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Primaeval Ethos and the Representation of Lesbianism in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*

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Abstract

Some same-sex sexuality scholars claim that the lesbian/gay phenomenon is primordial in Africa but had all along been muffled, silenced, and hemmed in by Christian and heterosexual walls. Contrarily, African heteronormative thinkers inveigh against, and dismiss same-sex acts as blatant perversion of primeval African sexual culture. They claim that colonialism, migration, and globalization foisted the 'emergent' and 'strange' sexual behaviours on the continent. Since text is often determined by context, this research investigates the representation of lesbianism in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2011). For backgrounds, the study traces sex and sexuality in the pre-colonial African novel. The research finds that virtually all the novels set in pre-colonial/colonial Igbo society depict no gay/lesbian sexuality probably because it was never a part of the oral antecedents, primordial ethos and cultural practice of the society. The study also establishes that Adimora-Ezeigbo excoriates lesbianism but strongly recommends heterosexuality in the novel of focus, drawing strength from the socio-cultural milieu and the epoch of her diegesis. However, although heteronormativity dominates the African environment at present, the supervening same-sex sexual minorities of the 21st century aided by so-called culture fluidity might eventually undermine heterosexual culture.

Keywords: Primaeval ethos, lesbian/gay, heteronormativity, heterosexual, representation

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Introduction

Scholarly efforts to legalise and entrench same-sex sexualities in Africa currently exist but heteronormative thinking strongly resists the idea. George Olusola Ajibade claims that "hegemonic heterosexual orientation" promotes the belief that lesbianism and homosexuality are colonial imports into sub-Saharan Africa. He decries the "preconceived obscenity of lesbianism and homosexuality among the Yoruba" which is hinged on a "culture of silence" (965). Gleaning material from the Yoruba culture and orature he asserts that "The deity Sango is conceived as a male. But during the trance possession, the woman Iya Sango is no longer seen as a woman; she has been seen to marry Sango at the metaphysical level, and has even become a man" (972).

Bisi Alimi lifts out of context, the Yoruba word, *adofure* and tags it, "a colloquialism for someone who has anal sex" (2), equating it with *yan daudu*, a Hausa phrase for effeminate men considered 'wives' to other men. But the Igbo word, *ofeke*, which in this writer's dialect is *ototobonoko* refers to male weaklings without sexuality imputations.

Ashley Currier and Therese Migraine-George (137) corroborate Saskia Wieringa's surmise that some African women do not recognize same-sex intimacy as "lesbian" or even erotic but rather categorize such intimacies "within broader understanding of friendship or playfulness or lack a common language for recognizing same-sex sexualities" (281-308). For Signe Arnfred (23), this categorization is dying out given the widening circulation of western sexual-identities' terms. This implies that whether the terms/postulations fit into African ethos or not, the 'mercantile' same-sex scholars might perforce compel the African post-colony to appropriate them. This exposes the worry that African feminism is "distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many 'bread, butter, and power' issues" (Mikell 4). It suggests dissentience with "the set of institutions that codify privilege, and reward monogamous, marital heterosexuality and gender conformity that vilify and punish non- heterosexuality and perceived gender transgressions" (Currier and Migraine-George 145).

Nfah-Abbenyi vilifies the articulation of African women's position on Same-sex sexualities at an African Literature Conference she attended, thus:

> Lesbianism was not a 'problem' in Africa; it simply was not 'our problem'…. In other words these women vehemently affirmed their heterosexuality…. (T)his choice continues to stigmatize and perpetuate prejudice against what one can conjecture to be 'silenced' number of lesbian African women, who

> cannot speak openly about their sexuality and therefore cannot publicly and politically fight for their rights (275).

For Audrey Lorde, there is illogic in Africa's lesophobia, since same-sex sexuality "has existed for ages in most of the female compounds across the African continent" and some woman-woman marriages were lesbian relationships (50). However, Ifi Amadiume (vii-ix) rejects Lorde's "creation of a trans-historical woman-loving-woman subject of African descent." Lorde had described the practice of woman-woman marriages across parts of Africa where wealthy women acquired one or more wives through bride money and claimed their offspring as heir. Pointedly, these women did not claim the "offspring as heir;" such children took surnames that perpetuated patriarchal lineage. Amadiume, therefore, correctly institutes sociological and "conceptual distance between women's strong bonds and support" and lesbian sexual practices (345). However, the sentiment persists that rebuffing same-sex situations allows scholars to distance African feminist theorizing and activism from associating with western sources (Currier and Migraine-George 147).

The contrary scholarly views hold that legitimization of lesbian/gay sexualities fails in most of Africa, *not* because of a culture of silence but due to its adventitious nature. The Igbo say: *what was not found in the anus of the mother goat should not be found in the anus of her kids*. Queer studies thrive in South Africa because the South African Constitution bars discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and race; it equally legitimizes same-sex marriage (Epprecht 662–668; Nyanzi 82; and Currier and Migraine-George 142). Thus, while South Africa is the nerve of lesbian, gay, transgender, and anti-sex articulations in Africa, such research and activism are weighed down by "obstacles and challenges" across the African continent. Robust critical essays/documentaries have focused on Zanele Moholi, a black South African lesbian whose work "resists precisely such endeavours to name, tame, and classify…. Zanele Muholi ushers in a new language to articulate Black lesbian sexuality creatively and politically at the same time" (Gqola 622, 628).

The fact that same-sex sexualities are democratized/legitimized in South Africa begs the question of its primaeval status on the African soil. The historical circumstance of South Africa's multiculturalism only justifies the Juvenal's prediction that some European aristocrats will spread homosexuality in other climes (81). Despite lesbianism's legality in South Africa, Diana E. H. Russell cites Tozi Ntuli's stand on the subject:

> South Africans can't just bring up the lesbianism saying, 'why can't women love each other?' This would be absolutely outside of South African context.

> We may say, 'we must be allowed to love each other,' but just as a by-the-way thing. We can't fight for that issue. Never ever! (65).

In 1995, late Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe described homosexuals as "worse than pigs and dogs" and proclaimed that "queers shall be sad people here" (Aarmo 262; Dunton and Palmberg 19). In 2015, Gambian President Yahya Jammeh declared: "If you are a man and want to marry another man in this country and we catch you, no one will ever set eyes on you again, and no white person can do anything about it" (Tharoor 14). On January 7, 2014, Nigeria's former President Goodluck Jonathan signed into law, the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (SSMPA). This law provides a 14 year jail term for anyone found culpable. Finally, the exchange in 2015 between Barack Obama and Uhuru Kenyatta during the former's visit to the latter in Kenya sums up the stance of most of Africa versus the west on the subject:

> Obama: When you start treating people differently not because of any harm they are doing to anybody, but because they are different, that's the path whereby freedom begins to erode.
>
> Kenyatta: There are some things that we must admit that we don't share (with the United States). Our culture, our societies don't accept (Alimi 1).

Marginal Sexualities in Pre-colonial Africa?

Text, presumably, is context-bound. Research has proven that pre-colonial Igbo and most other African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, Cyprian Ekwensi, Buchi Emecheta, Chukwuemeka Ike, John Munonye, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane, Bessie Head, Zaynab Alkali, Mongo Beti, Ayi Kwei Armah, Amos Tutuola, etc., did not represent queer sexualities in their novels (Lopang 77-78). This is contrary to Lopang's (77), and Mathuray's (635) claims, because 'queer sexualities' were never a part of the African oral antecedents which formed the collective text of the writers' imaginative engagement. Lindsey Green-Simms' assertion that pre-colonial writing on African homosexuality was characterized by "silence and opacity rather than any clear-cut homophobia" (140) is also deceptive. Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata-Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor, Ayi Kwei Armah, and a few others presented pejorative pictures of homosexuality/lesbianism in their works. In *The Interpreters*, Soyinka's homosexual character, Joe Golder, an African-American, is a foreigner importing "Roman Bad habits" into Africa (Juvenal 84). So also is Aidoo's Marija in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). Soyinka depicts Golder's homosexuality as western, anomalous, strange, taboo, and predatory to African environment (Okafor

66). Although Joe Golder challenges Sagoe with rumoured homosexual activities of some Northern Nigerian Emirs of the period (Soyinka 199), it merely confirms Arabic colonialist influence (Armah 1973). This is in contrast with the emergent 21st century queer literature of Jude Dibia (2005), Chimamanda Adichie (2009), Tendai Hunchu (2010), Diriye Osman (2013),Chinelo Okparanta (2015), Uzodinma Iweala (2018), and Akwaeke Emezi (2020), etc. Here, some writers (queers and libertarians) have decided to write themselves into history through speculative fiction.

In pre-colonial Africa as typified by the Igbo society, women bonded in hair making and related arts of beautifying their body, co-operative farming and trading, water and firewood fetching, *Umuada* meetings, etc. They talked about their body development, and the prospect of getting married to men to whom they often were betrothed in infancy. In Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Ahurole and her friend Titi typify this platonic friendship in the Igbo pre-colonial setting (Amadi 94-95). Whenever someone was caught in amorous relations, it was always a heterosexual act. Wordu Wakiri composed a song to lampoon "a man of Chiolu who tried to make love to a woman in the farm" (Amadi 128).

Fondling does not constitute incest between consanguineous and other couples debarred from sexual relationship (Amadi 196). Only penetration does. The Igbo had no knowledge of oral and anal sex. Kissing is a western importation and was/is not sex in the local sense. What did not exist could not obtain. And what does not obtain may not manifest. Throughout Ekwueme's love advances to Ihuoma, and the short-lived conjugal affairs with Ahurole, he deployed the available methods for expressing his feelings; so, Ihuoma and Ahurole each responded in kind (Amadi 89-92; 121-123; 132; 189-193; 201-204). The highest form of pre-sexual act was a passionate embrace (203). As a sign of acceptance of Ekwueme's proposal, Ihuoma's "eyes fell," no kisses (Amadi 89).

In *Arrow of God* (1964) Chinua Achebe depicts masculine relationship in traditional Igbo society. Although Obika is "one of the handsomest men in Umuaro and all the surrounding districts" (Achebe 10-11), he is not attracted to Ofoedu sexually. Importantly, Wordu Wakiri has neither girl-friend nor wife but his friendship with Ekwueme and the rest of the men in the novel is platonic and he is 'straight' or heteronormative (Amadi 156).

This research investigates, evaluates, and establishes the core of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's delineation of lesbianism in *Roses and Bullets*. Engaging qualitative cum eclectic deployment of textual and extra-textual material the study ferrets out and

establishes how Adimora-Ezeigbo's delineation toes the line of the heteronormative leaning of most African gender thinkers.

The Lesbian Outsider in *Roses and Bullets*

In an earlier novel *Children of the Eagle*, Adimora-Ezeigbo engages austere but highly suggestive representation of lesbianism and queer sexual behaviour (in the African sense) through some of the most cosmopolitan characters, Chiaku and Amara, in the novel. A medical practitioner in England, as well as a divorcee, Chiaku co-habits with her African-American girl-friend. She had lived with her former Ghanaian husband, Kwesi for five years without trying for a baby. She had "blocked her womb with artificial devices to prevent a child from taking on life inside her" (Adimora-Ezeigbo 44). It appears that Chiaku is bi-sexual. In the strict traditional African sense, as represented by Eaglewoman, Chiaku and Amara are queers. But there is continuing conversation between the traditionally correct ways and the intrusive way, between the given and the avant-garde. Amara, a journalist, fourth in seniority among Eaglewoman's five daughters supports Chiaku, the youngest. Amara also does not want any child and reminds her mother that "Times have changed" (44). But this is unwelcome practice and Eaglewoman says,

> Well, I'm not aware that times have changed so much in Umuga or any other part of this land when it comes to the question of having a child. …My child, shut your mouth before you say something you will regret all your life. … Please, do not ever say that again. Do not let your *Chi* hear you utter such foolish words (*Children of the Eagle* 45).

Chiaku may conveniently remain lesbian as long as she likes since she lives in England, a clime that tolerates/ 'democratizes' libertine sexual behaviour. She has been so brain-washed and socialized that she has decided never to return to Nigeria, but probably come once in a long while, on a short visit (*Children of the Eagle* 128-129). Only a so-called short visit could suit her queer ways since she would quickly dash back to her European safety haven where she may be spared the inevitable embarrassment that the Igbo environment is sure to offer in the event that the searchlight should turn her way.

With *Roses and Bullets*, Adimora-Ezeigbo frontally tackles and presents lesbianism with forthrightness and a certain depth and clarity through one of the most caricatured of her characters – Philomena. Although she delineates the lesbian character sketchily, there are picturesque pointers to what might constitute authorial standpoint. For,

> The rules and procedures which determine what is considered normal or rational successfully silence what they exclude. Individuals working within particular discursive practices cannot think or speak without obeying the unspoken archive of rules and constraints. Otherwise, they risk being condemned to madness or silence (Selden and Widdowson 159).

According to Myers (27-32), authors are *texts* who contextualize the environment, experience and epoch of their creative muse. The heterosexual Igbo background of Adimora-Ezeigbo's literary creativity predates same-sex sexualities of late 20th and early 21st centuries. Parents in this society do not object to girl-girl friendships and bonding since pre-marital sexual intercourse is never imagined: "It was only when a girl had a boyfriend that eyebrows were raised, that tongues wagged. Parents frowned when they saw their daughters with boys" (*Roses and Bullets* 47). Ubaka and Aunty Lizzy – Ginika's father and stepmother, tolerate Philomena, Ginika's friend, to visit and even sleep in their home for a full weekend, despite that they do not like her (*Roses and Bullets* 64).

Conversely, Eloka Odunze's love overtures to Ginika attract strong disapproval:

> …here was this skinny boy talking to her barely eight months after the other incident. She heard him sneer, "Can't you talk? Why don't you say something? For your information, I know your family. You live in Port-Harcourt, don't you?" Ginika was about to say something when she sighted her father and Aunty Lizzy striding towards her. From the dark look in his face, she knew he was angry. … Ginika stood up immediately. "Come on, get into the car," her father commanded. He gave the skinny boy a withering look and did not respond to his greeting (*Roses and Bullets* 77).

Male adolescents could fairly freely flirt. Nwakire, Ginika's older brother typifies this partiality:

> She could see Nwakire talking to a girl wearing a skirt and blouse made from Dutch wax. …She looked up and saw Nwakire and the girl laughing. What had he said that amused the girl so much, she wondered? Nwakire was in Form Three at Okrika Grammar School. He told her he could have a girlfriend if he wanted and there was nothing Papa could do about it (*Roses and Bullets* 76-77).

Ginika, alongside Ngozika and Anna, went for a dance with Bobby, Ken, and Chide. Royal Highlife Maestros performed late and Ken's bicycle had a puncture

on their way home so the teenagers returned late. Ubaka forcefully examines Ginika in his private room to satisfy himself that her virginity was intact (97-100). But Ginika visited Philomena at Anara and spent a full day, no incident:

> By the time she arrived home, it was nearly dark. She entered the living room and found everyone there, but no one said anything to her …. At first, she thought her father was angry with her for coming back so late, but on second thoughts she knew it could not possibly be (*Roses and Bullets* 64).

So, whereas same-sex friendship is deemed innocuous, opposite-sex friendships are viewed with asperity. For, sexual intimacy, unwanted pregnancy, and the degradation of family name may occur. Prior to the development of artificial insemination–Juvenal (81-82) predicted and feared that this might aid homosexuals, only male-female sexual intimacies led to procreation.

Character reveals moral purpose (Aristotle 24). Philomena is characterized as ugly. That which is patently ugly cannot parade ennobling qualities. She is chesty with fat buttocks. Nwakire is repelled at first contact with her and attributes this to either her wide mouth or flaring nostrils each of which "could swallow a pebble" (*Roses and Bullets* 51). Philo is Ginika's foil. Against her ugliness, Ginika is beautiful with long neck like *ugbana* (egret). Eloka admires "her superb body, … the beauty, the exquisiteness of every part of it – her firm rounded breasts..; her taut and flat belly with a button of a navel; her velvety thighs; and her shins, ankles and feet that looked so smooth and delicate" (*Roses and Bullets* 162).

Ginika comes from upper middle-class with the prospect for university education while Philo is a servile, lower class, Primary Three school drop-out. Ginika has education, esteem and family protection, Philo is laissez-faire, experienced, and street-wise. She had sold petrol in a filling station, and before the war she had tramped in Lagos. In fact, Adimora-Ezeigbo's depiction of Philo is deprecatory, it confirms that "people first decide what they want and then fit the facts to their aim" (Selden and Widdowson 158). As Nietzsche asserts, "Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them" (8). Compare, "Ginika knew that Philo was not beautiful, but she had a figure *some* men find attractive –big busts and buttocks, shooting out in front and behind" (*Roses and Bullets* 52); with, … "she began to dance and twist, singing, 'Hey, hey, I feel all right… One Two… Hey, hey, I feel all right!' Her breasts vibrated, her buttocks quivered" (53). Juxtapose these with, "her blouse was too outlandish with its plunging neck that revealed the

top of Philomena's massive breasts" (58), and see why Aunty Lizzy asks Ginika, "Where did you pick this one that looks so crude?" (52). Ginika knew that "her father would not approve of such a blouse; her teachers would have a fit if any of the students dressed like Philomena did" (58).

Philo's first dalliance with Ginika was an invitation to dance to the improvised James Brown music. She does not stop at pulling Ginika up; she holds her close and coaxes her body to ignite her for the dance. When Ginika successfully rebuffs the provocation, Philo waits. At night, she remains awake, and fidgets. When Ginika shows concern that she had remained awake, Philo sighs, and seizes the chance to throw her right arm across her waist. The looming harmattan had rendered the night chilly so Philo's closeness gives warmth. While Ginika is satisfied with the warmth that body contact generated and goes back to sleep, Philo resumes her inexorable course: (Ginika) "felt Philo's hand sliding upwards, gently, until it rested on her right breast. She held her breath, not sure what Philo was up to. She slid her hand into Ginika's night-dress and gave her breasts a gentle squeeze. Ginika froze, not knowinghow to react" (69-70).

Philo's invasion of Ginika's hitherto un-violated erotic zone sets the latter's pulse racing, her heart fluttering, rendering her immobile. She is confused as to what and how to react. But,

> Her lack of movement seemed to have either encouraged Philo or maddened her; she yanked Ginika's body with some force so that they faced each other in the darkness. Her mouth, hot and wet clamped on Ginika's. Like an animated object, Ginika found herself responding to the impassioned embrace; … 'Philo,' she whispered… 'Shssss,' Philo hushed her: 'Keep quiet. Don't talk!' (70).

It would have been interesting to see what else Philo could have done beyond clamping her mouth like a vise on Ginika's. However, a sudden, unidentified bang on the door interrupted the lesbian act. Instead of coaxing Ginika to face her, Philo "yanked" her body "with some force" in a coarse, aggressive fashion suggestive of rape. Directly Philo gains Ginika's face through that forceful yanking, she hungrily "clamped" her "hot" and "wet" mouth on Ginika's.

Ginika's response to this strange foray is delineated as helpless, innocuous and pitiable. When she feels a strange sensation following Philo's tug at her breast, her pulse begins to race, "her heart fluttering." Her innocence manifests in her silent screams, "What is this? What is happening to me?" At this point, the author reiterates

Ginika's innocence and helplessness: She was "yet unable to repulse this strange assault or welcome it" (70).

In comparison, Adimora-Ezeigbo approves heterosexual relationship between Eloka and Ginika. Prior to this love affair, Eloka had proposed marriage and secured Ginika's consent which inevitably assured them of a life-long partnership. In this exhibition, therefore, Adimora-Ezeigbo strictly advocates sexual intimacies that lead to conjugal relations, not pleasure-seeking dalliances. The prelude to sex is evoked with approving language and acceptable social etiquette. Eloka ritualistically plied into Ginika's core, gently, piously:

> With his mind inflamed by the sight, his male body hot like a forge and his heart beating hard, like the *ikoro* drum, Eloka was waging a losing battle against his vaunting desire. But he had to do things right; he had to act in a manner that would never provoke regret or guilt. He had to be sure he was on the right course. Ginika lay quiescent, gazing into his eyes with all the love her soul had reserved for this man… (162).

Propriety, opposite to Philo's rough-ride, further dictates this beautiful sexual intimacy:

> He slipped into bed with her and with a movement that was almost rough he pulled her to him and held her close. …He put his mouth on hers to stop further speech from either of them. The kisses they gave each other ignited a flame that engulfed them. She panted and clung to him, even as his fevered and moist lips set out on a passionate journey from her mouth down the smooth road of her neck. Enticed by the firm swell of her breasts, his lips paid homage to each honeyed fruit from Nature's own garden (163).

Even when they reached the zenith and Ginika had to be deflowered, the wrench "caused little or no anguish" while "her terror and anguish emptied in great delight" (163).

Is it possible then, that lesbianism could have been taking place without discovery or reportage in Africa prior to contact with westernand Arabic slavery, education and socialization? Philomena's "strange" dalliances are not revealed to Ginika's parents:

> She knew she would get into trouble if her father knew or suspected what was happening, and Philo would be banished from the house. She lay down beside Philo, wondering what had got into her; what force had driven them into doing what they did before that bang brought them to their senses (70).

Informed evidence marshalled out earlier in this research points to the contrary. Ginika is filled with remorse and confusion at Philo's forays in the night. Perhaps, she might have intimated her biological mother of the incident if she had not lost her at the age of six. It is obvious that Ginika had no intimate or close-knit disposition to either her father, Ubaka or her stepmother, Aunty Lizzy. Most girls would release their secrets and doubts to their mothers because quite often, they bond better through love, trust and mutual confidence.

This research submits, therefore, that lesbianism and other same-sex sexualities were neither practised nor muffled in Africa, particularly in the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria prior to colonialist contact. If pockets of same-sex sexualities appear here and there in the African space of the late 20thcentury and the present 21st century, it is as a result of the effect of Arabic and western slavery, socialization, education, and orientation energized by the escalating globalization.

Conclusion

This research investigated the representation of lesbianism in the African environment with particular focus on the Igbo of Nigeria. Most African writers provide consistent evidence of heterosexual relations in pre-colonial Africa. They either represented pejorative or no lesbian/gay sexualities at all, not because of "a cult of silence" (Alimi 3) nor muffling by "hegemonic heterosexual" culture (Ajibade 2), nor Christianity and writers with "a desire to project what is idealized" (Mathuray 635; Lopang 77). Rather, this was simply because they had no such imaginative experience. The people's oral repertoire/antecedents made virtually no reference to same-sex sexualities. It was not part of the collective ethos of Africa's primeval stay and therefore, could not form part of the textual environment upon which the authors preyed. The study posits that same-sex sexualities were not known in this society prior to Arabic and western socialization, orientation and education. This position is further strengthened by the fact that Africans, particularly the Igbo were not aware of, let alone engage in such oral/anal acts as kissing and sex through the anus.

The study establishes that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, in the context of the environment/setting of her literary imagination, paints a denigrating picture of lesbianism but clearly approves heteronormativity. The study further observes though, that pockets of underground lesbian and other same-sex sexualities operate in Africa now for obvious reasons but are patently discountenanced, officially as well as socio-culturally. The paper factors in cultural dynamism and conjectures that same-sex sexual behaviours may gain legitimacy some time in Africa, as long as globalization

and migration remain important factors for Africa's survival in the present de facto world order.

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