

# Mutual Misunderstandings: Gesture, Gender and Healing in the African Portuguese World

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In 1556, Antônio, the slave of Paulo Manriques, arrived in the Portuguese Azores from his homeland of Benin. Shortly after his arrival, Antônio shed the clothing that his master issued him and replaced it with a vest made from old, discarded woollen cloth he found in his master's stables. Over the vest, Antônio wore a white waist jacket, buttoned down the front. Around his waist, he wore a skirt that opened in the front. And on his head, he wore a tightly wrapped, linen cloth with a hat on top. Though his appearance was somewhat ambiguous, Antônio styled himself as a woman.

According to witnesses, Antônio earned a living selling sexual favours to men under the female pseudonym, Vitória. In Ponta Delgada, he sometimes took his clients to an orange grove; at other times, he worked the streets by night. Eventually, Vitória's master took her to Lisbon, where she ran her prostitution business out of a small house near the docks. There, Vitória took advantage of a vibrant, cosmopolitan setting along the waterfront. In addition to the comings and goings of sailors from across Europe and the Portuguese Empire, there were local merchants, carters, haulers, fishmongers, and other prostitutes. African slaves comprised nearly ten per cent of the city's total population and figured prominently among those working on the docks. To provide sustenance for this workforce, there were 'ten shacks next to the river where men and women grilled sardines and fish', feeding the various 'men and negro workers who earn their living on the river'.<sup>1</sup> There were also other small dwellings, where the prostitutes plied their trade. Sometimes as many as seven or eight men could be found outside Vitória's house, and 'while some were inside, others were waiting for them to finish so they could go inside'.

When business was slow, Vitória made a variety of inviting gestures in order to draw the attention of her male clients. For example, on one occasion

<sup>1</sup> João Brandão, *Grandeza e Abastança da Cidade de Lisboa (1552)*, ed. José da Felicidade Alves (Lisbon, 1990), 107. Brandão's account describes the various economic activities in Lisbon, including those along the riverfront: see esp. 72–84.

she saw two Flemish men passing her house and ‘she made winks at them like a woman’. Vitória engaged in other behaviours that were also deemed to be the provenance of women. Several times she was seen walking from Lisbon’s river front with a vessel of water on her head. Women, especially enslaved African women, gathered water from the ‘King’s Fountain’ (*Chafariz d’El Rei*) for their masters, as well as to sell. In 1552, one Portuguese eyewitness noted that ‘there are 1000 black women who walk with pots and jugs, selling water all over the city’.<sup>2</sup> Customarily, these women split the proceeds of their earnings with their masters, because ‘by day they eat at their own cost and at night in the house of their masters’.<sup>3</sup> An anonymous painting of the Tejo River waterfront from around 1570 shows the King’s Fountain in the background, with dozens of women, the overwhelming majority of them black, gathering water and carrying the vessels on their heads.<sup>4</sup> Vitória apparently joined in this predominantly female activity. Yet, there were also times that Vitória defied her chosen female persona. One witness claimed she saw Vitória doff her hat and bow ‘like a man’. Generally, in sixteenth-century Lisbon, only men wore hats, while women donned head scarves. The male gesture of removing the hat and bowing only reinforced the suspicion that Vitória was really a man.

Most witnesses agreed that Vitória ‘appeared to be more man than woman’, but her uncertain gender identity still caused great confusion. Vitória’s neighbours gossiped and debated her true sex, seeking answers from those closer to her. Members of Vitória’s master’s family said she was definitely a man. However, a servant woman, who lived in the same house with Vitória, explained to several people that Vitória was castrated. In fact, it seems that Vitória hid her manhood by tying a red ribbon around her penis, pulling it backward, and binding it to her leg. Eventually, the Portuguese Inquisition arrested Vitória on charges of sodomy. Under questioning by the Inquisitors (and with the assistance of an African interpreter), Vitória insisted that she was a woman and had the anatomy to prove it. Refusing to accept her claims, the Inquisitors demanded to know whether she created her female anatomy, or whether it was the result of some illness. Vitória answered that she was born with it. Moreover, ‘there were many others in her land who were born with the same orifices (*buracos*)’. Ultimately, the Inquisitors subjected Vitória to a medical examination to determine whether she was ‘a man,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> This painting, held in a private collection, has only recently been discovered by scholars. It has been reproduced in Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *O Trato dos Viventes: Formação do Brasil non Atlântico Sul* (São Paulo, 2000).

a woman, or a hermaphrodite'. The doctor's final report concluded that Vitória 'had the physical character of a man, without having any *buraco* nor other physical characteristic of a woman'. For committing the 'abominable sin of sodomy', Vitória was given a life sentence in the king's galleys.<sup>5</sup>

Antônio/Vitória was the first among a handful of transvested Africans whose names appear in the records of the Portuguese Inquisition between 1550 and 1730. If read through a strictly Western lens, these cases seem to represent little more than the persecution of same-sex behaviours of African 'transvestites'.<sup>6</sup> However, this narrow reading misses much larger historical struggles over sex, gender, kinship, and healing that took place between the Portuguese and enslaved Africans in the Atlantic diaspora. As Vitória's case shows, interpretation of gesture was at the very core of these struggles. Portuguese eyewitnesses were keen to read Vitória's gender ambiguity through her familiar gestures—winking at men, carrying water on her head, doffing her hat, and so on. The conflicting messages conveyed by these gestures were among the evidence that confirmed Vitória's 'deviancy' for the Portuguese. Yet Vitória engaged in other gestures that were not so readily familiar or easily translatable in Western terms. Her dress is one example. One could rightfully argue that Vitória cast away the master's clothing as an outward rejection of her enslavement. But why did Vitória choose to dress simultaneously as a man and a woman—wearing a man's hat and jacket, as well as a woman's skirt? And what was to be gained by claiming she was a woman, when, in fact, she knew very well that she was anatomically male? Finally, what did she mean when she said that there were many others like her in her homeland? Were there deeper political gestures embedded in Vitória's behaviour that were obscured by the Portuguese obsession with 'sodomy'?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Processos, No. 10868.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. in his groundbreaking work on the history of same-sex practices in the Portuguese colonial world, Brazilian anthropologist Luiz Mott describes Vitória as part of a 'gay subculture'. While the politics of such an assertion might be laudable, Mott's argument largely ignores the social (enslaved) and cultural (African) imperatives that informed Vitória's behaviours. See Mott, 'Pagode Português: a Subcultura Gay em Portugal nos Tempos da Inquisição', *Ciência e Cultura*, 40 (1980), 120–39; and most recently, Mott, 'Raízes Históricas da Homossexualidade no Atlântico Lusófono Negro', *Afro-Ásia*, 33 (2005), 9–33.

<sup>7</sup> In the Iberian world, male penetration was thought to be a 'natural' act, while male reception was not. As such, Spanish and Portuguese authorities reserved their greatest contempt for passive men, assuming that the penetrated man was the criminal sodomite. See Luiz Mott, 'Justitia et Misericordia: A Inquisição Portuguesa e a Repressão ao Nefando Pecado de Sodomia', *Revista do Museu Paulista*, 31 (1986), 705–9; and

One possible answer lies in healing. Though the Inquisitors were only interested in Vitória's sexual exploits, it seems that she also performed cures on some of the men who went to see her. One man, Jorge Fernandes, claimed that he went to Vitória 'because she was curing him from something that made him sick'. This 'curing' might explain the discrepancy between the 'seven or eight men' who could sometimes be found outside her house and the five she later admitted to having had sex with. If Vitória was a powerful healer, it may have been her healing skills that were most sought after by some of the men. Though the Inquisition case reveals only the barest outline of Vitória's own explanations for her behaviours, later cases involving African 'sodomites' help clarify.

By the 1590s, another transvested African healer, this one from Central Africa, appeared in the Portuguese colony of Brazil. In 1591, in Salvador, Bahia, a Portuguese man named Mathias Moreira denounced the African slave, Francisco Manicongo, for sodomy. According to Moreira, Francisco was renowned among the slaves of Salvador for being a 'sodomite'. Just like Vitória, Francisco rejected the clothing that was issued to him by his master. Instead, he wore a 'loincloth with the points [tied] in the front, leaving an opening', like a skirt. Moreira rebuked Francisco, warning that he should dress 'like a man', but Francisco responded that he did not want to dress like a man. Moreira, who had travelled extensively in Central Africa, tried to explain Francisco's behaviour to the Inquisition by noting that 'in Angola and the Congo . . . the negro sodomites who serve as passive women in the nefarious sin' use these loincloths, 'and in the language of Angola and Congo they call them *jinbandaa*, which means passive sodomite'.<sup>8</sup>

Though convenient for the purposes of his denunciation against Francisco, Moreira's seemingly authoritative translation of 'jinbandaa' was far off the mark. In fact, the term 'jinbandaa' carried none of the negative moral and sexual connotations that Moreira attached to it. According to linguist Malcolm Guthrie, the stem '-mbándá' means 'healer', 'medicine man', or 'spirit medium' in languages across Central Africa.<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, we have several descriptions of these 'chibados' and 'quimbandas' from seventeenth-century Angola that illuminate the seeming gap between 'sodomites' and 'healers'.

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Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Cornell, 1995), 167–72.

<sup>8</sup> ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Denúncias, Livro 779, ff. 128–129v.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu: An Introduction to the Comparative Linguistics and Prehistory of the Bantu Languages* (London, 1971), 28.

In 1606, Jesuit missionaries in Angola noted the presence of ‘chibados’, ‘extremely great fetishers . . . [who] went around dressed as women and they . . . by great offence called themselves men; they had husbands like the other women, and in the sin of sodomy they are just like devils’.<sup>10</sup> Some years later, in 1681, a Portuguese soldier, António de Oliveira Cadornega, wrote similarly about the ‘quimbandas’ of Angola:

There is among the Angolan pagan much sodomy, sharing one with the other their dirtiness and filth, dressing as women. And they call them by the name of the land, quimbandas . . . And some of these are fine fetishers . . . And all of the pagans respect them and they are not offended by them and these sodomites happen to live together in bands, meeting most often to provide burial services.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, these descriptions from Central Africa reveal that the sexual behaviours of these transvested men were subsumed beneath their roles as spiritually powerful people. The fact that they were seen as ‘great fetishers’, who were widely ‘respected’, meant that their place in society was highly esteemed, but their roles apparently went well beyond individual healing and burials. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Capuchin missionary, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, commented that ‘there is not a war captain or peaceful village chief who does not try to keep [quimbandas] to watch over him, without the counsel and approval of such, he will not dare exercise any act of jurisdiction, nor take any resolution’.<sup>12</sup> In short, it seems that the quimbandas were a secret society of diviner/healers who had the capacity to shape not just everyday ritual, but also the very politics of Central Africa. Their gender status, and the gestures that defined their roles as ‘women’, were evidently one indicator of their ritual expertise.

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the European commentaries that provides us with insight into the Central African understanding of gender inversion. Obviously, there was a tie between male gender inversion and healing, but what exactly was the ideological connection between the temporal gesture of gender inversion and the ritual power of healing? The answer may lie in spirit possession. One of the key elements in quimbanda healing was

<sup>10</sup> *Relação Anual das Coisas que Fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas Missões do Japão, China . . . Angola, Guiné . . . nos anos de 1600 a 1609 . . .*, ed. Artur Viegas, 3 vols. (Coimbra, 1930), I, 414.

<sup>11</sup> António de Oliveira Cadornega, *História geral das guerras angolanas, 1680*, 3 vols. (Lisbon, 1940–42), III, 259.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni António Cavazzi, *Descrição Histórica dos Três Reinos do Congo, Matamba e Angola*, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1965), I, 202.

consultation with the spirits of deceased ancestors. When called upon, ancestral spirits, known as kilundu, would ‘enter the head’ of the quimbanda and provide remedies for the ill. The act of taking the spirit into one’s head as a medium was literally a form of spiritual ‘penetration’. This symbolic act of feminization might have been translated into the temporal world as male gender inversion. A man was more readily penetrable by the spirits if he exhibited ‘feminine’ qualities—dress, labour roles, gestures, and so on. In this way, when the quimbanda took the role of a woman, he gestured primarily toward the world of the spirits and not toward his earthly comrades. Male gender inversion was never about sex, per se, but rather about making oneself more readily available to the spirit world.

Though admittedly distant in space and time, we might gain a glimpse into this ethos in the contemporary practices of Yoruba Shango possession priests. In present-day Yoruba religion, those who are possessed are known as ‘wives’ of the gods. When the gods enter the bodies of their devotees, they are said to ‘mount’ them. The Yoruba term, *gùn*, ‘to mount’, also ‘refers to what an animal or a brutal man does sexually to his female partner’.<sup>13</sup> Across Yorubaland, most Shango priests are women; however, male possession priests dress as women and often take on women’s roles. They wear skirts, blouses, make-up, and jewellery. They also work in professions most often associated with women (such as strip-weavers or barkeepers). Yet these male possession priests are never viewed as anything other than ‘men’. Indeed, ‘they present themselves ritually, sartorially, and verbally not as women but as wives of the gods’. In other words, male possession priests are clearly recognized as ‘men’ in the temporal world, but they signal their spiritual personas and ritual power through female gesture and dress. On occasion, possessed Shango priests have been witnessed anally penetrating unpossessed priests in Oyo shrines, but these behaviours are seen strictly through the context of ritual.<sup>14</sup> Yoruba scholars and religious practitioners strongly resist the suggestion that these ritual gestures and behaviours have any bearing on the temporal identities of spirit mediums. To impose sexual motive onto priests

<sup>13</sup> J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, 2005), ch. 5, 188–223, quotation at 211. Also see Matory’s earlier work, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 333–4, n. 47. Thus, male Shango priests, all of whom adopt female identities in the ritual setting, remain ‘women’ until Shango mounts them. Once Shango mounts the medium, he can use the medium’s male body to penetrate the unpossessed ‘female’ priests (regardless of their actual sex), literally enacting the possession ritual.

would be to impugn the will of Shango, and by extension, the entire basis for spiritual belief.<sup>15</sup>

Returning, then, to Vitória from Benin and Francisco Manicongo, we might speculate that their cross dressing, their feminine gestures, and their same-sex behaviours were simply expressions of their broader spiritual roles, roles that went completely unrecognized by the Portuguese. Their gender-inverted personas were widely recognized and politically important in their home societies, but the Portuguese could see only 'deviance' and 'sodomy'. At the juncture of male transvestism, conceptual fields diverged in such a way that the Portuguese read 'deviant sexuality', while Africans read 'spiritually powerful'. These divergent fields of perception defined interpretation of gestures related to gender inversion, resulting in mutual misunderstandings. Unfortunately for Africans, when they were enslaved and removed from their homelands, Europeans stripped them of the kin-like professional structures and broad spiritual understandings that endowed them with socio-political status. In this way, the jinbandaa could be naturalized to the diaspora as little more than a passive 'sodomite'.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the best efforts of Portuguese authorities, they could not completely stamp out African transvestism in their colonies. The slave trade ensured that male possession priests would arrive in places like Brazil for many years

<sup>15</sup> Matory argues that the ritual effeminacy and spiritual penetrability of possession priests in the Yoruba context has been 'reinterpreted' as the sanctioning of 'gay' (bicha, adé) men as possession priests in Brazilian Candomblé. Though Matory has never claimed that Yoruba possession priests were in any way 'homosexual' or 'gay', he has still been attacked by what he calls the 'Protestant Anglophone African bourgeoisies' for inferring same-sex practices into Yoruba-derived religion. The most egregious caricatures of Matory's argument accuse him of describing Yoruba possession priests as 'drag queens'. These scholars, most of them Yoruba, simply mis-read his work. Still, I would argue that their heated responses are much more than thinly-veiled homophobia; they are also a reaction to broader trends in the west to reduce the priesthood and relationships with ancestors to individual same-sex categories that defy African socio-cultural understandings. For the harshest critique of Matory, see Oyronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, 1997), 117. For Matory's response, see *Black Atlantic Religion*, 216–19. For a more recent and explicit summary of this controversy, see Matory, "Is There Gender in Yoruba Culture?" in Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (eds), *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture* (Madison, 2008), 513–58.

<sup>16</sup> I have taken up these topics in some detail elsewhere. See Sweet, 'Male Homosexuality and Spiritism in the African Diaspora: The Legacies of a Link', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1996): 184–202; and Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 50–8.

beyond the seventeenth century. Ironically, by the eighteenth century, denunciations of African transvestites seemed far more concerned with their ritual behaviours than with their gender or sexuality. In 1742, a Brazilian mulatto named José Telles da Silva denounced one of these cross dressers before a Catholic priest at the Franciscan convent in Salvador, Bahia. José testified that he was conducting business in the interior gold mines and was returning to his house in Agua Fria when he decided to camp for the night near a small town called Pao Apique. As he slept in his hammock in the middle of the night, José was awakened by an African man, who turned out to be the slave of a freedman from São Tomé, Gaspar de Andrade. The slave told José that he should come to see his master and that he should not be frightened. Curious, José found Gaspar de Andrade 'dressed as a woman' and on his head he wore 'a turban that seemed to him to be in the style of a [bishop's] mitre'. Andrade spoke in a language that José could not understand. Andrade also levitated above the ground without any apparent assistance. When José asked to whom Andrade was speaking, one of the slaves replied that, 'they were the souls of his ancestors, who came to visit his master and speak to him'. In the midst of Andrade's ritual, one of the ancestral voices spoke directly to José, asking him whether he was a friend. 'With great fear' José replied 'yes'. Then, the voice asked him to come and take a gift from his hand. When José approached Andrade to retrieve the object from his closed hand, he found Andrade's hand icy cold. Using all of his strength to prise open Andrade's fingers, José found a root. According to the ancestral spirit, this root 'was good for having luck in all his business dealings'. José claimed that he discarded the root shortly after leaving the ceremony. He also claimed that he knew everything Gaspar de Andrade did was 'the work of the Devil'; however, he could not flee 'fearing that the slaves would kill him, assuming he would go to tell what he saw'.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of Gaspar de Andrade, it is clear that the Portuguese were far more interested in the 'Devil's' ritual than female gestures and dress. Indeed, José Telles da Silva noted that at the culmination of the rituals, around four o'clock in the morning, Andrade's slaves removed the 'woman's' clothing and he resumed his male gender role. Thus, unlike Vitória or Francisco Manicongo, Andrade's female persona might have only emerged in ritual settings. Nevertheless, there are striking continuities among these three cases. Despite coming from vastly different parts of Africa (Benin, Angola, and São Tomé) across almost 200 years, all three men dressed in roughly the same fashion. Vitória and Francisco each wore skirts, and Gaspar de Andrade probably did too. Vitória and Francisco also wore vests. Finally, Vitória and

<sup>17</sup> ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Cadernos do Promotor, No. 109, Livro 301.



Fig. 1. A seventeenth-century image of a Kimbanda. Image from the *Manoscritti Araldi di Padre Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi*. Reproduced with the kind permission of Sr. M. Araldi

Gaspar de Andrade wore head gear that approximated ‘turbans’. Taken as a composite, these features are remarkably similar to the watercolour painting of an Angolan quimbanda drawn by the seventeenth-century Capuchin missionary, Cavazzi (Fig. 1). In the image, the quimbanda wears a skirt, a vest, and a turban. Perhaps most importantly, Vitória, Francisco, and Gaspar

expressed their female gender personas at least partly through the idiom of healing. This raises intriguing questions about the historical role of gender in African healing, both in Africa and the diaspora. Exactly what was it that made 'feminized' men so susceptible to the spirit world? And how did these ideas about spirit possession proliferate across such radically different social, political, and historical spaces?

Even taking into account differences in ideas about healing across Africa, it seems clear that many African peoples were unified in the idea of the spiritual power of men who expressed female identities.<sup>18</sup> That these ideas and attitudes still linger today is a testament to their tenacity, even outside of the geographic areas discussed here. In Zimbabwe, the current president has labelled homosexuals 'worse than dogs and pigs.' Sidestepping the question of sexuality, transvested men respond that, 'Africans can accept a feminine man. They believe that a spirit medium might get into you. But when it comes to sex, it becomes confusing'.<sup>19</sup> This insight, along with the data from Yorubaland, suggests that only with the spread of Western, Christian ideas about gender 'norms' and their connection to (hetero)sexual morality did 'feminine' men come to be understood by Africans as 'deviant' and 'immoral'. Until the colonial period, male effeminacy and its associated gestures were rendered primarily as spiritual categories; not sexual ones. This is not to say that all effeminate men were healers. Rather, it is to say that effeminate men were understood to have this capacity. Effeminacy was a signal from the ancestors of a man's penetrability as a spirit medium and his potential as a healer.

Across Africa, the absorption of effeminate men into social categories related to spirit possession and healing has had a profound impact on the way 'homosexuality' has been rendered historically. Some early European scholars like Edward Gibbon claimed that Africans did not engage in the 'moral pestilence' of 'pederasty'.<sup>20</sup> Even as late as the 1880s, Richard Burton placed sub-Saharan Africa outside the boundaries of the 'Sotadic Zone', those regions of the world where same-sex behaviours were said to

<sup>18</sup> Beyond those discussed here, see another example of spiritually powerful, effeminate men in Kenya. For a description of the social and political importance of these *mugawe*, see Rodney Needham, 'The Left Hand of the Mugwe: An Analytical Note on the Structure of Meru Symbolism', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 30 (1960), 20–33.

<sup>19</sup> Donald G. McNeil, 'For Gay Zimbabweans, a Difficult Political Climate', *New York Times* (September 10, 1995), A3.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (1776–1788; London, 1929), IV, 537, n. 205.

be most prevalent.<sup>21</sup> In each of these instances, Europeans attempted to classify and categorize African same-sex behaviours where those behaviours did not exist as separate categories. They could not find ‘pederasts’ or ‘sodomites’ in Africa, because these conceptual fields were simply unknown. Only with the emergence of colonialism did Africans come up with new language to reflect European ideas about same-sex deviancy and perversion. As Marc Epprecht has noted, ‘many regional languages now contain borrowed words that denote ‘copulation between male persons’. Local idioms also reflect the changing nature of masculine sexuality over the course of the colonial era’,<sup>22</sup>

The violence of these linguistic and conceptual transformations was profound. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the invention of the ‘homosexual’ body emerged from the very same scientific racism that justified African inferiority and colonialism. In this way, ‘categories of race and sexuality were not only historically coincident but in fact structurally interdependent and perhaps mutually productive’.<sup>23</sup> In Africa, the introduction of ‘homosexuality’ as a discrete category during the colonial period tore male transvestism and effeminate gesture from their socio-cultural moorings. Where effeminate men were once defined primarily by their potential to intercede with powerful deceased ancestors, they were now seen merely as ‘pederasts’. The ‘pederast’ was not an integral part of a community or ancestral lineage; on the contrary, he was an individualized, biological deviant. Here, it is important to note that European pseudo science cohered, to some extent, with African understandings of colonial ruptures. The European idea of ‘homosexuality’ emerged in Africa out of colonial conditions that thoroughly interrupted village life and old ideas about kinship and ancestors. Forced labour, urban migration, and mining camps were all contributors

<sup>21</sup> Richard F. Burton (ed.), *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night: With Introduction Explanatory Notes on the Manners and Customs of Moslem Men and a Terminal Essay upon the History of the Nights* (London, 1885), X, 205–54.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Epprecht, “‘Good God Almighty, What’s This!’: Homosexual “Crime” in Early Colonial Zimbabwe”, in Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (eds), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* (New York, 1998), 197–221, quotation at 197–8. On the absence of terms to describe homosexuality in African languages, also see Armand Corre, who explains ‘In the Wolof language, the expression to designate [pederasts] is of recent origin, and no word exists in the majority of African languages’: *L’ethnographie criminelle d’après les observations et les statistiques judiciaires recueillies dans les colonies françaises* (Paris, 1894), 80, n. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Siobhan Somerville, ‘Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5 (1994), 243–66, quotation at 246.

to communal attrition and the impetus for these new ‘homosexual’ relationships. Same-sex behaviours existed in the pre-colonial period; however, the social structures that accommodated effeminate gesture and behaviour faded with the breakdown of kin networks and communities. Effeminate men who engaged in anonymous same-sex practices in cities or mining camps were no longer attached to a specific community and its ancestors. Thus, they became a dangerous and powerful representation of colonialism. Economic exploitation and social depravity were grafted onto one another as overlapping features of colonialism. It is no wonder that people like the Basotho referred to the South African mining boomtown of Kimberley as ‘Sotoma’ (Sodom).<sup>24</sup> In this way, ‘homosexuality’ expressed just one of the corrosive impacts of colonialism on community social structures.

Colonial subjects sometimes contested European efforts to define effeminate, transvested men as biologically degenerate, particularly in rural areas where ideas about kinship and healing remained more durable. In rural Zimbabwe in 1927, a father defended his adult son’s cross dressing, noting that ‘I have never noticed anything peculiar about [the accused]. I have always thought him sound in his mind . . . . At the kraal Accd used always to dress in female clothes. He has always worked as a nurse. He associated mostly with girls at the kraal. My son has been wearing dresses ever since he was a baby . . . . I have never thought him mentally affected’.<sup>25</sup> Within the rural kraal, cross dressing was still well understood, but beyond these communal spaces, male effeminacy had become detached from structures of kinship, lineage, and healing. Outside the purview of kin and ancestors—in urban settings or mining camps, for instance—effeminate men were as deviant and degenerate for Africans as they were for Europeans, although for different reasons. As the impacts of colonialism became more entrenched and thoroughgoing, African ways of understanding male effeminacy slowly eroded and were largely forgotten in some places. Atomized, natally alienated ‘homosexuals’ were simply one symptom of the broader violence and depravity of European colonialism. As such, ‘homosexuality’ was seen as ‘un-African’, a degenerate practice introduced by Europeans as a product of colonialism.

Contemporary African leaders continue to claim that ‘homosexuality’ was historically absent from Africa and only imported with the arrival of Europeans. Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Daniel arap Moi (Kenya), Winnie Mandela (South Africa), and Samuel Nujoma (Namibia) are among a chorus of African leaders who virulently

<sup>24</sup> David B. Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The Word Music of South Africa’s Basotho Migrants* (Chicago, 1994), 68.

<sup>25</sup> Epprecht, ‘Good God Almighty’, 201.

denounce homosexuality as un-African. These statements have provoked the collective ire of Western intellectuals and gay rights activists, many of whom have gone to great lengths to demonstrate that same-sex practices existed in Africa during the pre-colonial period.<sup>26</sup> It is no small irony that the very Westerners who first attacked African ‘sodomites’ in the sixteenth-century Portuguese Atlantic, and then introduced the idea of degenerate ‘homosexuality’ to Africa in the early twentieth century, have now tasked themselves with restoring the historical importance of African same-sex practices. There is a striking imperialism in all of these Western endeavours, despite the enlightened, progressive veneer that always seems to justify them. The west’s obsession with individual sexual habits has moved from religious concerns (sodomy), to scientific concerns (homosexuality), to political concerns (gay/queer), all the while obscuring the social imperatives that have informed gender identities in Africa across history. This systematic erasure of African interpretations of bodily self-presentation privileges a politics of power embedded in western epistemologies. Meanwhile, in those parts of Africa where categories of kinship, lineage, and healing still take precedence over individual proclivities, gender identities and their associated sexual practices remain subsumed beneath broader social structures. In addition to the flexible gender categories evident in some forms of spirit possession, marriage and kinship structures also defy western gender norms in some parts of Africa. Hence, the existence of boy wives, female husbands, and male daughters.<sup>27</sup> To reduce these social complexities of kinship and community to questions of individual sexual practice is truly as ‘un-African’ as one can possibly imagine.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Wayne R. Dynes, ‘Homosexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Unnecessary Controversy,’ *Gay Books Bulletin*, 9 (1983), 20–1; Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male to Male Sexual Behavior Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750–1918* (New York, 1995); Murray and Roscoe (eds), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands*. I include my own earlier work in this category. See Sweet, ‘Male Homosexuality and Spiritism’.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., the work of Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (Atlantic Highlands, 1987) and Murray and Roscoe (eds), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands*. Though the Murray and Roscoe book demonstrates a range of kinship practices in Africa, the contributors seem more concerned with identifying ‘homosexual’ practices than placing these practices in their appropriate social contexts.

<sup>28</sup> The Western obsession with African sexual practices also obscures historical violence and inequalities that are crucial to understanding the present crisis with HIV/AIDS. See, for instance, Didier Fassin, *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa* (Berkeley, 2007).

This is not to endorse the intolerant attitudes of contemporary African leaders, whose ideas are informed by some of the very colonial and western attitudes they purport to reject. In one of the most common and contradictory refrains, African leaders claim that homosexuality is both un-African AND against Biblical teachings.<sup>29</sup> Yet, even as African leaders reify western and Christian homophobia, they also gesture toward the histories and everyday realities of the subaltern majority when they reject homosexuality as a relevant African category. From a strictly epistemological perspective, Europeans imposed their obsessions with gender and sexual 'norms' onto colonial spaces in the guise of rigid, seemingly scientific (biological), categories like 'homosexual'. That homosexuality is no longer a category of scientific degeneracy in the west does not undo the damage that the imposition of the category wrought in Africa in the first place. To this day, the subject of 'homosexuality' remains largely silenced in Africa, except when invoked by western activists, scholars, and a handful of gay rights groups inspired by western models.<sup>30</sup> The majority of Africans are not 'hiding' or 'denying' the same-sex practices in their societies, as some observers claim.<sup>31</sup> The fact is that

<sup>29</sup> During a speech at an agricultural show in 1999, Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi stated that homosexuality was 'against African tradition and Biblical teachings'. During the same year, Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni said, 'The Holy Bible spells it out clearly that God created Adam and Eve as wife and husband, but not men to marry men'. Chris McGreal, 'Debt? War? Gays are the real evil, say African leaders,' *The Guardian* (UK) (2 October 1999): (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/oct/02/chrismcgreal>). These statements echo more recent ones by Africa's Anglican clergy, particularly Archbishop of Abuja, Peter Akinola, who has written that 'homosexuality or lesbianism . . . is to us a form of slavery, and redemption from it is readily available through repentance and faith in the saving grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ'. Peter Akinola, 'Why I object to Homosexuality and Same-sex Unions', available at the Anglican Church Nigeria's web site: ([http://www.anglican-nig.org/Pri\\_obj\\_Homo.htm](http://www.anglican-nig.org/Pri_obj_Homo.htm)).

<sup>30</sup> Not coincidentally, the most vocal of these organizations, Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), emerged in the country where homosexuality is most severely repressed.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., the preface to Murray and Roscoe (eds), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands*, xi–xxii. The idea that sex and sexual practices are intentionally hidden in Africa can also be detected in themes of scholarly conferences, like the 'Sex and Secrecy Conference' held at WITS University in Johannesburg in 2003. While there is much to be gained by putting the topics of sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, and gay rights into the public realm for discussion, scholars simply take for granted that 'sex' is the primary prism through which these problems are (or should be) addressed.

in many places, 'homosexuality' still does not register as an African social reality. Rather, same-sex practices remain subsumed beneath idioms of gender, kinship, and healing.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, although the political dynamics have changed somewhat, the gestures of gender and sexuality are still (mis)read similarly today as they were 450 years ago. When African leaders reject 'homosexuals', they reject a European typology that is alien to many Africans, including those who engage in same-sex practices. Like their leaders, many Africans view 'homosexuality' as a colonial creation. This does not excuse the inherent intolerance of same-sex practices, but it does shine a different light on the audience and political meaning of such gestures. Just as Antônio/Vitória from Benin insisted that she was a woman 'like many others in her land who were born' this way, many Africans today continue to embrace a range of gender and kinship identities that sidestep explicit questions related to sex. Meanwhile, westerners see only individual sexual behaviours in a wide range of African gender and kinship practices. Ultimately, the western assumption that Africans should assert their identities as individual, (homo)sexual ones is a form of discursive violence, not all that far removed from the earlier persecutions of 'sodomites' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This reduction of gender and kinship imperatives to individual sexual acts is simply old wine in new bottles. Perhaps it is time to see African systems of

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Brian MacDermot's work among the Ethiopian Nuer in the 1960s. According to MacDermot, the Nuer denied that homosexuality existed among them and claimed that it was punishable by death. Yet, after some time, MacDermot learned that there was a man who dressed as a woman, performed women's chores, and even married a man. Confused by this contradiction, MacDermot learned that the spirits endorsed the man's claims that he 'had actually become a woman'. In the view of the Nuer, the fact that the man was actually a woman meant that he could not possibly be a 'homosexual'. MacDermot, *The Cult of the Sacred Spear: The Story of the Nuer Tribe of Ethiopia* (London, 1972), 119. Similarly, in South Africa in the early 1990s, same-sex partners took the roles of husband and wife; some of the couples even believed that the 'wife' might become pregnant. See Neil Miller, *Out in the World* (New York, 1992), 14–17. Meanwhile, a black gay activist claimed that 'in the black community, people don't know what gay is'. Simon Nkoli, 'This Strange Feeling', in *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa*, eds. Matthew Krouse and Kim Berman (Johannesburg, 1993), 22. More recently, on the continuing salience of healers, see Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid, "'I've got two men and one woman": Ancestors, Sexuality and Identity Among Same-Sex Identified Women Traditional Healers in South Africa', *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 5 (2003), 375–91.

knowledge on their own terms rather than in need of western re-definition and redemption. Imposing western forms of 'enlightenment' and 'tolerance' may, in fact, inadvertently create new forms of intolerance. At the very least, by recognizing the ways that particular gestures and bodily representation resonate differently, we can better understand our misunderstandings.