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CONTENIDO

REVISTA LÜVO | FEBRERO DE 2021 | VOL. 8 N°1

04

EDITORIAL

Ashish Kothari with Lüvo-Love

08

ANÉIS

Cristiane Belize Bonezzi

09

EL AGRAZ: UN FRUTO SILVESTRE PARA APROVECHAR SOSTENIBLEMENTE

Luz Esther Pérez

11

EL MIELATO Y LAS ABEJAS

Rafael Arias García

13

PARAGUAY: EL COMPROMISO SOCIAL DE PAZ ENCINA

Anahí Martínez Gamba

16

A FLOR

Ivi Paiva

19

CANTOS DE LA RESISTENCIA

Articulación Antinuclear de Ceará

24

ENTREVISTA COM CRISTIANE JULIÃO PANKARARU

Danielle Coenga & Priscylla Joca

27

APRETÓN DE MANOS

Sebastiao Anthony Rodrigues

29

CONFLITOS EMOCIONAIS: AMBIÇÃO

Cristiane Gomes Julião

33

AS VOZES DA TERRA: REFLEXÕES ENTRE HISTÓRIAS, REGISTROS FOTOGRÁFICOS E ENSAIOS

Priscylla Joca

41

CONVERSATION ON INDIA

Ashish Kothari, Devika Misra & Catherine Viens

49

MARIQUITA, MÍRATE AL ESPEJO, "MORENA" NARRACIONES DE UNA MARIKA SANTANDEREANA COLOR MARRÓN

Gerson Morena

55

SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF THE LGBTQ+ ISSUES IN THE HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND LEGAL CONTEXT IN CAMEROON

Laurent Francis Ngoumou

61

PERFORMANCE: REALIDADES AUSENTES EN CORPÓREAS HABITACIONES DIGITALES

Pandilla de Demiurgos



SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF THE LGBTQ+ ISSUES IN THE HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND LEGAL CONTEXT IN CAMEROON

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It is important to note that before the arrival of the colonizers, homosexuality in all its forms was always known in Africa, long before the advent of civilizing missions (Gueboguo Charles, 2006, p. 70). Several sociologists and anthropologists, such as Tesson (1921), show that during the pre-colonial period, sexual minorities have always existed in Africa and within the Cameroonian community. Their social life is characterized by harmony and good living conditions.

In Cameroon, as in the rest of Africa, homosexuality would have been introduced by the German and then French colonizers. Before 1914, an ethnologist, Gunther Tessman, had identified traditional cases of sodomy among the Fang (people of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon). These relations being supposed to bring material help to the active protagonist (Tessman, 1921 cited in Tin, 2003. p. 9.). It is also known that among the Fang Beti in Cameroon, during some initiation rites that marked the transition from adolescence to adulthood, known as "SO", where young people of the same sex are obliged to have sexual relations in order to maintain harmony, discipline and group spirit according to Labat (cited in Gueboguo, 2006).

The Pre-Colonial Social Context

In a socio-historical, anthropological and ethnographic context, research conducted by Ruscoe and Muret (1998), Gueboguo (2006) and Awondo (2011) reveals that homosexuality has always existed in Africa, long before the arrival of colonization. These researchers also show that there has been a different, even positive, conceptualization of homosexuality in Africa since pre-colonial times. In Cameroon, for example, we found the following concepts:

1) *Nkoandengué and Coujé*

According to Awondo (2011), it is important to state that the concept "homosexual" exists in all the languages of Cameroon (about 250 languages). The researcher points out that since the 1990s, the Ekang Beti tribe, which is the ruling power in Cameroon, has participated in the institutionalization of the word *Nkoandengué* for all homosexuals among other tribes in Cameroon. For Awondo (2011), "the term *Nkoandengué* is used in the "Ewondo" language spoken by the indigenous people of the capital region Yaoundé" (Awondo, 2011) to refer to a person who has sexual relation with a person of

the same sex. Awondo also affirms that in the traditional Beti society in Cameroon, homosexuals are nicknamed "persons with spirits". For the researcher, these people could be women, men or neutral. These individuals occupied a privileged place in the king's courts. Their role was to teach traditional values, educate children and predict the future.

2) *Nfinga or nkuta*

According to Gueboguo (2002), *nfinga* means in the Ewondo language of Cameroon "the bed sheet". The researcher affirms that a gay person who is still hiding his or her homosexuality for fear of being unmasked by those around him or her is referred to as *nfinga* to signify that he or she is still living under the blanket. He explains that the term *nkuta*, on the other hand, means "bag" in the Beti language. The author makes us understand that this notion designates a person who still lives in the closet. We can also see with Gueboguo (2002) that there is a form of secular conceptualization of the LGBTQ+ language in Cameroon.

3) *Dan kashili and kifi*

According to Gaudio (1998), in the Haoussa tribe, found in northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon, people refer to a man who has sex with another man as a *dan kashili* and a woman who has sex with another woman as a *kifi*. These designations are means of identification, which reveals to the community that these people are sleeping with people of the same sex and cannot be in a heterosexual relationship. In the light of this, it can be said that, in these so-called traditional societies, the concept of homosexuality already exists. Gueboguo (2006) demonstrates, as I have argued, that during the pre-colonial period, sexual minorities have always existed in Africa and in the Cameroonian community, good living conditions and harmony characterized their life. In short, the current stigmatization stems from colonization and not precedes it: there was no homophobic tradition in Cameroon.

4) "SO"

Among the Fang Beti in Cameroon, some initiation rites that mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood, called "SO", forced young people of the same-sex to engage in sexual relations. The aim of these ceremonies is to maintain harmony, discipline and group spirit according to Gueboguo (2006). For Tessmann (1921 cited in Tin, 2003), in the cultural tradition of the Bafia tribe in Cameroon, penetration between adolescents is recognized. Murray and Roscoe (1998) point out that in these traditional African societies, young teenage that has sex with each other do not like to stay with men. They like to stay with girls, and girls like to stay with boys. These boys stay with women, dress like them, while lesbian girls dress like men. These habits did not cause any problems in society. Based on the same analysis, it is revealed that elsewhere, among the Bantou speaking Fang in Gabon, Cameroon or Equatorial Guinea for example, homosexual relationships were seen as a means of being rich. This wealth was passed from the receptive partner, predisposed, to the insertive partner in an anal penis relationship (Murray and Roscoe, 1998, p. 42. cited in Gueboguo, 2006).

The Socio-Colonial Context

The article entitled "La question LGBT au Cameroun", written by Mageau Taylor (2013), notes that "the colonial period was marked by the arrival of homophobic laws and the Bible which condemned homosexual practices in Africa" (p. 11). Here, the author highlighted that "the British Empire effectively imported section 377 of its Penal Code into all its African colonies" (idem). It should be noted that this still incriminates homosexual practices in Cameroonian society today. The writer also explains to us that although sexual relations between persons of the same sex were decriminalized in France in 1791, "the French administration still imposed anti-sodomy laws in some of its former colonies, including Cameroon, Benin and Senegal, in order to exercise greater social control" (Mageau Taylor, 2013, p. 11). The scientific articles show that not only did the colonial period foster the beginning of criminal stigmatization of sexual minorities in Cameroon, but also had a negative influence on the social view of homosexuals, which justifies the homophobic behaviours we see today.

Mageau Taylor (2013) teaches us that the colonizers destroyed the pre-colonial African societies perception of homosexuality by imposing these homophobic laws of Judeo-Christian tradition in Cameroon. The colonizers make these populations believe that homosexuality is indeed a bad practice. In fact, Fanon (1952) underlines that even though the role of science is to liberate people; it has instead contributed to dehumanizing black people during slavery. Rather than working for social welfare, science has established social ostracism against homosexuals. Fanon helps us to understand that today, some black people reject their culture, their own African history because the colonizer makes them believe that

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their history and culture have no value. For the colonized to be accepted in the Western world, he or she must deny his or her own culture. The author teaches us in a comprehensive way what are the psychological effect of slavery on some black people in modern societies.

Césaire (2000), in his *Discours sur le colonialisme suivi de Discours sur la Négritude*, analyses how Europeans, through colonization, participated in the construction (deconstruction, I would say) of mentalities in Africa. For the writer, Europeans have spent more than 400 years showing black people that they are not fit for science, and their duty is to civilize them. Western proponents of colonization justify it by saying that it will bring benefits of science to African countries. According to some Western philosophers, these black people are “savages”, “barbarians” and they need “to be civilized”. In addition, Césaire states that Europeans want to lead black people in a disciplinary process, because they believe that black people need discipline to be accepted by Westerners. According to Foucault’s idea of “knowledge is power” (1975), those who possess power and knowledge in a given society always want to put individuals in the “norm” (normalization). These people use a variety of techniques to discipline human beings. This is why Césaire (2000) informs us that during the colonization of Africa, Westerners used humanist discourse, denigration, humiliation and even hidden dictatorship and assassinations as a technique of normalization to enslave black people. For Césaire (2000), black people did not need discipline because they had their own way of living. The author believes that it is not because Westerners possess the material power or even the great world power and knowledge that they should impose this on the rest of the world.

According to Césaire, colonization and slavery are the origin of racial discrimination towards black people in modern societies. Therefore, I argue that colonization is the main cause of homophobia against LGBTQ+ people in modern African societies. For Césaire (2000), negritude today refers to groups of black people who continue to suffer violence and stigmatization due to their racial origin from slavery to the present day. He believes that re-establishing the truth about African knowledge is paramount for Africa today. This justifies the use of the constructivist approach in my research.

The Socio-Religious Context

Roy (2008) points out that some very religious families expelled their children once they see that their children have atypical physics. First, they try to make boys more masculine or girls more feminine by inflicting physical abuse, hurtful insults on them. However, if things persist, the families end up expelling them in the name of faith. According to Ladõ (2011), this is the result of conditioning, based on essentialist theories that cannot explain things without disarticulating them from nature. Logic is always used to explain complex phenomena. Thus, the man would have a penis and the woman a vagina to complement each other.

In Amnesty International’s report (2013), the organization notes that LGBTQ+ people are often homeless and without social protection and the Cameroonian Ministry of Social Affairs is doing nothing about the situation. Despite this, many homosexuals survive through underground prostitution and are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, Christian and Muslim religions participate in creating a homophobic social environment towards sexual minorities in Africa, particularly in Cameroon (International Lesbian and Gay Association, 2012).

According to Human Rights Watch (2006), in addition to the criminal charges, homosexuals are also victims of burglary and fatal assaults in their homes in the presence of the public. The perpetrators are sometimes in collusion with law enforcement officials or family members. For example, since sexual minorities are likely to be arrested because of their homosexuality, many of them prevent themselves from dressing and speaking in a natural way. Boys avoid practising usually reserved for women and girls avoid professions reserved for men. Homosexuals also try to hide their sexual orientation by having an official boyfriend or girlfriend while having a homosexual relationship in secret (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

The Socio-Legal Context

Article 347 bis of the Cameroonian Penal Code (2016) states that: "Any person who has sexual intercourse with a person of the same sex shall be punished by imprisonment for six months to five years and a fine of 20,000 to 200,000 CFA francs." This penalty is doubled if one of the persons is under 21 years old. According to the International Federation of Human Rights (IFHR 2015), sexual relations between persons of the same sex remain illegal in Cameroon despite ratified international human rights agreements. In addition, court decisions against homosexuals in Cameroon increase in number. According to Amnesty International (2013), people have been sentenced to five months in prison because of their sexual orientation.

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that the LGBTQ+ issues in Cameroon with regard to the historical, social, religious, legal context has evolved over time. Today the main question that should be asked is: what are the challenges and issues related to LGBTQ+ in Cameroon in a current context marked by social ostracism and criminal repression against this population?

It is also important to emphasize that this article allows us to understand that homosexual practices have always existed in Africa long before the arrival of colonization. Today, almost all African countries penalize sexual relations between certain people of the same sex, going as far as the death penalty, blaming the white man who came as a colonizer for bringing homosexuality with him. In fact, if there is one thing that really came up with the colonizer, it was intolerance towards homosexuals in Cameroon and all over the countries in Africa. It should be understood that in Africa, colonization has developed a form of homophobia by strongly repressing what existed as homosexual practices. Today it is important to appeal to African countries to respect the rights of homosexuals, not to consider them as second class citizens or criminals.



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