nigerian homophobia, therefore, one would want to bring together these authors' attention to the cultural universes within which sexual practice is performed and interpreted with the historians' attention to change over time.

Academic paradigms of extant same-sex communities and those communities' accounts of themselves intertwine with other modes of understanding that should also be taken seriously and historicized. Contemporary homophobic critics have developed influential forms of "knowledge"

12. See Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, and Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1.

13. Cf. Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives*; Greenberg, *Construction*; Murray, *Latin American Male Homosexualities*; Murray, *Male Homosexuality in Central and South America*; Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*; and Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities*.

14. See, for example, Altman, *Global Sex*. For critiques of "modernity" and "globalization" as analytic devices, see Cooper, *Colonialism*

in Question. For a wonderful and subtle study that suggests Iran went through a process of heterosexualization across the nineteenth century as part of a conscious project of modernization, see Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*. Tom Boellstorff argues in *A Coincidence of Desires* that non-normative sexualities must be considered through several spatial frames, local, national, and global. See also Jackson, "Capitalism and Global Queering."

15. See Benedicto, "Haunting of Gay Manila," and Povinelli and Chauncey, "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally."

16. These diasporic communities are fruitfully discussed in Manalansan, *Global Divas*, and Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*.

17. These studies include, among others, Blackwood, *Falling into the Lesbian World*; Boellstorff, *Gay Archipelago*; Boellstorff, *Coincidence of Desires*; Rofel, *Desiring China*; and Blackwood and Wieringa, *Female Desires*.

18. See Altman, *Global Sex*, and Mitchell, "Turboconsumers."

about homosexuality, and human-rights campaigners have touched off global awareness of African gay men and lesbians who are in danger. These forms of knowledge too have pretensions to universal scope. Both human-rights and homophobic strands conceptualize “African homosexuals” as a discrete group in need of regulation—for the former in need of protection, for the latter elimination. The intersection of different forms of knowledge about African same-sex practices suggests a way of historicizing them. That, in turn, may provide new insight into what is going on today. Or to put it another way, this essay approaches the problem of recent forms of homophobia by looking at some recent changes in sexual subcultures and at the ways in which these have been approached as objects of knowledge. Neither a late instantiation of Western same-sex subcultures nor entirely alien from them, this Nigerian history must be understood on its own terms but in dialogue with its global context.

The historical account for the West is well known. To oversimplify: a long-term process of urbanization, economic change, and industrialization created a larger population of urbanized people less economically dependent on (and often more physically isolated from) their extended families. Marriage and children became less economically central to individual welfare and people disinclined to marry became less susceptible to pressure from kin. These developments were intensified by the mass mobilizations of the two world wars, enabling urban same-sex subcultures to expand radically, creating today’s gay communities.¹⁹ The social history of Western gay communities played out in tandem with a transformation Foucault described in which new modes of subjectification created the “homosexual” as a new identity, a category of deviance that served to stabilize the “normal” heterosexual subject of power through identifying some subjects as its pathological other. This discursive development traveled unevenly, reworking identities closest to the sites of normaliza-

tion while influencing others’ sense of self more partially and gradually.²⁰

It is possible to make an analogous set of arguments about recent patterns of social change in Africa such as those of Nigerian societies, historicizing indigenous forms of same-sex practice that might or might not resemble Western orientational communities. Such a history would begin with *longue durée* accounts of various ways in which same-sex sexuality was institutionalized (in adolescent relationships, initiation rituals, urban subcultures) and then show how social change across the past 125 or so years has transformed such patterns (through the creation of mining communities in southern Africa,²¹ the inauguration of boarding schools,²² or vastly increased urbanization²³). A shortage of primary sources, however, would make detailed accounts difficult to write. Moreover, they would need to be read carefully in order to avoid equating such secret subcultures with Western orientational communities.

In some places (for Nigeria, the Hausa-phone north most notably), subcultures of people engaged in same-sex activities did emerge, and in many places there were also recognized categories of persons whose intimate practices did not fit neatly into the boundaries of exclusively male-female relationships, though describing these as “boundaries” is often more an analytic imposition than a description of indigenous categories of thought. However, no Western-style normalization of sexuality has taken place—not until recently and in very limited circles—and such subcultures and categories were not Western-style orientational communities. The story of how these latter paradigms came to Africa is different from Euro-American trajectories. Elements would include certain sites of normalization (cities, missions, universities and secondary schools), actors (returning expatriates, flight attendants, tourists, aid workers), and technologies (television, video-cassettes and DVDs, the Internet, and especially social networking sites). The spread of HIV/AIDS

19. See, for example, D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, and Greenberg, *Construction*.

20. See Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1, and Davidson, *Emergence of Sexuality*.

21. See Moodie and Ndatshe, *Going for Gold*; Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity*; Van Onselen, *Chibaro*; and Achmat, “Apostles of Civilised Vice.”

22. See Mutongi, “Dear Dolly,” and Gay, “Mummies and Babies.”

23. Donham has provided a brilliant synthetic account for the normalization of same-sex identities to Western orientational norms in southern Africa. See Donham, “Male-Male Sexuality.”

and of acute homophobia, as well as humanitarian responses to these scourges (including and perhaps especially Western requirements for political asylum and funding for NGOs devoted to issues of sexual orientation or men who have sex with men) have helped to constitute “gay” and “lesbian” as available subject positions. But this history remains to be written.²⁴

In the remainder of this article, I consider explicitly the reasons why such sexual subcultures have recently become the target of such opprobrium. And here, though I am somewhat skeptical about the explanatory power of taxonomic approaches as such, I do think they offer some insight into why same-sex sexuality can be blown up into a compelling danger at particular moments and in specific circumstances. To the extent that homophobia is based on hostility to extant sexual communities, taxonomy may help explain what precisely is threatening. Nonetheless, there are real drawbacks to this approach in that the description I offer is a rather local one, centered on Hausaphone northern Nigeria, but the public sphere within which I locate homophobic movements is a national one.

Gender Out of Place

Consider the case of northern Nigerian Hausaland and specifically those regions that have been officially Muslim for many centuries. As a point of entry, let me start not with same-sex practice but rather with long-standing norms of gendered and sexual conduct—really a set of truisms, which almost everyone in the region would agree with. In Hausa society, as in most around the world, marriage is more or less a universal, the marker of adult status and the only legitimate way of engendering the children who are most people’s dearest aspiration and guarantor of a secure old age. Marriage has long been conducted according to what are understood to be the norms of Islamic law: men may marry up to four wives at once; women may marry only one man at a time. Before the abolition of slavery in the early twen-

tieth century, men could also form relationships with slave concubines, but sex outside these sanctioned relationships is forbidden—even though it occurs with great regularity. In the years since the start of the colonial period in 1900, the incidence of seclusion among married women has dramatically increased, becoming nearly universal. That is to say, as a point of principle, most married women live in *purdah*: a man may not enter a house where a secluded woman lives unless he is related to her family, or at least he may not go beyond the entry room. Secluded women are not supposed to go outside during the day. The specific terms of a woman’s seclusion are usually negotiated as part of her marriage contract, and there are many variations—technically secluded women may leave the home for medical treatment, education, or even paid employment.²⁵

This picture of normative connubiality between men and women applies to only part of the population, only part of the time. Visions of gendered normality coexist with other modes of living. Adult women who have been married and divorced and who have chosen not to remarry but live on their own, not under the tutelage of a male relative, are called *karuwai* (sing. *karuwa*), a word that is usually translated as “prostitutes” or “courtesans.” *Karuwai* are broadly condemned as being immoral, and they are understood to subsist on presents they receive from male suitors or admirers. Any divorcee living on her own may be called a *karuwa*, though it is more polite to say *tana zaman kanta* (“she lives on her own”). But *karuwa* is more than a derogatory term. While not every divorcee living on her own subsists in this stereotypical manner, *karuwai* are a recognizable social category. Many live together—usually far away from their relatives. They are visited, normally under cover of darkness, by men who wish to make their acquaintance and to court their favors. Houses of *karuwai* are known as places of *ishanci* (misbehavior, vice, craziness), where men can find sex, drink alcohol, listen to music, and enjoy the company of people who do not feel constrained while there by

24. Elements of such an account, though with a slightly different emphasis, can be found in Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*, and Epprecht, “Sexual Minorities.”

25. See Pierce, “Farmers and Prostitutes,” and Pierce, “Identity, Performance, and Secrecy.”

religious mores. In the region's ancient walled cities, such houses also tend to be located outside the confines of the old city, in areas where southerners or Christians live, or in relatively elite, quasi-suburban areas. Karuwai are well known for being witty and interesting. They are often not deferential to men in the way that so-called respectable women are, and they are excellent conversationalists. In all respects, therefore, houses of karuwai are different from the normative gendered space of the respectable household.²⁶ The social history of *karuwanci* is complex. We have evidence that it considerably predates the colonial period, as in the writings of the reformers who launched the jihad that created the Sokoto Caliphate in the early nineteenth century, and independent women understood as "karuwai" in Hausa and as "prostitutes" in English were a recurrent problem across the colonial period as divorcées and freedwomen came to state attention as a problem of public order. Karuwai were regularly expelled from cities during the middle of the twentieth century, and more recently large numbers temporarily migrated to Niger Republic after Nigeria's northern states passed criminal codes modeled on sharia at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

There is a group of men who ignore the norms of respectable masculinity in ways reminiscent of karuwai and the norms of femininity. These men, called *'yan daudu* (sing. *'dan daudu*), have an effeminate affect.²⁷ They sometimes wear articles of women's clothing, use female pronouns and otherwise address one another as women would (for example, using *kawa*, "girlfriend," instead of *aboki* "[male] friend"²⁸), use skin-lightening lotions, and in other ways behave like women. Unlike being a karuwa, status as a *'dan daudu* suggests that one

does not have a high level of Western education, and effeminate men who are educated, who hold elite jobs, or who are fluent in English tend not to be identified as *'yan daudu*. Oftentimes *'yan daudu* live in the same houses as karuwai, and they also receive masculine-identified suitors and admirers. Many *'yan daudu* make a living through stereotypically female professions, such as selling cooked food (as do many karuwai), but many also depend economically on gifts from boyfriends, even if they are married to women.

'Yan daudu and karuwai are highly visible to respectable society. They are widely condemned, by Islamic reformers and respectable people more generally. They are, however, just the tip of a non-normative iceberg. The men who visit their houses and court their favors are not necessarily just errant "respectable" people. *'Yan daudu* are the most visible part of a widespread subculture of people who have sex with members of their own gender. Masculine men who like to have sex with *'yan daudu* are known in subcultural slang as *'yan aras*.²⁹ There are also substantial numbers of women who enjoy sexual relations with other women; many (though not all) of these are karuwai. In the slang of male same-sex relationships, these women are called *'yan kefi*,³⁰ while people who enjoy same-sex relations are called generically *masu harka*, or "those who do the business." *Harka* can also be used as a verb denoting having sex, either heterosexually or homosexually—*Na harka da shi*, "I had sex with him." "Heterosexuals" (I use quotation marks because most *harka* people in northern Nigeria with whom I have spoken do not think of gender preference as being an orientation in the Western sense) who are unaware of this sexual subculture are called *makafi*, "blind people,"

26. Pittin, *Women and Work in Northern Nigeria*; Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*; Smith, *Baba of Karo*; Callaway, *Muslim Hausa Women*; and Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi*. On anxieties about prostitution a little further to the south, among Idoma speakers, see Ochon, "Masculine Anxieties."

27. The best work on *'yan daudu* is Gaudio's *Allah Made Us*. This section is based on Gaudio, on my own observations during fieldwork in 1993, 1996–97, and 2002, and on personal communication with Gaudio, Susan O'Brien, and Adeline Masquelier. The following account describes a state of affairs for which we have

direct documentary and interview evidence from the middle of the twentieth century, and there are references to some aspects of the subculture from earlier on.

28. *Kawa* is a term used by one woman to address and describe another with whom she has an intimate, quasi-formalized friendship, and it presupposes feminine gender for both the speaker and her friend. It would not be used by a man to describe a female friend, though a nonsexual heterosexual friendship would itself be a rarity and most likely to occur among highly westernized people. If a man were to describe a woman as his friend, however, he

would use the feminine of *aboki*, *abokiya*. See Smith, *Baba of Karo*.

29. *Aras* is used only as slang and does not have another meaning. *'Ya* literally means "children" (and *'da* means "son"). When joined to another noun with the connective *-n*, it means "children of" or more figuratively "those who do." Thus, bori practitioners are *'yan bori*, Nigerians *'yan Najeriya*. *'Yan daudu* are associated with the bori spirit *'Dan Galadima*.

30. Like *aras*, *kefi* does not have another meaning.

because they cannot see what is going on. A liking for same-sex relations is thought of as learned behavior, so that a harka person may be asked, “Who taught you [to be harka]?” Having sex with a person who had not previously had homosexual relations is called “opening”: *Jiya da dare na bude shi*, “Last night I opened him up.”

Many people in northern Nigeria would say that women, even respectable housewives, are sexually dangerous. There is a widespread sense that the female libido needs to be carefully circumscribed and controlled. The subordinate position of “respectable” women signals sexual danger, but any more ambiguous set of positions within this set of sex/gender dichotomies poses greater challenges to respectability and morality, perhaps partly through their demonstration that most human conduct does not fit neatly into morality’s heuristics. In other words, this somewhat free-floating account of a particular structural logic allows an appreciation of how sexual danger might be perceived as emerging from culturally specific category errors.³¹ Such an account does not necessarily tell us very much about the structure of sexual communities or how they change over time. And perhaps most urgent for an observer of contemporary Nigeria, it does not help elucidate what is behind contemporary homophobia. Most particularly, it does not by itself locate this in time, and doing so would be a challenge. The demi-monde I describe has left few records and awaits its chronicler.

Isolated sources from the nineteenth-century Sokoto Caliphate do suggest that both karuwanci and d’an daudu status have a long history. The abolition of the status of slavery at the start of the twentieth century helped bring into cities a substantial number of unattached women who were quickly perceived as a threat to urban order and who then became the object of a series of repressive measures. The history of harka communities is even more elusive. For northern Nigeria, aside from isolated historical references to effeminate men and the like in poetry and exhortatory texts,

in government documents, and in literature, there is little in the documentary record that would allow us to reconstruct the experiential universes in which they were living. On the other hand, I have been struck in casual conversations far too casual to dignify with the term *oral history* by a general sense that there was a major sea change, an expansion of male same-sex subculture in Nigeria, along with the oil boom. In a piecemeal and fragmentary fashion, it may be possible to put together accounts of subcultures and their transformations over time. In these, a critical element is the juxtaposition of the histories of particular communities and individual lives with broader shifts in social life. Many of these developments are largely independent of the consolidation of global queer identities. Urbanization and monetization, for example, are vitally important pieces, but rather than enabling people to create a Kano Castro or Sokoto Stoke Newington, they have energized a harka subculture that is distinctly its own.

And yet, intensified interaction with people outside Nigeria and Africa is of critical importance in transforming subcultures, perhaps with the ultimate effect of moving West African sexual subcultures more toward being local gay communities. Perhaps as influential are television, film, popular literature, and pornography. As Lindsey Green-Simms has brilliantly discussed, the great popularity of the Lagos-based Nollywood film industry extends to films depicting the lurid, seductive dangers of lesbianism, simultaneously appealing to audiences’ prurient interest in female-female sexuality and engaging in condemnation of these fictional lesbians’ immorality—their sexual practices serving as a metonym for other misbehavior in the film plot.³² The Internet has been crucially important over the past fifteen years, not just as a more efficient way of dispersing information but also through dating and networking sites like gay.com, gaydar, and gayromeo. Migration and diaspora—in Euro-America, the Middle East, and elsewhere—is centrally important, as of course are the spread of reformist Islam and evangelical Christianity.

31. In discussing the structural logic of beliefs about sexual pollution, Mary Douglas argues that such notions emerge in societies that do not have directly physical mechanisms for patrolling appropriate relationships between the

sexes, suggesting that they map onto broader structures of hierarchy and status within particular societies. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 3–4, 141–45.

32. Green-Simms, “Hustlers”; Green-Simms and Azuah, “Video Closet”; and Green-Simms, “Occult Melodramas.” See also Garritano, *African Video Movies*.

HIV has been an important force in the transformation of sexual subcultures. As Epprecht suggests, prevention and treatment programs in Africa have been structured to address a population presumed to be heterosexual.³³ Despite this, the “gay” West was demonized by a press describing the dangers of AIDS, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, has helped at the very least to channel homophobia and to reinforce a narrative in which homosexuality was introduced to Africa from the outside. This narrative predates the AIDS epidemic, but the disease has given it added, almost literal virulence. Here one could find some hints of a medicalized model of homosexuality refracted through issues of epidemiology. Ironically, the medicalization of homosexuality in West Africa may not ultimately be accomplished through psychiatry at all but through a confluence of older notions of vice as contagion and of AIDS as an external threat. To the extent that this occurs at the same time as globalizing militant religiosity also targets homosexuality (conceived along these lines as a key front in the battle against wickedness), the future prospects of “gay” subcultures are embattled at best.

I would be disinclined to view the process as being an emergence of Western-style homosexual orientation as a result of modernization or globalization, but at the same time I would resist taking a position that all such accounts—and Western-based rights groups’ attempts to support victims of homophobic oppression—are Western imperialism in the guise of sexual liberalism. In recent years, powerful critiques have been advanced condemning international efforts to combat homophobia for ethnocentrism and for a tendency to view westernized modes of life as superior to others. Such commentators, quite reasonably, worry that oppressive regimes can engage in “pink-washing,” demonstrating human rights bona fides by tolerating homosexuality and thus distracting from brutal racial or religious oppression.³⁴ I return to this point in the final section of the essay.

What I have been describing so far is a community often condemned as sexually immoral

by a wider society to which they are also organically connected. Notable about this population is not that it comprises the only people having illicit sex, simply that members of this group are the ones whose conduct makes their “immorality” most readily apparent. Some parts of this community can also be interpreted (and may interpret themselves) as homosexual. As I have suggested above, although their small absolute numbers make them little direct threat to anyone anxious about the overall prevalence of heterosexual conubiality, the persistent failure of *karuwai*, ‘*yan daudu*, and other *masu harka* to abide by the polarities of moral sexual categorization suggests a certain quality of “gender out of place.” But how does this map onto actual patterns of homophobic anxiety?

Nigeria without Such Perverts

A striking feature of contemporary homophobic discourses—certainly in Nigeria—is their complex critique of the shortcomings of the present. The dangers posed by homosexuality are intertwined with those posed by witchcraft, political corruption, crime, neocolonialism, and sexual depravity more generally. As the Rev. Dr. Moses Iloh put it in an op-ed in Lagos’s *Daily Champion*, “Where the practice of witchcraft is prevalent, a large number of members of the community have very similar inclinations, customs, behaviours, and experiences. Crime, fraud, corruption, excessive gambling and obscenity seem to be common place. Prostitution, lesbianism, homosexuality, incest, polygamy, pedophile, etc. are regarded as social norms.”³⁵ Or as the president of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, suggested, “As a nation we have quite a load of challenges to tackle and we cannot afford to add homosexuality to that long list.” The newspaper quoting him continues with a paraphrase: “Those canvassing homosexuality today were brought into the world by women who travailed for nine months or more before bringing them forth, so why will any man in his right senses now think they can do without the natural order of God. . . . Nigeria can do without such pervers

33. Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?*

34. See, for example, Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, and Puar, *Terrist Assemblages*.

35. Iloh, “Nigeria: Some Are Definitely above the Law.”

who can drag us back in our current developmental process.”³⁶

While the religious dimensions of these critiques are obvious, I would like to focus on two more fundamental aspects: who the homosexuals are, and what they are imagined to be doing. For although the Bible and the Quran are often invoked—God did not create Adam and Steve, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, sodomy is illegal under Islamic law—and although Christian and Muslim leaders’ stances are somewhat different, in part because of the institution of Islamic criminal law in the northern states after 2000, religious doctrine is not really adequate to explain the virulence of contemporary homophobia.

As a means of approach, consider a series of newspaper stories, whose content and rhetorical structure provide a certain insight into the distinctive economy of contemporary Nigerian homophobia.³⁷ A story on the Bauchi eighteen that appeared in Abuja’s *Daily Trust* begins with the provocative statement that “It would have turned out to be the first ever Bauchi gay wedding but history was upturned when the Sharia monitoring team and the security agents dispersed the group that allegedly gathered for a gay nuptial ceremony.” After describing the charges against the men and the outrage of protestors outside the court, the reporter quoted one of the accused, who claimed the party was to celebrate a friend’s graduation from secondary school. The story jumps immediately to a claim that the accuseds’ “gay association” gathered at a hotel “when information about the proposed wedding leaked to the authorities who immediately disrupted the wedding.” This is followed by an interview with a hisbah official, who explained his information came from hibah members who had attended the gathering long enough to pray with the partygoers:

“Our secret member who was with the group recorded all their conversations and according to him, they all spoke like women.” He said the

informant told them that most of their conversations were on teasing their colleagues about the lack of “protruded breast or pointing at another and saying he doesn’t have big buttocks, beautiful face or lack of long hair, among other jokes. . . . We also recovered money between N300 to N1000, women[’s] dresses like braziers, rubber buttocks, pants, skirts, head ties and wrappers, we also recovered some cosmetics like kajal,³⁸ powder, lipstick and other women[’s] cosmetics.”³⁹

A similar story in Lagos’s *This Day* quoted a police official who explained that “reports reaching us from our undercover agents indicated that large number of youths arrived from different parts of the country, giving the impression they might belong to a big and strong national body.” These agents “reported ‘intimate’ discussions and activities amongst the youths, which . . . confirmed the [police] commission’s ‘worst fears’ that the youths were there to contract marriages.” “We thought if we allowed the wedding take place, there would be sodomy, and since we were aware of this, we wanted to prevent it happening at all cost.”⁴⁰ The reporter for this story interviewed two of the suspects, both of whom claimed the party was sponsored by the son of a secondary-school principal not himself arrested in the raid. One claimed it was for his birthday, the other that it celebrated his birthday, secondary-school graduation, and junior sister’s wedding all together. Both men disavowed homosexuality or any knowledge of cross-dressing or same-sex weddings.

It would be unproductive to try sorting out the disputed details, but the official narrative suggests a fascinating causal chain: gathering of cross-dressing men→(plans for) gay wedding→sodomy. All that could ever be proven was the gathering part, which was the basis for the charge of vagabondage. However, the intensity of the response from hisbah and the police emerged from the allegation of the gay wedding. Putting aside the absolute unlikelihood of there actually having been an

36. Eyoboka, “Nigeria: Homosexuality Is Totally Unacceptable.” At the time of this writing, Pastor Oritsejafor is embroiled in a baroque scandal involving gun running, South Africa, and the Nigerian military.

37. All of passages that follow have been reproduced verbatim from the original newspaper articles and edited only slightly for clarity.

38. This is a somewhat tendentious conclusion. Kajal is kohl. While ‘yan daudu are perhaps more likely to use it than “civilians,” many adult men do use it.

39. Mohammed, “We Never Held Same-Sex Wedding.”

40. Shehu, “Same-Sex Wedding or Birthday Party?”

intention to conduct such a ceremony, juridically it was not a crime. And the sodomy was both hypothetical and difficult to prove.⁴¹ While same-sex couples engaged in sex have been victims of mob violence, the evidentiary difficulty of obtaining a conviction for sodomy makes actual sex a relatively minor legal issue.⁴² The recurrence of the gay wedding trope in newspaper coverage suggests, rather strangely, that *this* is what homosexuals are up to. But why are same-sex social events so easily interpreted as weddings, and why do they now attract such outrage and disgust?

One way to answer this question is to broaden the frame of reference from same-sex sexuality to the field of immorality described by Dr. Iloh. His empirical claim is that Nigeria is troubled by an elite class of “lawless and lewd wealthy malefactors” that gets its power from “a cult that upholds the practice of witchcraft.”⁴³ For Iloh the consequence of Nigeria’s domination by an elite whose religion is witchcraft (rather than Islam or Christianity) is the prevalence of intertwined forms of immorality—crime, corruption, prostitution, homosexuality. The position is not unique to Iloh. Public discourse—from newspapers, television, and film to conversations in bars and public meeting places—is filled by complaints about corruption. There is a consensus so broad that it is an item of common sense that corruption must be stamped out. This conviction is, at least in public declarations, shared by the government leaders who are the chief subjects of complaint. But there is substantial (if not equal) concern at how corruption is intertwined with sexual immorality. Popular outlets such as newspapers and films market themselves in part through their prurient exposés of the immorality suffusing Nigeria. For example, in a story on Obalende, a red-light district of the northern city of Kaduna, the writer reports:

I witnessed something that made me understand why Obalende is often referred to as the Sodom

and Gomorrah of the state. Two beautiful girls in micro miniskirts, glued to each other arrived together on a bike (okada) [motorcycle taxi]. Few minutes after they arrived, I beckoned to one of them, but to my surprise, the two made their way towards me. When I insisted on just one of them, the other hissed and said: “Don’t worry about talking to her in my presence because whatever you discuss I will know anyway, and she can’t go along; you have to take both of us if you want to sleep with her, because this is how we do it”. Asked what the prize is for the two of them was, they explained: “First we have to know the type of sex you want from us, is it anal sex, or both? And if you have any lesbian that you want us to meet she is welcome. We can give her the real satisfaction,” they said. They gave me the prize range for the various categories of sex, but while we were negotiating, a lady in a Honda CRV, parked in front of my car and called out to them. In less than 5 minutes, they waved goodbye, an indication that they got a better deal.⁴⁴

Despite occasional exclamations of disgust (when escaping from a “slim, dirty lady” who attempted to unzip his trousers, the reporter “couldn’t wait to get out of the environment”), the article reads as something of a travel guide or instructional manual; it ends with a warning that police roadblocks go up at midnight. Rich lesbians in SUVs aside, the story’s portrait of the prostitutes is fairly desperate:

A 45 year old [woman] who is still active in the prostitution business explained that, young girls are into prostitution now due to poverty. “I still do the business, but to tell you the truth, those girls parade themselves here due to hunger, else, why will a girl give her virginity up just because she wants to eat indomie [a brand of instant noodles]? Look at them, none of them has ever traveled to Saudi Arabia or travelled with a man to England or France in the name of prostitution. What we have now is ‘cini na ci abinci.’” [Fuck me so I can eat.]⁴⁵

41. As the hisbah official pointed out: “Another problem we encountered is with what offence were we going to charge them, because if you charge them with homosexuality, it would be difficult to prove the case before the state Shariah court since Bauchi is operating the Islamic legal system for its citizens. You know the consequences and to prove this case you must [sic]

produce four reliable witnesses who will testify that that [sic] they saw them naked doing the thing. This is very difficult to prove” (Mohammed, “We Never Held Same Sex Wedding”).

42. The bulk of cases that have received widespread publicity are really cases of rape, often involving children.

43. Iloh, “Nigeria: Some Are Definitely above the Law.”

44. Tonga, “Obalende—Kaduna’s Sodom and Gomorrah.”

45. Ibid.

This depiction of hunger points to an important aspect of the sense of crisis underlying concerns about sexual immorality. Another exposé of prostitution titled “Campus Girls” that appeared in a Lagos paper attempted to alert parents to the danger of their children at university becoming prostitutes:

Parents, including the wealthy among us should have a rethink as to where their precious daughter, so calm, innocent looking and highly respectable is at this moment, because prostitution on our campuses have gone beyond the level of past time, it is now a highly organized and digitalized business not only practiced by the female students, but also by some boys who act as pimps to the female students and sometimes themselves service the pervert needs of wealthy homosexuals.⁴⁶

In contrast to the financially desperate prostitutes described in Kaduna, these student prostitutes are alleged to do it for material advancement. The reporter quotes a beautician, who “said that 75% of the girls who got into campus commercial sex did so for greed, peer influence, lack of good upbringing and inadequate parental monitoring,” and a “former student,” who declared, “It is greed and the urge to belong to senior babes in school that pushed most girls into campus prostitution, including those whose parents could afford anything they needed on campus” (ibid.). But it is not greed alone: describing the daughter of a local government chairman who was arrested while performing as a nude dancer, the reporter declared:

By any standard in the Nigeria contest, a local government chairman is a millionaire at least, so what could a daughter of a council boss who could even convince her dad to award contract to someone so that she could get her own share, [be] doing in the club as a nude dancer, if she is not perverted, addicted to some vices or a victim of spiritual manipulation, perhaps from the marine world.⁴⁷ This particular girls and others in her class perhaps see commercial sex as a habit which they say once formed is very dif-

ficult to quit, or they are simply super sex machines or maniacs who cannot stay a day without having the feeling of a man’s sugar stick inside their tunnel, and therefore actually need some spiritual assistance, which their parents should have discovered, if they were giving them close marking.⁴⁸

Greed and sex mania, again, are not limited to young women, though young men are described somewhat less sensationally: “The boys have equally fallen victims to some wealthy cult figures who engage them in homosexual activity in exchange for money. These homosexual hide-outs though could be found in some cities in Nigeria, they are mostly located in the north, especially in the ancient city of Kano, where it is alleged that some big shots who engage these boys in sodomy did so for ritual purposes” (ibid.).

The shadowy sex partners of these young prostitutes are not just rich roués; they potentially pose much more immediate dangers. The story relates the sad case of a girl

called Angel who was approached at the Rita Lori Night Club by a client who told the girls that though he was interested in having “short-time,” which means a quick casual sex, he could not go back to his hotel room for the fun and offered to have fun with the girl at a nearby botanical garden for N10,000 [\$65]. Being good money for just some minutes fun, Angel agreed and hopped into the wealthy man’s jeep. After [the client had] fun with her, two men emerged from the bush and assisted the man to kill Angel. Her private part, tongue, eyes, breasts, fingers and toes were removed. However, as the criminals were going back to the jeep, some vigilant police men arrested them only to discover the human parts of the late Angel. (ibid.)

The dark observation about the “ritual purposes” of sex with boy prostitutes and the lurid story of Angel’s dismemberment indexes a much wider universe of stories about satanic rituals and magic practiced by elite witches.⁴⁹

46. Edohasim, “Campus Girls.”

47. This is a glancing suggestion that the girl was a member of the Mami Wata cult or was bewitched by a devotee of this mermaid-goddess who provides prosperity to her fol-

lowers while promoting lurid forms of sexual immorality.

48. Edohasim, “Campus Girls.”

49. On the interpretation of fantastic rumors and the popular concerns they index, see

White, *Speaking with Vampires*. On the contemporary politics and the uses of magic, see Comaroff and Comaroff, “Occult Economies”; Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*; and Smith, *Culture of Corruption*.

Individuals differ on how they assign blame to particular members of the younger generation for their sexual immorality and participation in prostitution. But the broader problem is with the generation itself, and there the critique is fairly consistent. Popular descriptions of prostitution present, perhaps in its most unified form, a general description of Nigeria's ailments. A wealthy class of libidinous witches debauches Nigerian youth, who cooperate out of hunger or because they have been badly raised: their parents and religious leaders have failed to inculcate proper sexual values. While the representation of the problem is fantastic and is obviously calculated to sell papers through the heady delights of prurient repulsion, what is noteworthy is that these descriptions dichotomize Nigerians: an antinomian elite versus everyone else. Even the most sex crazed of the young are ultimately victims of elite appetites and schemes for power. For the (male) victims of homosexuals, for example, these experiences are traumatizing but not precisely sexual. In an exposé of elite homosexuals, a reporter describes a radio broadcaster who lured three young men from a technical college to his flat in a small town in southwestern Nigeria:

The trio slept in one of the rooms in the three-bedroom apartment. In the night, Alhaji furtively went into the room where the boys slept. He slept among the boys, who kept wondering what was going on. Initially, they thought, their host just wanted to be in their company. But they were wrong. The Alhaji soon started fumbling with the boys' private parts till they ejaculated. It was equally alleged that he penetrated the anus of one of the boys. The boys felt dumbfounded and violated. They consequently reported the matter to the school authorities.⁵⁰

Sexual or not, the depredations of this sorcerous elite ensnare both boys and girls (albeit it somewhat different ways) and are imagined to endanger the most intimate arenas of private life. The ultimate offense of the elite's activities lies in having precipitated a crisis of reproduction—less biological reproduction than physical and social. Nigeria's ongoing economic crisis and endemic

poverty make life a struggle for all but the wealthiest. Complaints about young people's "greed," as well as their desire for consumer goods and an easy life, suggest a perceived breakdown in parental authority.

In effect, the dangers perceived to be posed by homosexuality stand in for those posed by a corrupt elite, which destroys parents' ability to control their children. Parental control is an absolute precondition for reproduction through affective accumulation, which depends on contracting parentally (and therefore socially) sanctioned marriages. That is to say, in contexts where the primary route to accumulation has been through gathering followings of people and where marriage is contracted through bridewealth rather than dowry, strategies for economic advancement necessarily center on a desire for well-regulated families in which young people obey the reproductive dictates of their parents: money allows marriages, which lead to children, who produce family prosperity in a self-perpetuating chain. Ideally this formula can provide a good life, but only if one's children do as they are told. Independent action (in both economic and romantic decisions) threatens parents' own investment in these affective bonds, which is all the more likely and all the more heartbreaking when dire economic circumstances make supporting a family so very difficult. But when the real enemies are as huge and abstract as the national economy and an elite systematically looting it, the more obvious and immediate focus for attention is the sexual conduct of juniors who are not proving the source of hope they should be. This conjuncture begins to explain why homosexual sociality is so readily equated with the gay wedding. An anxiety over a crisis of reproduction and related shifts within family politics is read, quite accurately, as being tied to the activities of Nigerian elites, for whose immorality homosexuality serves as a metonym.

The Erotics of Recognition

So what is one to make of this conjuncture? The men and women arrested for homosexual conduct and the people beaten, ostracized, and killed for

50. Sulaiman and Adebayo, "Nigeria: Nation's Homosexuals."

their intimate relationships are doubly unfortunate victims of Nigeria's problems today. For the most part, those targeted by homophobic violence are not themselves beneficiaries of the corruption that benefits a few and for whom they serve as scapegoats. But on multiple levels it is difficult to agree entirely with international human rights activists that the problem is the oppression of Nigerian gay men and lesbians: many of the people in danger would prefer not to accept that label or would find it meaningless. At the same time, Nigeria does not fit easily with more radical critiques of such positions. Joseph Massad and Neville Hoad have suggested that Western paradigms of sexual orientation have only been applied to non-Western contexts through a process of covert imperialism, one that ignores the particularities of local forms of same-sex experience and self-understanding while consolidating a homophobic heterosexuality that claims to be both moral and culturally authentic.⁵¹ Massad ascribes this to a "gay international" of LGBT human rights organizations and gay male sexual adventurers who insist on viewing the non-Western world through a kind of gay Orientalism. Taking the argument a step further, Jasbir Puar argues that, particularly in the frenzy of imperialist xenophobia in the years since the September 11 hijackings, both conservatives and gay rights activists in the West have displaced Western homophobia, ascribing it to non-Western peoples, whom they stigmatize as the perpetrators of sexualized and homophobic violence. Even outrage at the sexualized torture committed in places like Abu Ghraib gets read as a sign of "Islamic homophobia."⁵² There is a profound ethnocentrism to too-easy ascription of Western orientational norms to many same-sex identities, but I am not convinced that non-Western homophobias are so purely reactive to Western paradigms or that any emergent identification of Nigerian same-sex communities

as "gay" or "lesbian" simply reflects an imposition of Western categories.

Moving beyond the impasse of human rights versus local culture, as well as universalism versus relativism, reveals the opposition as itself being a strategy of domination.⁵³ But while I am sympathetic to scholars tracing the co-construction of race, sex, nation, and class (and attempt to demystify Whiggish narratives of liberation or self-actualization that inform both neoliberalism and liberal attempts at progressive critique), I would underline the need for sufficient attention to the performative stakes of such a project.⁵⁴ How can one describe Nigeria's current impasse without engaging afresh in an analogous normalizing project?

In the past thirty years, homophobic movements and HIV/AIDS have doubtless directed some people toward identifying as gay or lesbian both as a means of making claims on resources and as a means of understanding their own suffering and victimization. Asserting LGBT identity can be a way of getting resources from and for NGOs. It provides readily accessible narratives for publicizing homophobic violence and repression, and it enables successful requests for political asylum in the West. But this is as much a global form of "local knowledge"⁵⁵ as it is a sexualized strand of cultural imperialism. That is to say, narratives of same-sex sexual activity as emerging from "gay" orientation are not the cause of contemporary homophobia. Just as much, homophobia may itself exert a normalizing force on its victims. At the very least, the perpetrators of this "cultural imperialism" are at a much higher level than those of Massad's "gay international." It would be deeply presumptuous to claim that such modes of address should be unavailable for people who might use them strategically.

The availability of sexual orientation as a form of identity is a natural consequence of the

51. Hoad, *African Intimacies*, and Massad, *Desiring Arabs*. Hoad suggests another aspect is that certain postcolonial regimes (perhaps most notably that of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe) have deliberately stoked homophobic campaigns as a way to distract attention from their own failings. Rudolf Gaudio has suggested that Hoad and Massad are right to worry about the potential for ascriptions of homosexual orientation to endanger people who

do not understand themselves to be LGBT, but he argues that some of the starkness of their characterization stems from the fact that they use published and literary sources almost exclusively. Gaudio, *Allah Made Us*, 180–85.

52. See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

53. For a more extended discussion, see Rao and Pierce, "On the Subject of Governance."

54. A useful approach here lies in the recent interest in affect within queer studies; see, for example, Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, and Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

55. The term comes from Geertz's classic eponymous essay, "Local Knowledge." For an interesting discussion of how human rights discourse finds resonance when appropriated in specific contexts, see Merry, *Human Rights*.

current international state system;⁵⁶ this is not a development that can be countered solely through critique. As Charles Taylor famously pointed out, liberal democratic states—and basically the juridical form of all modern states—are deeply troubled by what he terms *the politics of recognition*, by a public need to recognize claims made on the basis of group identity.⁵⁷ The political repertoire available internationally for protection and redress and for challenging the oppression of unpopular minorities depends on (1) being able to recognize them as such—members of a minority group with distinctive qualities and interests—and (2) being willing to accept that universal equality can be achieved only through a respect for particularism. The fundamental equality of all is possible only through recognizing difference. Taylor has received criticism for his implicit assumption that groups are given and natural and for assuming an artificial opposition between the “facts” of identity or culture and the contingency of political contestation.⁵⁸ Even so, communitarian claims for recognition haunt the modern state. Conversely, being located within that historical and juridical space makes speaking as a member of a community a necessary strategy, at least in some circumstances. This is not incompatible with more sociologically sophisticated accounts of group formation and the articulation of claims on the basis of group membership.⁵⁹

Even when we are not being tempted toward a reification of same-sex sexuality as “gay,” to the extent that same-sex experience is based in community (as it usually is—not only is desire intrinsically social, but romantic and sexual relationships are also scripted by a host of community expectations and assumptions),⁶⁰ public attention to same-sex sexuality does entail some sort of recognition of same-sex subcultures. In this regard, their recognition by academic analysts as being, in some

sense, homosexual, is something not quite a simple act of appropriation. Recognition is not normalization, but under certain circumstances it can have a normalizing effect. More to the point, it is not necessary to celebrate the emergence and spread of homosexual identities in order to acknowledge the multiple utilities that claiming them might occasion. One might decry the offensiveness of asserting universal gay identities, but writing as someone whose putatively expert opinion has determined the fate of political asylum cases, I am unwilling to risk subjecting people to acute physical danger because of theoretical scruples.

Perhaps the appropriate response is to emphasize careful historical praxis—locating people in precise sociohistorical milieus and paying careful attention to (nonteleological) processes of change over time, as well as providing ethnographic attention to communities and deep respect for people’s own claim making, even while retaining agnosticism about the relationship between those claims and broader social reality. In doing this last, it is necessary to understand normative discourse as something other than descriptive—as I have suggested, the moral dilemmas of sexuality in northern Nigeria are more profound than their violation of a coherent social script. Rather, these dilemmas reflect the impossibility of one’s real-world behavior ever fitting neatly into the heuristics of appropriate moral conduct. The emergence of Nigerian homophobia is helping consolidate Nigerian same-sex communities through what one might term an *erotics of recognition*, a fascinated engagement with the possibility of non-normative sexual practice in tandem with, emerging from, and enabled by a dark and dangerous set of socioeconomic transformations. The dangers, as too many have already learned, are very clear. ■■■■

56. See, for example, Reddy, “Homosexual Asylum,” and Ho, “Global Governance.”

57. Taylor, *Multiculturalism*.

58. Markell, *Bound by Recognition*. See also Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition.”

59. For warnings that attempts to accommodate group difference pose their own dangers, see Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition*, and Rao, *The Caste Question*.

60. Methodologically, I am suggesting something along the lines proposed by Mrinalini Sinha in “A Global Perspective on Gender: Some Reflections against the Grain” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Boston, 2011). Sinha suggests gender categories have frequently been understood as emerging from a binary relation of female/male which is simultaneously a cultural model and a system of understand-

ing, and it is deeply grounded in recent western European history. Understanding gender in global context requires a careful attention to local ways of understanding gendered life and the global contexts and systems that (1) make these recognizable as gender and (2) inflect them along particular lines.

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