Towards a Theology of Disruption: a Critique of Heteronormativity in post-Colonial African Consciousness

Rumo a uma teologia da ruptura: uma crítica à heteronormatividade na consciência africana pós-colonial

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Abstract

Contemporary Africa struggles to make sense of its own rich heritage-due to the colonial traumas it faces. These traumas have held Africa's collective imagination captive and thus produced a form of politics of memory that makes Africa unable to reclaim its pre-colonial past. In Africa's precolonial past, lies a rich expression of queerness and its link to the fecundity of life in which all beings participate. A failure to retrieve this heritage has led to many Africans believing that queerness is fundamentally alien to the African way of life. It ought to be noted that this attitude, on the part of Africans, is linked to colonialism itself. It is the very nature of colonialism to erase a people's memory of self and to usher in new matrices for meaning-making and even value systems. This work intentionally **claims** that Africa ought to embrace a decolonial approach to reclaiming its pre-colonial heritage, and to foster a theology of acceptance of Africa's gay and queer members.

Keywords: African consciousness. Coloniality. Epikeia. Politics of memory. Queerness in Africa. Theology of disruption.

Resumo

A África contemporânea luta para compreender a sua própria rica herança devido aos traumas coloniais que enfrenta. Estes traumas mantiveram cativa a imaginação coletiva africana e, assim, produziram uma forma de política da memória que torna a África incapaz de recuperar o seu passado pré-colonial. Em seu passado pré-colonial, encontra-se uma rica expressão da diversidade sexual e sua ligação com a fecundidade da vida, na qual todos os seres participam. A incapacidade de recuperar essa herança levou muitos africanos a acreditar que a diversidade sexual é fundamentalmente estranha ao modo de vida africano. Deve-se notar que essa atitude, por parte dos africanos, está ligada ao próprio colonialismo. É da própria natureza do colonialismo apagar a memória de um povo e introduzir novas matrizes para a construção de significado e até mesmo sistemas de valores. Este trabalho defende intencionalmente que a África deve adotar uma abordagem descolonial para recuperar sua herança pré-colonial e promover uma teologia de aceitação dos membros gays e queer da África.

Palavras-chave: Consciência Africana. Colonialidade. Epiquéia. Política da memória. Diversidade sexual na África. Teologia da ruptura.

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Introduction

Post-colonial Africa experiences social, cultural, and anthropological negations on many fronts. Such negations are couched in the idea that an African sense of cultural memory, religious heritage, and moral accurateness **demands** a certain way of being in the world. When difference is encountered with such a positionality of mind, such difference is quickly moralized and reduced to the domain of the abnormal. When the reality of queerness is encountered, cognitive dissonance immediately defines how such reality is understood. On **the** one hand, African socio-cultural worldview is grounded in a rich understanding of abundant life for all. All is understood to be radically inclusive of all beings, animate and inanimate. In fact, it is radically cosmo-spiritual. Wangari Maathai calls attention to this point when she writes:

> Nature is not something set apart, with or against which we react. It's not a place we fear as something within which we might lose our humanity or, conversely, a place where we might gain perspective and simplicity away from the corruption and treachery of the court or the city. It is, instead, something within which human beings are enfolded (Maathai, 2010, p. 94).

Reflecting on Maathai's insights, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator further validates the claim of Africa's worldview on the cosmo-spiritual connection to life, he notes the following:

> This understanding of ecology, both human and environmental, resonates with a uniquely African spirituality and approach to creation in which creation acquires a sacramental dimension as a text inscribed all over with the actions of a God who triumphs over death to save both humanity and the cosmos. ... this spirituality and ethical imperative of reverence for nature, whether human or environmental, contains a powerful reminder that the duty to protect and preserve 'environmental ecology' and 'human ecology' originates from their constitution 'not only by matter but also by spirit' ... something an animist would clearly understand and celebrate (Orobator, 2018, p.119).

On the other hand, **a** cognitive crisis arises when such a phenomenon is given meaning based on contemporary collective memory of human sexual and embodied expressions. One simply hears the following statements used to invalidate such encounters with queerness; 'it is un-African.' 'There are no gays or queers in Africa. What we see today is an attempt by westerners to corrupt the moral heritage of African societies.' Not much attempt is given to dig into the rich

precolonial realities defining African pragmatic approaches to embodiment as it pertains to queerness, gender performativity, and sexual expressions. Perhaps, one may conclude that there is a form of cognitive slot defining how contemporary African societies probe into their socio-cultural pasts. It cannot be said that this is accidental. Rather, it is the natural outcome of the colonial trauma on the African collective psyches that instantiated what I have described in another work of mine as coloniality of imagination. How does this type of coloniality operate?

> Coloniality of imagination operates by creating in the subject an erasure of memories of the past that do not meet the logic of the new realities being experienced by the subject. After all, colonialism has legitimacy by always negating the histories, cultures, social systems, and economies of the people being colonised. The coloniser has a legitimacy in the places traditionally occupied by the colonised only by showing how the colonised is existentially dependent on the benevolence of the colonizer (Negedu; Aihiokhai, 2022, p. 104)

By holding the imagination captive so that it is unable to tap into the rich past of Africa's cultural heritage, coloniality of knowledge is thus given validity. Hence, coloniality of knowledge finalizes the "erasure of African consciousness and praxis of knowledge production to allow for that of Europe to claim legitimacy within the African psyche" (Aihiokhai 2024). It produces a monologue that is linear rather than the rich polyphonic heritage of the African world. Hence, the denial of queerness in African post-colonial memories is in sync with the European cultural imposition of heterenormativity in the African colonial world (Nyeck, 2020, p. 365).

Furthermore, the negation of queerness in contemporary African imagination is legitimized by a rigid appeal to religion. A literal theological anthropology is appropriated to validate its own rigid cultural anthropological visions. In post-colonial times, a structural system of negation has been embraced; one that involves the use of state power to suppress queerness in African societies while also using state power to promote heteronormativity as the norm for building the nation-state collective identity. This system blurs the lines between culture and religion. In fact, state power immediately assumes the positionality of being a tool for promoting collective Africanness within a particular nation-state that allows for religion to become a partner in its use of

force to control those whom it considers existing at the peripheries of heteronormative society. When violence is done to such persons or groups, it is seen as an act of necessity ordained by God. The state is thus the enforcer of the moral code articulated by the religious tradition (Barga, 2023; Falola, 1999; Vaughan, 2016, p. 127-128).

How then can one undo these attacks on the richness of African anthropological consciousness to allow for those who are pushed to the peripheries of African societies to regain a sense of belonging and abundant life? To address this question, this work will make the case that an embrace of a theology of disruption ought to be a logical response. A theology of disruption is a decolonial theology. It operates and locates itself within the domain of retrieval of suppressed memories while also being constructive of a new world where all peripheries will become centers of life for all, and the boundaries of negation become irrelevant and illegitimate if abundant life is to be experienced by all. In a work focused on the phenomenon of disruption, Frédéric Godart and Luca Pistilli attempt to offer a systematic presentation of how this phenomenon is addressed in several disciplines. In their work, they offer four categories that define how this plays out: "technological, business model, regulatory, and social movements" (Godart; Pistilli, 2024). They also note the following, that the phenomenon of disruption attempts to stress two polarities – "whether a disruption is 'constraining' vs. 'unconstraining', and whether it has an insider-driven vs. outsider-driven origin (Godart; Pistilli, 2024). A theology of disruption, points to an awakening, a consciousness that orients one to a world that is beyond, but which instantiates itself within the nowness experience. What do I mean by this? What one awakens to, though may have been there before one has the experience, the content of consciousness that one is exposed to, is something that evokes in one a turn to encounter. In this context, it is an encounter with Africa's forgotten past, where lays its praxis of queerness. This encounter plays out in the continuum of experience that makes one to grow in awareness. One does not know the content itself as though it was in a moment. It is in that continuum which encounter evokes that one becomes more aware of what has been awakened to. Hence, an awakening to Africa's rich cultural heritage allows for contemporary Africans to embrace and appreciate who they are as a people

who are linked to an ancestral wisdom that validated queerness as a way of being in the world. However, this awakening to the forgotten offers Africans the opportunity to respond to their colonial heritage by asking questions that are intended to help them to make sense of that which is being encountered – their rich cultural heritage.

The following movements will occur in this work; first, a critique of the colonial and post-colonial agenda of creating a monolithic consciousness that allows for control of the collective imagination of a people, in this case, Africans themselves, will be explored. Second, a deliberate attempt will be made to shed light on the resistance and the reclaiming of their lost agencies in shared spaces by members of the queer communities in the continent. This will lead to the third movement; one that deliberately centers a decolonial approach to articulating a theology of disruption as the needed way for contemporary African societies that will become both a prophetic and pastoral guide of acceptance of queerness in African consciousness and a rejection of heteronormative biases on being a sexualized human person.

1 Decolonizing African Socio-Cultural and Historical Imagination

A sense of self is never complete unless it is rooted in a rich memory of the past on which one's historicity finds its root. It is also incomplete unless the imagination is able to **wander** into a future that is unfolding. This fact can also be applied to a society, and a people. An African sense of self can correctly be said to be suffering from what Engelbeth Mveng calls "anthropological poverty" (Mveng, 1994, p. 156; Stewart, 2005, p. 5). Such **a** form of poverty limits a people's ability to connect to their rich historical past, whether in the domain of knowledge production, anthropological expressions, language, culture, and even the imaginative abilities that need to be rooted in the past, while looking into the unfolding future. This fragmentation of the collective and individual psyche of Africans that produces an anemia of a sense of history is deeply rooted in the matrix of colonialism. In fact, colonialism produces not just an anemia of memory, it also produces a form of collective humanity that is intended to be at the service of the colonizer. It is a collective humanity that is deeply rooted in a positionality of servitude and self-negation. Such a humanity thinks and speaks

of history only from the locus of linearity and it is unable to hold in place the complexities defining a healthy historicity. In fact, at the core of the vision of the human that colonialism produced in Africa is a preference **for** a form of simplicity that is injurious to the psyche of both the individual and communal. Such injurious simplicity defined the new reality of nation-states in Africa (John Reader, 1999, p. 609-610). This is because "the colonial enterprise is a memory enterprise and that colonialism, among other things, is an attempt at wiping out a people's memory" (Adebayo, 2023). Africa was forced to abandon the rainbow tapestry of political institutions, languages, cultures, ways of thinking and knowledge production, and ways of expressing gender and sexual identities. The colonized **Africans** living in the colonial vision of society is meant to embody injurious linearities all the way. To turn to the complex is to become an enemy of the grand agenda created for the **Africans** by the benefactors and perpetrators of colonialism. The uncritical engagement with the colonial heritage by African intellectuals, as noted by Edward W. Said, "reproduces the pattern of an earlier imperialist history," one that instantiates forgetfulness of Africa's rich heritage, while validating an anemic linear past that grounds history at the feet of the colonizers as they entered the geopolitical world that is called Africa (Said, 1993, p. 39).

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o calls attention to this anthropological poverty that defines the African colonized psyche when he posits the two hermeneutic movements inherent in any language: "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 13). The power of language is that it is the medium for conveying our human experiences and the experiences of the realities that define the world our human bodies occupy. To dislocate a people from their shared linguistic heritage so that they can be given a language that itself is an alien tool for conveying their basic human experiences, be they their sense of self, their sense of memory, their sense of the world around them, and so on, is to legitimize a fractured and incomplete way of being human in the world. Nothing can be so dehumanizing as to delegitimize a medium for conveying human experiences. This fact is more relevant when one understands that human experiences are themselves concretized and discussed within the matrix of realities defining a

particular context. In other words, to be an embodied human is to be human within concrete contexts. Language is thus a validation of such a context. To thus speak a language is to bring forth and recognize the realities defining such a context. For Africans, the fact that they are today victims of the colonial agenda that produces a deformed sense of self, the embrace of languages that are alien to their own **historicity** will definitely produce an anthropological poverty, because colonialism is itself intended to produce that which is always deficient – economic deficiencies, political deficiencies, linguistic deficiencies, a lack of aesthetic appreciation, and a surplus production of violence. This fact is clearly articulated by Aimé Césaire when he writes:

> ... no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either, that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment. Colonization: bridgehead in a campaign to civilize barbarism, from which there may emerge at any moment the negation of civilization, pure and simple. (Césaire, 2000, p. 39-40).

A critical engagement with Césaire's insights allows one to observe that the colonizer is himself embodying an anemic vision of the world which thus produces a narcissistic projection of the self onto all that embody otherness. In this case, otherness is embodied in the victim of the narcissistic gaze that the colonizer produces. Thus, when the colonizer states that it is helping to civilize the other through the matrix of colonization, what is truly going on is the destruction of the rich tapestry of culture, language, knowledge, and identities that define the other so that the logic of intrusion into the inhabited world of the other by the colonizer can be maintained. At the end of the day, the colonizer is as anemic as the idol of humanity he has produced in the other. Otherness in the face of the colonizer does not exist. What exists **is** the continuum of the pathologies inherent in the colonizer that is now given a home in the colonized's body, psyche, culture, language, and society.

Achille Mbembe makes a similar point when he notes that the world of the colonizer was one that was saturated with the praxis of violence towards those who have been judged to be criminals, poor, and misfits of society. Consequently, they had to undergo the "process of social excretion" by being made to migrate to

other territories outside of Europe. (Mbembe, 2019, p. 45). Their arrival in the foreign territories created another form of social excretion by way of an unhinged embrace of violence towards the indigenous people being encountered and brought under the umbrella of colonialism. (Mbembe, 2019, p. 45). Consequently, colonialism produces a world of violence that benefits those who perpetuate it.

Again, at the heart of colonialism is the production of fragmentation as a way of being in the world it produces. Such fragmentation affects all aspects of life, whether ecological life, social systems, individual bodies, historicities, cultures, and political systems. Mbembe offers a succinct description of how such fragmentations occur within the matrix of colonialism when he writes:

> Colonizing broadly consisted in a permanent work of separation: on one side, my living body; on the other, all those 'body-things' surrounding it; on one side, my human flesh, through which all those other 'flesh-things' and 'flesh-meats' exist for me. On one side, therefore, is me – fabric per excellence and zero point of worldly orientation – and, on the other, others with whom I can never completely blend; the Others that I can bring to myself but with whom I can ever genuinely entertain relations of reciprocity or mutual implication (Mbembe, 2019, p. 45).

At this stage of this work, it is relevant to pose the following question: What type of memory does colonialism produce and how does such a memory perpetuate a form of being human today in Africa? To address this question, one has to engage the insights of Said. In his work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said explores the idea of how Europeans were unable to free themselves from the imperialist label that also the colonizer has come to identify Europeans by. He offers a nuanced engagement with the pervading view that Europe has become equated with imperialism by showing that there are moments of interruptions in the "codes of European fiction." (Said, 1993, p. 163). Shedding light more on this insight, he argues that "these interruptions of an imperial project are realistic reminders that no one can in fact withdraw from the world into a private version of reality." (Said, 1993, p. 163). Why is this the case? For Said, the imperialism of Europe and its ability to set the rules of public discourse and the sense of history makes it impossible for one to live outside of such a matrix because the logic of being in the world of imperialism demands that even the disrupter be quarried and the hermeneutics of disruption be given meaning, one that ends up validating

the grand agenda of imperialism. (Said, 1993, p. 163-166). What is most notable about the world created by and for imperialism is that the very structure of the narration that imperialism produces never allows for a rich engagement with the content and complexities surrounding memory that narration gives voice to. Since there is no escape from the matrix of imperialism, even when disruptions occur, all memories become fragmented memories and do not reveal the fullness of creative ways of being in the world. Unfortunately, both the colonizer and the colonized are held captive by such a phenomenon.

In the context of Africa, colonialism disrupts the transference of the content of memory because of the fact that the colonial matrix is intended to delegitimize all that is African, including the concrete reality of African embodiment. Colonialism is the bedfellow of imperialism because they both are intended to exploit, control, and subjugate their victims. Africa is the victim and thus falls under the matrix of exploitation, control, and subjugation of the land, its people, religions, worldviews, philosophies, and all that makes the continent a place that can be called home by its people. A closer look at the sense of self by the colonized African reveals a form of subjectivity that strips away nuances of identity markers, be they memories, notions of embodiment, and the ability to be creative in advancing what has already been embraced by Africans themselves. The fact that European imperialism produces a false narrative of Africa that is inherently subjugating and less human forces Africans themselves to fall in line with the logic of the discourse. One may wonder, why and how is this possible without the African resistance? To respond to this question, one has to reflect on what Said and Wa Thong'o have articulated on the politics of narration that imperialism and colonialism have produced (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 13; Said, 1993, p. 163). The fact that a sense of being a civilized people meant that Africans ought to embrace the European vision of civilization through the cohesion of the barrel of the gun; the ideology of race that makes the European more human that Africans; the agenda of coloniality of knowledge that speaks of true and false knowledge production, where the European is always the determiner of what is considered true or false knowledge; and the imprisonment of the imagination that makes the colonized imagination to produce narratives and visions of the world that are self-erasing make it impossible for the colonized African to see

herself as a holistic being who embodies the complexities of all that makes one human. Unfortunately, the controlled narrative structure that imperialism produces favors a particular type of being human in the world, one that has a bias for heteronormativity. African societies that had linguistic structures that embodied fluidity of gender identity markers became rigid and no longer performative.

As aptly described by Albert Memmi, "Far from wanting to understand him [the colonized] as he really is, the colonizer is preoccupied with making him undergo this urgent change. The mechanism of this remolding of the colonized is revealing in itself. It consists, in the first place of a series of negations. The colonized is not this, is not that. He is never considered in a positive light, or if he is, the quality which is conceded is the result of a psychological or ethical thing. ..." (Memmi, 1967, p. 83-84; Kaunda, 2015). By denying Africans of their past, the African body is stripped of its many tangential expressions of histories. It is a being without a locus, a worldview, historical memories of the past, a rich instantiation of its cultural memories that play out in the present and thus cannot journey into the horizon of the future. To address these, a theology of disruption grounds the African body as a body of histories, one that can lay claim to the fruits of its encounters with its ancestors who mediate encounters with the divine through the embrace and praxis of queerness.

If one were to ask what the colonized African must address today as a result of the fragmentation of memory that colonialism and ongoing imperialism have produced is a deliberate attempt to free herself from the unhealthy marriage between knowledge of the self as an embodied sexualized human whose embodiment is radically defined by nuanced complexities, including its sexuality, and neocolonialism that is couched in capitalism. As cleverly noted by such scholar as Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, while reading closely the work of Eugene McCarraher, "the new world that capitalism created [in Africa, this new world was brought about through colonialism] is characterized not by disenchantment but by a 'migration of the holy' to the realm of production and consumption, profit and price, trade and economic tribulation. Capitalism, in other words, *is* the new religion, a system full of enchanted superstitions and unfounded beliefs and

beholden to its own clerisy of economists and managers, its own iconography of advertising and public relations, and its own political theology – a view of history and politics that is premised on the inevitability of the capitalist system spreading across the world. (Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2019; McCarraher, 2019)[1]. Capitalism is itself counter wisdom. At its very roots and throughout its historical posturing, it has always been deeply rooted in exploitation of the other, be it, human, environment, narratives, and so on. The being that capitalism otherizes can never stand in its truth to speak and encounter the capitalist ideologue as an equal. Equality is never honored. It is a threat to be liquidated. Capitalism operates by producing hierarchies of being human in such a manner that the full humanity resides in the heteronormative human. In its historical control of the world it produces, such a human being is racialized and it is the white heterosexual man and woman that embodies its fully its vision of the human. All other humans who do not have the same markers as the idols of the human that capitalism produces must be judged according to the matrix and logic that capitalism upholds. In this case, the fluidly sexualized human of history, especially in the African context, does not stand a chance in being an equal. To be accepted into the circle of hierarchy of humanity, one has to embrace the calcified sexualized and racialized way of being human in the capitalist world. Also, such a way of being in the world is maintained by the logic of ignorance, especially by the fragmented memory that colonialism produces. When one does not remember the past, then, one can easily embrace an ideological narrative of the past that erases the rich history that is coded in the embodied self. Such a biased historicity produces a dislocation of a people from their authentic roots. Sadly enough, when a people embrace such a jaundiced historical consciousness without critiquing it, they become perpetrators and producers of the logic and narrative of erasure. In fact, they become custodians of the very system that was intended to diminish them, whether as historical beings, as Africans, or as sexualized persons who embody a fluid and performative expression of their gendered and sexualized reality. Bell Hooks speaks to this point clearly when she writes on the internalized racism that has shaped some African Americans in the way they relate to poor European Americans (Bell Hooks, 2009, p. 54). Due to the jaundiced nature of the historical

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[1] The words in parenthesis are those of the author of this work.

consciousness that colonialism produces, its victims are stripped of the ability to hold in place the nuanced and complex nature of the past. Everything is looked at through a narrow prism and generalizations become the norm all the way.

Before European colonial venture into Africa, knowledge was produced as a form of aesthetics (beauty). The wise ones of society told stories and held the imagination of the young captive. Wisdom and knowledge production were never gendered. They were humanized and ensured that the fullness of life was experienced by all. The trauma of dislocation of values is the intended crisis that the colonialist created when the so-called explorers first ventured into the continent of Africa. Though, driven by curiosity to see the African world, they were also victims and agents of a crisis brewing up in Europe. If I dare to say what that crisis was: It was a crisis that came out of the desire to come out of Europe's Dark Ages; that saw a continent devoid of the ability to feed its own people after experiencing the catastrophe of the Bubonic Plague and radical development of technology that included inventions of the navigational system to travel outside of Europe to seek relevant materials for its economic and social development (Campbell, 2008). The era of the so-called discovery was an epoch defined by the survival instinct due to the fact that there was **a** struggle between the land owners and their fiefs for the right to define their economic realities outside of the rigid structure of feudalism that was falling apart as a result of the many lives lost to the Plague (Campbell, 2008). That memory, rooted in the DNA of the European subject, never left its mind as it embraced wealth ushered in, first by the Renaissance Era, characterized by a consciousness of the beautiful (aesthetics), and later solidified by the skepticism of the Enlightenment Era; a skepticism that saw the birth and validation of all things European, and a reduction to a subliminal state of being of all that is NOT. It is these European colonizers, shaped by multiple layers of epochal traumas, that came on the ships to Africa to proclaim a type of Christianity and a vision of society and culture that were already in crisis – the denial of the rich understanding of the human person and what consists cosmological relationships, and the understanding of the sacred outside of the boundaries of Christianity. No escape could have been possible for the European mind when the starting point was skepticism of the other and an infallible acceptance of itself as the custodian of all that is true.

How can **Africans** produce knowledge that is considered knowledge when the very discourses of what knowledge is serves the very agenda of colonial capitalism? How can the African critique religion that it has come to know today, when that religiosity was intended primarily as a tool for subjugation? How can the African value knowledge as aesthetic flourishing, when flourishing has been reimagined for it as primarily a capitalist venture? I refer to the African as an 'it', not even in the capital case, because the African subject created by the colonial capitalist project by the European agent is never to be recognized as a being that can emerge from behind the veil of Maya, where subjective complexities of all things human are reduced to the illusion of a footnote - barbarian, lazy, violent, fetish, and so on. As Douglas Berger rightly notes, "Epistemologically, *maya* entails an erroneous perception of things and a fallacious assessment of their nature; axiologically, it is the inauthentic valuation of world and other; metaphysically, it is the mere phenomenal appearance of noumenal reality; and ethically, it leads to an unjustifiable alienation of other from self" (Berger, 2004, p. 63). Thus, the finished product of the colonial capitalist is a creature with one telos – to feed the curiosity of the European mind. Anything else is outside the rules of the game and there are consequences for that.

Did the Africans of the 16th century understand any of these when they encountered the European missionaries and traders? I do not think so. The constant and systematic denial of their originality by the European subject led to a split in the sense of self by the African. Gunpowder in the form of hard power, along with religion, the ever-effective soft power was used to hold **Africans** captive always as a double reduction to nothingness. Where gunpowder held the African body hostage, it was religion that held the mind captive, all in the name of civilizing the African barbarian. After all, **Africans** lived in a continent already defined by the European mind as the Dark Continent. This project of reduction of **Africans** as always other has led to what I see today as a split within the African sense of self, including an ignorant embrace of heteronormativity that denies the rich performative expression of gender and sexuality in African socio-cultural expressions.

An enduring myth holds the discourse on queerness in Africa's history

captive; one that Kamau Muiga describes eloquently:

> Ever since Europe colonized Africa on the back of an imperial propaganda of the "Civilizing Mission," the West has always been seen as an enemy of the customary, a modernizing savior rescuing a reluctant Africa from the jaws of a tribal existence. In this narrative, pre-colonial Africans lived in corporate tribal units characterized by a common language, culture, kinship, hereditary membership and tribal laws enforced through tribal hierarchies of power. Europe then swooped in and disrupted this centuries-old order, actively dismantling African cultural life and forcibly modernizing the continent, making it imperative for Africans today to decolonize themselves by reclaiming and protecting their "original" culture. This narrative is as neat and efficient as it is thoroughly fictional (Muiga, 2019).

Muiga offers an excellent insight into how African cultural memories have been held captive by a narrative intended to perpetuate a way of being in the world that served the **interests** of European colonizers. When African leaders today say that homosexuality is alien to African culture, they speak of a time when African histories were already redacted. Contrary to such a narrative, one observes that even the colonial annals kept by the colonizers themselves reflected a different script on the place of queer expressions in the continent. Even prior to colonial rule in Africa, European explorers noted the practice of homosexuality in such kingdoms like the Kongo in the 1500s (Epprecht, 2010, p. 770).

Queerness was never reduced only to sexual encounters in **the** precolonial African cultural world. As noted in the report by Andrew Battell, "who lived amongst the Imbangala" people "(modern-day Angola) in the 1590s" there were the socio-cultural practice of cross-dressing. Disapproving of this practice, he wrote the following: "They are beastly in their living, for they have men in women's apparel, whom they keepe among their wives ... and of women withces ... [who] use unlawfull lusts betweene themselves in mutuall filthinesse ..." (Epprecht, 2010, p. 770). To understand queerness in precolonial African imagination, along with colonial and contemporary African expressions of gender and sexualized fluidity, one has to study closely African religious traditions, especially the interactions amongst the members of the spirit world and humans themselves. Religious initiation rituals, along with the phenomenon of spirit-possession are saturated with an embrace of queerness. Roberto Strongman has demonstrated in his work, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, how the embrace and expressions of queerness was taken to the Americas by enslaved Africans,

which also served as the basis of such Atlantic Religions like Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou (Strongman, 2019). In my review of the work by Strongman, I note the following:

> As noted by Strongman, the queering of Black bodies within the religious rituals found in these Afro-diasporic religions offers a pathway of escape from the "imposition of a European discourse of identarian interiority onto colonized and enslaved populations" that is intended to make "Black body's representation an empty shell" (4). The body is a locus of encounters, whether of spiritual or temporal realities. Afro-diasporic religions allow for creative imaginations that make possible the possibility of seeing identity not as a rigid construct, but as a medium for effecting relationality and connections. Consequently, sex and gender fluidity go beyond ontological labels. Western discourses on subjectivity are themselves insufficient to explain the depth and complexity of identity as inherently fluid. Gender fluidity points to the recognition of the spiritual world as one radically connected to the material world. Hence, deities transgress rigid notions of gender and sex through the rituals of possession of the bodies of their adherents, even when those adherents have a different gender from those of the deities (Aihiokhai, 2022, p. 1).

Christianity's bias against queerness, especially within the religio-cultural praxis of Christianity in European societies led to the delegitimization of queerness and all its expressions in societies that Europeans encountered outside of Europe. To ensure that the moral principles advocated by their reading and practice of Christianity became the norm of the cultures and peoples they colonized and evangelized, the hegemonic use of colonial power was put in place. As noted by Human Rights Watch in the case of the British policies in its colonies:

> Colonial legislators and jurists introduced such laws, with no debates or 'cultural consultations', to support colonial control. They believed laws could inculcate European morality into resistant masses. They brought in the legislation, in fact, because they thought 'native' cultures did not punish 'perverse' sex enough. The colonised needed compulsory re-education in sexual mores. Imperial rulers held that, as long as they sweltered through the promiscuous proximities of settler societies, 'native' viciousness and 'white' virtue had to be segregated: the latter praised and protected, the former policed and kept subjected (Gupta, 2013, p. 86).

The paranoid abhorrence of queerness in the cultures and societies being encountered by colonial agents the "European codifiers ... to correct and Christianise 'native' custom. Yet there was also the need to protect the Christians from corruption. Historians have documented how British officials feared that soldiers and colonial administrators – particularly those without wives at hand – would turn to sodomy in these decadent, hot surroundings. Lord Elgin, viceroy of

India, warned that British military camps could become 'replicas of Sodom and Gomorrah' as soldiers acquired the 'special Oriental vices'" (Gupta, 2013, p. 94). Africa's heritage of colonial homophobia is rooted in British rejection of queerness in India's cultural and societal practices (Gupta, 2013, p. 97). When state power and religious beliefs join forces to condemn queerness in the history of Africa's colonial interactions with Europe, it is not surprising that **the** erasure of queerness in the cultural markers of Africa will become the norm. This is not just incorrect; it is also the product of a redacted history and a fragmented memory of the rich African cultural heritage.

Knowing all these is an existential burden one must endure as an African. Perhaps, some of us have come too early to witness and speak some truths that may need to be spoken in another era. Like Friedrich Nietzsche's "Madman," the identity of madness cannot be erased for it is through such phenomenon that the Madman sees the inconsistencies defining the so-called logic of Great Prussia. While Prussia embodied the very ideals of the vision of the European colonial capitalist, Prussia was already a phenomenon defined by endless paradoxes. The Madman left the mausoleum of the Divine proclaiming to an era yet to be born but already in the womb of human civilization - "Where is God? You have killed God. God is Dead." (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 181-182). The Madman reminds me of Anyi Kwei Armah's work; *The Beautiful Ones Are no Tet Born* (Armah, 1989). Have Africans come to the realization that the colonial trauma they experience today that denies them the ability to reconnect with their rich sense of self as a people who embrace a fluid expression of gendered and sexualized identities must be rejected if they are to address the split in the subject that colonialism has and continues to produce in the continent? Such a realization ought to reorient Africans in a manner that their traumatic memories can be engaged in truth and humility with a dogged determination to open up a new horizon defined by beauty, recognition, and *anamnesis* (memory) of a liberating and eschatological order (forward looking). In response to the question posed here, the next section of this work attempts to offer insights into how some African communities, especially those who belong to the queer communities of Africa, are reclaiming their erased memories of self.

2 Re-existing Voices of African Queer Communities: A Prophetic Witness to Abundant Life

Resistance, or rebellion is how an oppressed people respond to systems of oppression. The history of queerness in post-colonial Africa is one of resistance. This is especially true because of the fact that the "religio-political system blurs the lines between state and religion. In fact, state power immediately positions itself as a tool for promoting collective Africanness within a particular nation-state, allowing it to make religion a partner in its use of force to control those it deems to exist at the peripheries of heteronormative society. An example is in Uganda. The Anglican archbishop there has openly aligned the Anglican Church with the state authorities in ensuring that homosexuality is criminalized" (Aihiokhai, 2023, p. 13). One cannot also discount the legal battles playing themselves out in some African countries. An example is Nigeria, where claiming one's identity as a gay person and showing affection in public spaces has been criminalized (Adebanjo, 2015). Countries like Mauritania, Sudan, parts of Nigeria (northern) and parts of Somalia (southern) have embraced the death penalty for anyone found guilty of being a homosexual (Amnesty International UK, 2018).

Luckily, some institutions, religious and secular, are resisting such draconian laws and are giving more attention to the culture of inclusivity.

> For example, the Universal Coalition of Affirming Africans Uganda uses a faith-based approach to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries is a U.S.-based global Christian organization that creates safe spaces and inclusive theologies. Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, now active in nine African countries, is a Christian organization working with faith leaders and elected officials to pass inclusive policies that benefit LGBTQ+ communities. Gay Christian Africa is a Christian social group with a very active social media presence that humanizes members of these communities by creating a platform for them to tell their stories. The Inner Circle is an Islamic group that advocates for acceptance of Muslims who identify as gay within the Muslim community in South Africa. Founder Imam Muhsin Hendricks also convenes an open and affirming mosque in Cape Town. The Global Interfaith Network organizes in several African countries to promote positive dialogue and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights (Aihiokhai, 2023, p. 13).

In addition to the above, the Pan African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN) started a research unit aimed at articulating a theology of accompaniment that will be a guide to be used by the Roman Catholic bishops of

Africa in their ministry to members of this community. Unfortunately, the work of the research unit was not well received by some members of PACTPAN and the research unit now exists on its own with a renewed mission of helping to provide a needed education to the African continent on matters related to queerness in the continent.

It is important that a deliberate reclaiming of the rich cultural and religious openness to homosexuality by Africans for an enduring hospitality to prevail amongst their people. This is particularly true because of how ~~the~~ powerful the myth is that homosexuality is alien to African cultural and religious heritage, and that it is an export from western cultures into contemporary Africa to help breed division and promote neocolonialism in the continent. The opposite is the case. As noted by Harry Dugmore, "An understanding of the moralities that appeared in 19th-century Europe, entailing missionary-driven assaults on African social and sexual customs and practices such as polygamy, and sex before or outside of marriage, is key to unpacking the current state of affairs in Africa" (Dugmore, 2015).

An important point ought to be made; Africans are deeply religious and faithful to their cultural heritage. It is on that note that any attempt at helping to foster a hospitable atmosphere for members of the gay community in the continent must be rooted in the cultural and religious context. In the next section of this **article**, a deliberate attempt will be made to articulate an inclusive theology that helps to decolonize current biases against Africa's gays.

3 Rethinking The Sexualized Human: Towards A Theology of Disruption

Theology is itself a tool for disrupting the imagination, especially when the imagination is held captive by an anemic vision of reality. By this, I mean a way of viewing reality and our collective human experiences through a scarcity mindset approach. A disruptive theology was at the heart of the responses of the early church to the Gnostic teaching that invalidated the goodness of the sexualized human being. "*Gloria enim Dei vivens homo* - For the glory of God is

the human living fully" (Irenaei, p. 219)[2] - reveal the rich content of a disruptive theology. Irenaeus of **Lyons**, in his struggle against the Gnostics attempts to reclaim the connection between the glory of God and the abundant life of a sexualized humanity that serves as God's epiphany on earth. It must be credited to the Christian community that there has always been a deliberate attempt to insist on the goodness of the human body and to uphold the fact that it is through human embodiment that humans are said to embody the image and likeness of God. However significant this truth may be, the Christians have also struggled with vestiges of gnostic biases that tend to see the sexualized body as something to be afraid of or at best spoken of in the negative. This is particularly true when one looks at how the Catholic Church has understood this divine embodiment in the concreteness of our collective humanity. *The Penny Catechism*, a document used for teaching catechumens, reflects this bias. Question four of the document states: "Is this likeness to God in your body or in your soul?" The response is: This likeness to God is chiefly in my soul" (Archbishops and Bishops of England and Wales, 1982, p. 1). This dualistic way of viewing the human person accounts for a bias against the sexualized being. But one has to note that the totality of a human being is the human being that is embodied. This is at the heart of all that Irenaeus stood for when he refused to accept the dualism inherent in gnostic teachings that presented the human person as a being whose body was made an inferior deity and whose soul is held captive by the body. In fidelity to Irenaeus, one has to argue as has Rita Nakashima Brock, that the turn to an authentic humanity must begin with an acknowledgement of eros. As she notes, "Eros involves an appreciation of concrete, embodied beauty and a sense of the tenuousness and fluidity of life. Eros is a sensuous, transformative whole-making wisdom that emerges with the subjective engagement of the whole heart in relationships" (Brock, 2008, p. 26). A closer look at the insight of Nakashima Brock offers one the understanding that the authentic way of being an embodiment of the divine in the concreteness of human existence is manifested through relational connectedness. In fact, God is an erotic God and through this erotic nature of God, the fecundity of human life is enacted. The nature of eroticism is that it opens one to otherness. This openness allows for one to be fully oneself without

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[2] Note: English translation is mine.

the dualistic split that gnostic preferences would want to produce in one.

In God, eroticism evokes a sense of ritualized freedom. By this, I mean that God's freedom is not something that is a badge, rather, it is an expression of how God is fully God. This freedom is enacted in a relationality of love, openness, and solidarity within the very inner life of God as a community of persons, and in the economy of God in the world that God brings into existence. Thus, to speak of divine eros is to instantiate life in an abundant manner, and it is to make a statement of a God that is truly whole. Thus, in relation to humans, sexualized humanity is how humans embody their own link with the divine in such a manner that that link allows ~~for~~ humans to be fully alive, fully relational, and become fully an epiphany of divine freedom.

It is important to unpack the contours of divine freedom and how divine freedom can offer a pathway **to** embracing the sexualized realities defining humans. God's freedom allows God to be a God beyond control or totalization. Furthermore, divine freedom is linked to divine intentionality. This is particularly important if one is to take seriously the fact that one cannot exhaust **the** knowledge of divine intentionality as it pertains to creation. An important critique of natural law is that many who uphold the natural law tradition in the Church tend to think of it as exhaustive of God's intentionality; especially as it applies to human sexuality. However, Thomas Aquinas offers a guiding principle that one can argue helps to preserve the freedom of God and divine intentionality as that which is beyond human totalization. For Aquinas, only God knows eternal law exhaustively. Humans, on their part, can access eternal law through natural law in a progressive manner because of the degrees of the formation of the affects by human reason. Thus, this progressive nature of human comprehension of God's intentionality through natural law allows for change in natural law comprehension in "some particular cases of rare occurrence, through some special causes hindering the observance of such precepts" (Aquinas, *Secunda*, I-II, q. 94, a. 5). Concerning the notion of change, Aquinas introduces two ways this can occur; through "addition" and through "subtraction." By "addition," divine and human laws "add what was not previously there to natural law for the benefit of humans" (Aquinas, *Secunda*, I-II, q. 94, a. 5). Articulation of natural law is

conditioned by human experiences, thus, as human experiences expand and progress, the understanding of natural law also expands. Furthermore, Aquinas agrees that through "subtraction" natural law can change but he fails to give instances when this can happen. Reading Aquinas closely, one can conclude that by "subtraction," he is not saying that the essence of the law itself is changed. Rather, it has to do with the benefit of the law to a particular person within a particular concrete situation.

On another note, one can argue that what Aquinas is arguing for as it pertains to change in natural law is itself found within the pastoral praxis of *epikeia*. As Lawrence Joseph Riley argues, *epikeia* is not just about the interpretation of the law. Rather, "the function of *epikeia* [is] to go beyond the words of the law, and having determined the intention of the legislator (not the intention which is expressed in the words of the law, but rather that which constitutes an exception or a contradiction to those words), to deviate from the course clearly prescribed by the words of the law, on the basis of the belief that the lawmaker in enacting the law benignly excluded from it the case at hand" (Riley, 1948, p. 243). Simply stated, since human beings cannot know exhaustively the intentionality of the lawmaker, in this case, God, *epikeia* becomes the accommodative pathway for welcoming perspectives or situations that do not fall completely within the domain of the law itself.

What does *epikeia* have to do with inclusivity when speaking of homosexuality in the African context? I argue that it opens up four pathways for inclusivity and a rethinking of the natural law tradition as it pertains to human sexuality in a manner that allows for the articulation of a theology of disruption. First, since divine eros is the marker of human sexualized embodiment, and eros involves sharing of oneself, just as God as Trinity participates eternally in a fellowship of love, *epikeia* opens up the pathway for members of the gay community to share their stories. Through the ritual of telling their stories and experiences as sexualized persons who fall outside of the dominant heteronormative reality, they allow for an expansion of the cognitive awareness as well as existential awareness of the spectrum of human sexuality. As Adriaan Van Klinken and Ezra Chitando argue, "in response to … [the] stigmatization of

their bodies and silencing of their voices, lgbti and queer activists and communities across the continent have resorted to a strategy of storytelling: they reclaim and affirm their embodied existence by sharing the stories of their lives" (Klinken; Chitando, 2021, p. 129).

Stories are by their nature inclusive and disruptive. By sharing their stories and thus expanding the vision of the audience as it pertains to the realities shaping one's sexuality, the culture of acceptance, recognition, and openness that is cultivated also becomes a mode of being for the community where such persons live in. This style of being a community can help to disrupt the hegemony of *heteronormativity* playing out in the African context. To understand how stories can be both inclusive and disruptive, it is important to revisit the hermeneutic abilities inherent in disruption. Disruption allows for two possibilities to arise that define the human condition – a turn to sense making and a turn to meaning making. For the former, is grounded in a turn to the familiar; the predictable or the familiar. As Sally Maitlis and Marlys K. Christianson note, sense making is "a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn" (Maitlis; Christianson, 2014, p. 67). In the context of the retrieval of Africa's cultural histories of queerness, by telling their stories, queer persons are tapping into their rich cultural history where queerness was a familiar mode of being, even though it may have been forgotten due to the colonial trauma on the collective psyche of Africans. However, it does not end there, by telling their stories within the new world of post-colonialism and the global realities shaping African and its citizens, a consciousness arises which forces the question to be asked: how can queerness be expressed in contemporary Africa? This question allows for the bridging of the sense making world which is oriented towards the past to the present and future possibilities that can only open up when Africans allow their collective imagination to explore ways of being fully human in the unfolding world of the present and the future. Aditya Shukla states this well in the following lines: "meaning-making is a process that attempts to makes sense of the now and the future in ways it gives you purpose and a desirable existential context. Meaning

making cultivates hopes and a life-trajectory you can look forward to" (Shukla, 2023). Consequently, through stories a sense of rootedness to Africa's rich heritage is given validation while being present to the current realities of our world and times.

Second, *epikeia*, as a response to a rigid embrace of natural law, offers the possibility of seeing the gay or queer body as a body that embodies divine eroticism. This embodiment of divine eroticism allows ~~for~~ gay or queer bodies to mediate encounters that are saturated with abundant life both for themselves and for those they encounter. Thus, where heteronormativity has reduced such bodies to the domain of evil, their ability to mediate surplus life for all through the mediative role of *epikeia* preserves the freedom of God to decide how God wants God's goodness to be experienced in the world.

Third, *epikeia* is about the enactment of solidarity in the concreteness of human existence. Where the law letter of the law creates exclusions or boundaries that push others out of the circle of community, *epikeia* creates a pathway of inclusivity and solidarity. Consequently, African gay and queer persons can fully call their communities their home because the praxis of *epikeia* allows ~~for~~ them to belong. Such belonging instantiates a theological vision that allows for a form of being above the matrix of a particular logic. In this case, the logic of rigidity as it pertains to sexual orientation.

Fourth, *epikeia* is itself a statement on the fact that all theologies are themselves footnotes to God's truth and revelation. Thus, where heteronormativity rigidifies the theological vision of the human as a sexualized being, the praxis of *epikeia* allows for a rethink of the role of theology as a tool to help humanity to journey with the erotic God who can only be encountered through the journey itself. Expanding this reasoning, it is only through Africa's journey with its gay and queer siblings that Africa can come to understand the tapestries of God's beauty that resides in all. It is never through an arid conceptualization. The sexualized human is not a concept. Rather, the sexualized human is a being always open to encounters.

Conclusion

A just community cannot be realized unless all its members can call it their home and have a healthy sense of belonging. Contemporary Africa is struggling for a sense of belonging as it pertains to its gay and queer members. In this struggle, a reclaiming of ancient African praxis of centering the flourishing of all ought to be the norm. For this to happen, Africans need to be critical of how they understand who they are today. The politics of memory ought to be understood for what it is, it involves the filtering of what is complex to allow for a simplification of the past. Such simplification does injury to the richness of Africa's heritage. In the reclaiming of Africa's rich heritage, as it pertains to the realities defining queerness, the focus is not to moralize. Moralization only produces two extremes – good and evil. Rather, a third path should be sought, that which is beyond good and evil, and which allows for a rich and critical reading of the realities defining the contemporary era.

The third path, through the lens of discernment, can be arrived at by carefully reflecting on the following questions: What does it queerness mean in Africa's collective psyche? How does Africa's progressive knowledge of the human as a sexualized being allow for an embrace of Africa's gay and queer persons? These questions, when carefully engaged, can help Africa to reclaim the central motif of abundant life that is the backbone of its worldview.

Precolonial queerness that are also today coded in the ritual practices are themselves pathways for experiencing abundant life and being in solidarity with others who participate in the one life of God. By telling their stories, Africa's gay and queer persons will help Africa to again experience the aesthetic of life that each person embodies. However, this can only be done when safe spaces are mediated for all to feel that they belong. Belonging is not a statement. It is a way of being and it requires solidarity, openness, kindness, understanding, and curiosity. Africa needs to be curious of its gay and queer members in such a manner that such curiosity leads to acceptance and a sociality that is constituted beyond the parameters of good and evil in relation gay or queerness.

Finally, a disruptive theology that allows for inclusivity ought also to

engage the political and cultural realities instantiating heteronormativity. To do this, a turn to dialogue ought to be the norm. Dialogue through encounter allows ~~for~~ people to have a disruption in their hermeneutic conclusions on life and even on human sexuality. This will in turn lead to **a** relevant political shift that will lead to the enactment of benign laws and not the current draconian laws that harm Africa's gay and queer members.

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