



## **Where anthropology and spirituality meet: eros, libido and force-of-life – concepts of African traditional world view and their re-emergence in the focus of debates on personhood and sexuality in modernity**

Onde antropologia e espiritualidade se encontram: eros, libido e força-da-vida - conceitos da visão de mundo tradicional africana e seu ressurgimento no foco de debates sobre personalidade e sexualidade na modernidade

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**Abstract:** This essay is based on my presentation at the *7th Biennial AASR Conference in Africa: Religion, Sexuality, and Identity in Africa and the African Diaspora*. University of Ghana at Legon, Accra, July 26-29, 2016. It explores the cultural and spiritual significance of sexuality in the view of African Traditional Philosophy with a view to current debates in “Western” and in African societies. It explores resonances with motifs of European (and Euro-descendent) philosophical and anthropological thought, as basis for a deepened mutual understanding and exchange.

**Key words:** African philosophy, force of life, sexuality, spiritual significance of sexuality, gender in African culture.

**Resumo:** Ensaio baseado na minha apresentação na 7ª Conferência Bienal da AASR na África: Religião, Sexualidade e Identidade na África e na Diáspora Africana. Universidade de Gana em Legon, Acra, de 26 a 29 de julho de 2016. Ele explora o significado cultural e espiritual da sexualidade na visão da filosofia tradicional africana, com vista aos debates atuais em sociedades "ocidentais" e africanas. Ele explora ressonâncias com motivos do pensamento filosófico e antropológico europeu (e euro-descendente), como base para uma compreensão mútua aprofundada e troca.

**Palavras-chave:** filosofia africana, força de vida, sexualidade, significado espiritual da sexualidade, gênero na cultura africana.

### **Approaches**

Thinking of African culture with regard to sexuality raises contrasting images: notions of cultural affirmations of sexuality – in contrast to the ascetic traditions of Europe or India – but also of rigid disapproval of sexual minorities' orientations. A closer look at views about sex in African traditional thought may show that it does not fit the categories of present public debate in “Western” cultures well.

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Beyond the purpose of understanding Africa cultures, the concept of sexuality in African traditional religious or spiritual philosophy may be appreciated as a distinct contribution which nevertheless resonates with some ideas in the history of European thought.

### **Contexts of discourse about sexuality and gender roles**

“Western” discourse is often marked by an opposition of “cultural construction” of gender roles (WEST & ZIMMERMAN, 1987) against the aspects of biological conditioning of sexual identities and their gendered expressions, also in a philosophical perspective. While mutual influence between the biological and cultural determinants of man appears to be self-evident in the frame of dynamic psychiatry with its notion of psycho-somatic relations, which account for influences in both ways, it has become a matter of hot ideological debates in Western culture.

The constructivist position has been formulated as an ideal of a wholly self-determined “body” by J. Butler: “The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.” (BUTLER, 1999) for constructivism. Her argument is that since any sexual identity must be expressed to be enacted and lived, “gender” sets in, which according to her is irreducibly culturally determined and thus arbitrary – or to take matters further: since the notion of “subjectivity” is a cultural construct and thus an illusion, “gender” is the enactment of social order and therefore open to infinite revision, making recourse biological determination illicit (BUTLER, 1990).

A contrasting position is formulated by Julia Kristeva:

“Of course both parents experience conception and giving birth as initial acts marking a beginning, yet the mother feels it most strongly because of the importance of her own body’s involvement in the process. For her, this new beginning that is birth is not only a conjuration of death. Philosophers have taught us that the logic of freedom does not reside in transgression as one might readily suppose, but precisely in the capacity to begin.” (KRISTEVA, 2005)

Julia Kristeva’s theory of a balance between the cultural and the biological which she formulated from a feminist perspective that the “symbolic order” which in most cultures has a more or less patriarchal determination, was balanced by an element of biologically determined and thus irreducible “maternity”, which also expresses itself, albeit often indirectly, in the sphere of culture. Kristeva posits that the return to the materiality of the body and to motherhood opens a future beyond the (closed)



universe of culture and its patriarchal order. Procreation is seen in the perspective of liberation as the realisation of a dimension potentially beyond the limits of culture (SÖDERBÄCK, 2011). This connects the questions of sex and gender to those of parenthood and of life in a transgenerational perspective.

In this context the role and forms of expression of minoritarian (“deviant”) sexual orientations in social and cultural order is a politically contested issue. Preference for heterosexuality and family, also in legal terms, tends to be based on biological arguments, whereas constructivism is often associated with the struggle for the societal recognition of deviating sexualities.

On this background it may be helpful to look at the concept of sexuality in African traditional philosophy, in particular to understand its spiritual significance. On this basis a better understanding of the rules of sexuality in traditional African cultures emerges and a critical view of some current ideological positions in present African societies regarding the recognition and roles of “minoritarian” sexual orientations.

The cultural changes in these debates and their legal consequences in European and American societies have not gone unnoticed in Africa. Here too sexual minorities have stood up to claim social and legal acceptance of their differing identities and conditions. This has been met with considerable resistance up to legislation defining non-heterosexual acts and attitudes as criminal offence in several countries. Legal discrimination is most severe in countries with a dominantly or considerable Muslim population (WHIPPLE, after 2011: p.4). Homosexuality is punishable with the death penalty in Sudan, Mauritania, and under sharia law in Northern Nigeria, and sanctioned with long imprisonment in many Africa countries north of the equator. However differences emerge between countries, with the French and Portuguese speaking non-Islamic countries being more tolerant. These big differences suggest that the status of homosexual orientations and people is not primarily defined by African tradition, as is frequently stated: “these social ills never existed in African traditional societies”. This commonly heard claim may be based on ignorance about African traditional cultures and societies (idem, p. 3). The differences between African countries appear to go back to the strongly differing laws concerning same sex sexuality in the societies of the colonial rulers. (idem, p. 12). These cultural imprints have become perceived as original African cultural heritage over time, not to speak about the effects of Islamisation.



In spite of a clear preference for marriage and heterosexuality in traditional African (and Afro-American) societies awareness of diverse sexual orientations has existed and these have been acknowledged in practise. The claim, that this issue is “un-African” and a case of ideological colonisation may be rejected. It may be a symptom of the loss of cultural continuity to African tradition and of knowledge of the traditional ways, as noted by the respected scholar of Zulu traditional culture, Harriet Ngubane for herself (NGUBANE, 1977: p.3).

### **The perspective of interest: sexuality, gender and the “web of life”**

In view of both the Western perceptions about the cultural appreciation of sexuality and of the harsh punishment of same-sex-practice in many African countries, it is of interest to see, how African traditional philosophy treated the issues of sexuality, of erotic desire and of the “order of procreation”.

In the following the issue of same-sex orientation is rather peripheral. The main focus is to establish how the questions of sexuality, of gender and of procreation were and are viewed in African Traditional Philosophy and cultures. The generalisation of “African Traditional Philosophy” may be permissible here, acknowledging the vast multitude of value systems, cultures and philosophies among the major cultural regions of sub-Saharan Africa. In the following I draw especially on sources of Bantu African philosophies and cultures, which have a higher degree of homogeneity. Then, how do views of African traditional philosophy -an ideal-type construct - relate to views in modern European culture? Are points of convergence or common lines of thought discernible?

In the following the distinction between the “order of sexuality” and the “order of procreation” is made. Of course these are correlated: without procreation there is no sex in the long run and sex is the condition for procreation. Trivial as it may seem to remind about the link it appears necessary in view of the way in which debate of “gender” and “sex” is sometimes conducted on the basis of social constructivism and in some applications of “gender mainstreaming”, without any concern for issues of procreation, which are ridiculed as indications of old-fashioned values and mind-sets.

An approach to sexuality which takes the person in isolation from the sequence of generations and of the web of social and familial connections is at the basis here; sexuality is solely framed in the perspective of a thus isolated perception of “person”



as an issue of his or her “human rights”. This isolated concept of the human “person” may be characteristic for industrial societies with a strong tradition of political liberalism, which emphasises the person detached from bonds and attachments of kinship and communities. It does not even apply to cultures of the Christian Orthodox realm who define the concept of “person” essentially through the relations of a person (YANNARAS, 2008). Christos Yannaras, perhaps the foremost Christian Orthodox philosopher and theologian of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has pointed out that the (artificially) isolated concept of the “person” in “Western” culture may be responsible for a host of social and cultural problems and represents an impoverished view of the human condition. This view is echoed by contemporary African philosophers such as Mogobe Ramose (RAMOSE, 2002).

Therefore it is interesting to see how the orders of sexuality and of procreation are related in African Traditional Philosophy and custom. The concept of “gender” is not further pursued here on the understanding that any cultural reference to sex is mediated through concepts of gender, and that rules and concepts relating to sex nevertheless are directed at that.

### **Positions of African Traditional Philosophy (ATP)**

African traditional cultures made a categorical distinction between sexuality and procreation in social order. Both have metaphysical value in African Traditional Philosophy, derived from a philosophy of “Life” as a cosmological and spiritual current.

The order of procreation is of intrinsic spiritual significance since the souls of the departed – and those of the unborn – are held to exist in an intermediate realm between material existence and heaven. In many cultures they are believed to be mediators to God. The esteem for sexuality derives from its association with the “force vitale”, with the flourishing of life. The orders of procreation and of sexuality are inter-related, but neither is derived wholly from the other and secondary. Marriage is seen as the field where both forces meet and are conjoined, but are not reduced to each other nor wholly fused. A critical distance to gender-debate in the “West” becomes perceptible in the maintenance of both elements as equal.

The Flemish scholar Placide Tempels first identified the concept of a “force vitale” as central to Bantu Philosophy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after many years of



work and studies in the Belgian Congo (TEMPELS, 1945). Quite likely Tempels was sensitized to this aspect of Bantu philosophy through the philosophy of “Vitalism”, the “Lebensphilosophie” of his time in the identification of a metaphysical dynamic entity in Bantu thought which he identified as “force vitale” and named accordingly. Influence of the “Libido” concepts of S. Freud and C.G. Jung who saw it as a unified, dynamic and organising “force” of intelligent character, which had become popular at the time, may have also influenced this perception.

### **ATP, Psychoanalysis and Neoplatonism on the “force of life”**

On this background an interesting affinity to the psychoanalytical thought about libido as a “life-force” emerges, which can be traced back to the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian vision of “life” as an “energeia”, emanating from God. The psychoanalytic anthropology of S. Freud and C.G. Jung goes back to Neoplatonism through German Romanticism and Idealism of the 1800’s (ELLENBERGER, 1970, pp. 110ff.).

Tracing these lineages may serve to relate this central concept of Bantu Philosophy to the history of philosophy and anthropology in particular. The idea is not wholly new, going back to ancient Greece, and being presented anew in recent decades, that Greece has indeed absorbed substantial influence from Egypt. This has been elaborated in particular by Martin Bernal in several voluminous books which focus especially on elements of cultural history of early Greece (BERNAL, 1987).

The next step was taken by Mubabinge Bilolo, a philosopher and Egyptologist, who compared Bantu and ancient Egyptian cosmology, showing fundamental common features, and who also showed that the Neoplatonic model of the emanation of all of reality from the divine “One” can be traced to Egypt, where the founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus was born, and to a general model of African traditional philosophy, to which ancient Egyptian thought belongs (BILOLO, 2007, p. 116). The pervasive influence of Egypt on Greek civilisation, especially in Hellenism, is stored in cultural memory, as by Iamblichus, *The Mysteries of Egypt* (IAMBlichus OF APAMEA, (around 300), ed. 1831).

The purpose of these far-reaching lineages does not lie in itself, but rather in showing that certain key ideas in cultures may indeed be related genetically even though traceable written history is lacking in some parts. This approach is influenced especially by M. Witzel’s reconstruction of world mythologies far beyond the times of

writing and by the notion that central elements of culture remain stable in “longue durée” (WITZEL, 2012. Cf. SMITH, 2013, pp.132ff.) This lends credibility to the idea that common African cultural and religious concepts may have developed and spread before the Sahara dried up some 8000 years ago. Bilolo’s assumption of a common African metaphysics including the Egyptian is not unreasonable in this perspective. Witzel’s indication that ancient Egypt also engaged in mutual cultural exchange with the Middle East, needs not contradict Bilolo’s assumption. The advantage of the quest for genealogical links is that concepts thus related can be related as of the same order of philosophical thought, regardless of whether they have been recorded in written tradition or not.

While Bilolo discusses the cosmological model of emanation from the One, without special reference to the aspect of “energy”, it is obviously included since ancient Egyptian thought held it that creation was not a singular event but a continuous one. The concept is also adopted in the Old Testament, and reflected in Psalm 104: 30 “*Send out Your breath and life begins; You renew the face of the earth.*” (- according to the Catholic translation - the King James Version has “Spirit” instead of “Breath” which disrupts the link to the breath of living beings, i.e. the idea of a sacred vital, cosmogonic essence referred to here, is intellectualised by this translation, and thus misrepresented.)

The dynamic understanding of reality is not rooted in traditional Greek culture, but perceptibly due to Egyptian influence, and comes to be a central, organising concept in Neoplatonism, where it is conjoined with the idea of emanation and becomes a central cosmological, theological and anthropological principle – much as in ATP. This idea of dynamic emanation is arguably not an element of traditional Indo-European culture, but of African origin or inspiration, and has been introduced.

This belief in a dynamic “force of life” reappears in the “dynamic psychiatry”, which is the psychoanalytical model of man, narrowed on “libido” in the thought of S. Freud and wider, more cosmological, in C.G. Jung as anthropological principle, linked to the concept of “Soul” (psyche) – and, true to Neoplatonic idea of a correlation between the individual soul and the World Soul, even as an element shaping reality, as expressed in his essay on “synchronisms”. Freud himself pointed out to the relation between his concept of “libido” and Plato’s concept of “eros” (FREUD, 1925, pp. 163ff). Here an affinity between assumptions of African

Traditional Philosophy – in its Bantu form - about the force of life and of sexuality emerge with psychoanalytic notions of man.

It is mediated historically by Neoplatonism. In Neoplatonic metaphysics “Soul” - which means all of ensouled beings, including the world itself, i.e. Soul as an anthropological, cosmological and theological entity – emanates from the Divine One, God, not only as substance but also as activity (energy) (PLOTINUS. *Enneads*, IV, 8). “Soul” is held to be “life-giving”, in its “energetic” aspect. Of Soul’s embodied state, Plotinus, like Plato, had an ambivalent view. Eros serves to unify the individuals, thus relating, theologically significant, to the divine Whole and the One, and also to procreate, i.e. to serve the creation of ensouled individuals.

In Platonic myth the desire for “One-ness” which manifests itself in “Eros” has spiritual significance as well, since it leads to “One-ness” and thus to the divine. In a passage of Plato’s dialogue, *The Symposium* (PLATO. *Symposium*) this is also attributed to those of same-sex orientation, as presented by Aristophanes. The theological significance remains the same. In Neoplatonism the issue of striving for One-ness is included in cosmology.

The Neoplatonic development which integrates the idea of Eros into a comprehensive and dynamic view of divinely enacted “emanation and return” leads to a dynamic and spiritual view of “life” which likewise characterises African traditional metaphysics (TEMPELS, 1945).

In sum in Neoplatonism “Soul” vivifies everything and individualises it. “Eros” is that force in Soul which strives to re-join beings and to lead them to “wholeness” and to their divine source. Sexuality is expression of this “force of life” in the body and the soul. Eros appears thus in two aspects: (1.) as an essential element in the experience of “life” in its relation to the divine “All”, (2.) in the aspect of creation and procreation, in the passing-on of life. This rejects some premises widespread in “Western” debate, which treat “eros” as the isolated self-expression of an individual’s personality or as individual modifications of the culturally determined patterns of “gender”.

### **The “current of life” as central value in Bantu culture**

In a study on Bantu thought the Congolese author Mulago gwa Cikala Musharhmina states:





“Partant de l'étude de trois peuples bantu ... nous sommes arrivé à la conclusion que toutes les institutions et coutumes familiales, sociales, politiques et religieuses ont leur base principale, sinon statique, dans le fait de la participation à la même vie. Et cette vie n'est pas statique: elle est capable de croissance et de décroissement; elle est vécue dans la communion de ses membres pouvant user de l'influence vitale réciproque.”  
(MUSHARHMINA, 1973, p. 121)

The notion of “participation in the same life” has a social dimension, of communality, as also confirmed by M Ramose, but also, according to John Mbiti, as a cosmological and spiritual meaning of “life” as a transcendent force which extends beyond the realm of the visible (MBITI, 1990, p.24). “Life” is not static, but depends on a dynamic of “life force”.

Fundamental to Bantu African philosophy and religion is, that the current of life must be sustained and participated in. “Life” in this view is not confined to existence as a material being. In a “vertical” line it passes through the generations, connecting this world and the otherworld. The religious importance of this aspect is amply supported by the notion that the spirits who mediate between this world, the visible realm of the present, i.e. the sphere of us as we live here as incarnate human beings, and the „otherworld“, the realm of the souls of those who have departed this world – for whose existence there is ample evidence, as we may acknowledge – is mediated in particular by one’s ancestral spirits. Their mediation to the otherworld has religious significance too. Evidently procreation and the sequence of generations are of spiritual and theological significance. Procreation is thus seen as a fulfilment of a person’s destiny, which is reflected in ritual and culture (NGUBANNE, 1977).

### **The role of “ancestral spirits” for “Life”**

The significance of procreation and, intrinsically connected to it, the significance of the ancestors as mediators of the divine, is a conviction fundamental to Bantu cultures. It has persisted widely through the transition to Christianity and finds itself in new conceptual and social forms in some churches. The interpretation of the phenomena associated with this practise has sometimes shifted to the fields of psychology in literature - reframing them in contexts of „healing“. Their religious nature is indisputable though. There are also „nature spirits“ and „impersonal, generic spirits“ of the „distant past“, but „familiar“ ancestral spirits are most important, extending the concept of „life“ into the nearer temporal realm of „otherworld“ (MBITI, 1990, p. 24f.).



Image: SHILAKOE, Cyprian Mpho, *My Grandmother Emily* (1991)

The spiritual importance of the order of generation is clearly presented in the work of the South African artist Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe, (1946 – 1972) who created many works with a keen sense of the „beyond“, even predicting his own early death (CORRIGAL, 2007). In this homage to his grandmother Emily, who raised him, both the personal and the spiritual and religious aspects show up:

### **Outlines of views of sexuality in Bantu Traditional Philosophy**

On this basis lines of approach from African tradition to the issues of the order of procreation, of family and of „gender“, of sexual orientation emerge.

Sexuality comes into view:

- 1.) as a force of metaphysical significance, similar to the Neoplatonic concept of „Energy“ „Ενέργεια“, as an aspect of any being,
- 2.) in the various forms and orientations it assumes in life,
- 3.) as connected to but categorically distinct from the order of procreation.

As to the diversity of desires we may assume that „traditional societies“ recognised the reality of different sexual orientations, communicated about them – as conservative societies tend to do: rather indirectly - and assigned them a place in mythology and society. The fact that the diversity of sexual orientations is encoded in African mythology, without being vilified, and also in rituals and in the special sexual orientations, e.g. of transvestitism, often associated with the status of being a diviner in some parts of Africa, attests to this acknowledgement of sexual diversity and of the places it was assigned in traditional African societies – both in ritually enacted, playful, transgressions of the actual gender roles (NGUBAE, 1977), as well as in the assignment of places in society for those of non-heterosexual sexual orientation.

### **The myth of the Yoruba deity Oxumarê: ambiguity and mediation**

The deity Oxumarê exists in different stages, as rainbow and as a snake – as man and as woman respectively. In Brazil Oxumarê is identified with a Mukisi, the “lesser deity” of Hongolo (Angolo) from Angola, who has similar functions and appears in both states too. The rainbow mediates between heaven and earth. Snakes have a spiritual significance in many cultures too, as spirit messengers from the otherworld.



The two states of Oxumarê are thus possibly doubly determined: as representations of two sexes, male and female and as two spiritual states. The sexual determination is described in myth: “Oxumarê was the son of Nanã. In his destiny it was written that he would have to be a monstrous snake for six months and for six months a beautiful woman.” This fatefully disrupted his loves. Another myth tells, that Oxumarê became a rival of the Orixá Xangô in love matters. After a long struggle he was killed and finally resuscitated to live as a rainbow by the supreme God (PRANDI, 2001, pp. 226ff). Oxumarê thus appears and acts in both states: that of a woman and that of a man.

The myths tell about his sexual dimorphism and about his ambiguous sexual nature as of a matter of fate, not of choice and thus acknowledge this condition. Myth also ascribes special powers to this state, as the representations by the snake and by the rainbow show. The mythological representation of “deviant” sexuality in Oxumarê is reflected in rituals of African traditional cultures all over which feature sexual ambiguity and transmutations, thus acknowledging them – and ritually integrating them. However the special powers attributed to Oxumarê, of attractiveness, wisdom and divination also come at a price about which myth is quite clear. He is depicted as a solitary and marginal figure too, as R. Prandi recounts:

“Oxumarê era um rapaz muito bonito e invejado. / Suas roupas tinham todas as cores de arco-íris / e suas jóias de ouro e bronze faiscavam de longe. / Todos queriam aproximar-se de Oxumarê, / mulheres e homens, todos queriam seduzi-lo / e com ele se casar. / Mas Oxumarê era também muito contido e solitário. / Preferia andar sozinho pela abóbada celeste, / onde todos costumavam vê-lo em dia de chuva.” (PRANDI, 2001, p. 226)

His marginality brings about both special powers and evokes fascination, connecting him to transcendent forces, and the powers of shape-changing, into a snake - an animal viewed as connected to the spirit world in many African cultures - but it also makes him victim of attempts on his life. He is killed by Xangô, the representative of law, and relegated to heaven. Finally the supreme God, Olodumare, transforms him into a rainbow in the sky, presiding over the stars. (PRANDI, 2001, p. 227f.) In a way reminiscent of Ovidius' *Metamorphoses*, the hero dies at the limits of the worldly order, but is recompensated by the gods with a transformed existence, often in heaven. This means that on a religious level of cultural symbolism this special “character” of the hero is acknowledged and respected, but at the same time, myth states that there is little or only a precarious existence conceded to such figures in social reality. This tension is sometimes resolved by rituals, in which periods and occasions of transgression of the common general norms are enacted, or by special





roles accorded to such marginal figures. The myth shows that African traditional cultures did not fully accept non-heterosexual orientations, but acknowledged them in principle, as told in myth, and sometimes found ways of accommodating for their presence in social life and culture. The precariousness of this status is however clearly expressed.

### **Consequences of the distinction between the orders of sexuality and of procreation with regard to the diversity of sexual orientation in African Traditional Society**

Traditional law in many African societies had rules aimed at enabling spouses to have children in case one of them was infertile or impotent – or even not present at home for most of the year, as was the case with migrant labourers, or when a spouse died. These rules are not considered immoral, but are based on the importance of procreation (MBITI, 1990, p.141).

It would be insufficient and inappropriate to regard these rules merely as pragmatically motivated to ensure survival in old age. Rather, the passing-on of life in a sequence of generations had a high spiritual significance even beyond the need for children to provide for old age. Having children was considered as so important in terms of the metaphysics of life that their importance for either spouse overrides the bond of the marital couple in traditional African law. (The spiritual significance of “ancestors”, encoded in ritual, makes it important to become an ancestor oneself.)

The importance of procreation and giving birth was however balanced in traditional African societies by knowledge about various means of contraception and of abortion. Fertility was regulated in traditional societies according to personal, marital, emotional and social circumstances. (For all the high esteem for procreation it can therefore not be maintained that procreation, and thus heterosexual practise was the absolute norm in traditional African societies.)

It may be surprising to learn from ethnographic literature to which degree birth control, abortion and suppression of fertility were practised in traditional societies. In a detailed study of traditional customs and mores, a long-time missionary in Rwanda in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, P. F. Bösch, gives detailed account of such practices (BÖSCH, 1930, pp. 538ff.). Father Bösch describes herbal methods in detail, as well as the use of aphrodisiacs. (He even describes “birth strike” as a



practise of women who were dissatisfied with the state of their marriage or who wished to take revenge on their husbands by depriving them of progeny.) This means that even the high value of procreation in traditional society was lived in relation to the quality of a relationship, of marriage and of social circumstances.

### **The appreciation of sex in ATP**

The importance of procreation accounts for the rules and mores dedicated to this aim. It did not exist in isolation however nor was it the overriding principle which would have subjected sex solely to its purposes. Rather African traditional thought sought to create a balance between both principles, reconciling them as well as possible, accounting for both. In practise e.g. the provision that a brother or a member of his age group could sleep with his wife meant that an impotent man could live the socially desired “gender role” of a married man and a father even he would be personally incapable to fulfil this role sexually. It may be assumed that similar understanding existed for women with no desire of men. The marked difference in the present penal code of some west African countries, by which male homosexuality is heavily punishable, even by death, whereas female homosexuality is not, may be a hint in this direction.

The categorical distinctness has the consequence that sexual life is treated as a category of its own with distinct rules. Here the metaphysical importance of sex as expression of the „force of life“ comes into effect. John Mbiti expressly stated: „It is perhaps the religious attitude towards sex which has produced the social use of sex“ (MBITI, 1990, p. 143). He points out both to rules of avoidance and to „joking relationships“ of sexual nature, which affirm the importance of sex in traditional culture.

The rules governing marital life – and even the life of those who do not marry – are influenced by both categories: procreation and sex.

The metaphysical significance of sex in African Traditional Philosophy may be understood if it is viewed in on the background of the concept of the „force of life“, which encompasses sex, but which can in no way be reduced to it.

## **On life and the „force vitale“**

Given the central importance of the „force vitale“ in Bantu philosophy and cultures, as first noted by Fr. Placide Tempels, sexuality is to be understood in relation to it. The central idea is the „energetic“ quality of life – of the mode of living life and of experiencing it, which P. Tempels had discerned as „force vitale“ at the core of Bantu philosophy:

„La conception de la vie chez les Bantu. Elle est attentivement centrée sur une seule valeur: la vigueur de la vie. Cette valeur suprême est la Vie, la vigueur, vivre vigoureusement, la vigueur de la vie. ... Ainsi, pour les Bantu, tous les êtres de l'univers possèdent leur force de vie propre, bien déterminée: humaine, animale, végétale ou matérielle. Et chaque être a été doté par Dieu d'une force déterminée, susceptible de raffermir la force de vie de l'être le plus fort de la création: l'homme.“ (TEMPELS, 1945, ch.2)

The idea of “vigour” as a metaphysically determined cultural value resembles the role of “libido” in both the thought of S. Freud and C.G. Jung. It is understood as the basis for well-being, of thriving, happiness, creativity, charisma, power and so on. The idea that each and every being is endowed with a unique measure of this “life force”, which expresses itself as “vigour” affirms its metaphysical grounding, which is reminiscent of Neoplatonic thought in its identification of such a life force as a universal principle. Social and cultural values are thus focussed on enabling and nurturing such “vigour” and to create mores which allow for a “vigorous” life. (It is not hard to relate this value to the perceived “expressivity” of Bantu forms of art.)

## **Consequences for morals and ethics**

Given the universality of the belief in the energetic nature of life and of beings, this also applies to the understanding of sex whose vital and spiritual role for the enjoyment and enhancement of the „energy of life“ for the individual, and by extension, for the community is appreciated. This is not a matter of mere hedonism, but is spiritually and philosophically founded.

However such vigour is always seen in relation to the whole of social and familial order, i.e. not individualistically but embedded in the web of relations of a “person”. This explains that in spite of the high appreciation of sex it is closely “gendered” and transgressions are sanctioned and sought to be reintegrated into social life, as is the case in rape and abductions, where conflicting individual values –



e.g. the desire for sex of young men unable yet to marry, as by poverty, or the transgressions of powerful older men, by rape, are sought to be compensated, with social integration of both the victims and the perpetrators. At this point it is obvious that this high value of sex does indeed come into conflict with other values and causes problems where tensions and iniquities in the social order exist, e.g. by the precedence of powerful elder polygamous men, who created a mass of sexually deprived young men, fostering violent sexual transgression in traditional societies. These problematic aspects need however not detract from the fundamental attitudes and role which sex has in African Traditional Philosophy and culture. (This cultural difference has been noticed in Brazil. The sexual mores of Brazil, compared e.g. to Portugal have been attributed to centuries of African cultural influence which shaped the values and mores of the country (FREYRE, 1966, p. 393ff.)

In African Traditional Philosophy being able to live as a sexual person is important for any being, regardless of his or her sexual orientation. Traditional mores, customs and myth show that the variety of sexual orientations was accepted as „written by fate“ (RANKOTHA, 2002). This point, as may be shown, is not a Western idea. It is rooted in African tradition. Solutions for the present may developed from here.

The claim that the recognition of the wide range of sexual orientations and destinies is un-African can be dismissed as a post-colonial phantasy about African Traditional Culture. The recognition of sexual diversity is not an alien „Western“ concept. Considering that traditional African cultures have taken notice of this multitude and have shown the flexibility to account for them as well as for procreation may provide a basis for developing solutions to the issues of sex and procreation, which includes families, on the basis of African Traditional Philosophy and cultures for the present. This said the approaches and solutions to be found in this regard in African societies may well differ from the patterns of argument and from the cultural and legal regulations as compared to European and American societies.

Given the long genealogical links with some lines of European thought, such as Psychoanalysis and Neoplatonism, a common discursive field may be delineated between African Traditional Philosophy and these systems of European tradition. Here intercultural differences and similarities can be found and communicated for stimulating, fruitful exchange. The connection between sexuality and the spiritual



force of life, in its transcendent and immanent aspects, certainly may provide inspiration to European and American thought, which has begun to explore this link for just a century in our times. The fascination by its expression in African art may provide a pathway of access.

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### Image:

SHILAKOE, Cyprian Mpho. **My Grandmother Emily**. (1991). (Campbell Collection Univ. Kwazulu-Natal). URL: <http://campbell.ukzn.ac.za/?q=node/51>

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