# Queer in an African Worldsense: The Spirituality of Sexuality in Nigeria and South Africa

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The globalization of queer thought and LGBT pride has resulted in socio-political power struggles to define authentic African traditions and identities. This paper explores what Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí terms an African "worldsense" in which the sacred and secular are thought together, and sexuality becomes a spiritual matter. Grounded in Black Queer Studies and radical African feminist thought, I examine woman-woman marriage in Igboland and the lived experiences of Zulu lesbian sangoma Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde, and Igbo lesbian author, Unoma Azuah, as a queering of heteronormativity, sexuality, and gender. I conduct a close reading of their memoirs, ethnographic texts, and the novel, *Efuru*, by Flora Nwapa to argue that same-gender union and gender fluidity are not simply a matter of individual identity or desire, but a dynamic interplay of ancestry, customs, divination, and destiny. I contribute to scholarship that debunks the myth that queerness is un-African, but rather than define queerness in African terms, I explore how Indigenous African practices can disrupt and reframe global understandings of queerness itself. Ultimately, this paper challenges queer theorists to engage more deeply with African epistemologies that position sexuality and gender within a sacred social sense.

**KEY TERMS:** queer, LGBT, radical African feminism, worldsense, Indigenous Africa, reproduction, same-gender desire, gender fluidity

> "This child will neither marry a man as a life partner, nor bear children.... Onishe is her guardian goddess. She is not in her life to harm her.... She sustains her life.... This is her destiny, and you can't say it is not as good as any others."[1]

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-twentieth century, African women have been writing for a global audience in French and English, producing fiction and academic scholarship that serves to revise and expand universalist concepts of gender, woman, human, and more recently, queerness. They provide insider knowledge on Indigenous African cultures in opposition to early racist, colonial writings on Africa. I first learned of the practice of woman-woman marriages and fluid gender systems in Africa as an undergraduate. Ifi Amadiume showed that in the nineteenth-century, prior to European colonialism, Igboland was matriarchal, and women of wealth could cross into manhood through marriage to multiple wives.[2] She argued for a definition of matriarchal based not on the complete rule of women, but on matrifocality and female value. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argued that in precolonial Yorubaland, gender as we know it did not exist at all.[3] Woman—*obirin* in Yoruba—was not embedded with hierarchy and inequality as it was in Europe. In my young mind, I thought of these as queer phenomena, but I discovered that Amadiume staunchly opposed the characterization of woman-woman marriages as lesbian relationships, and both she and Oyěwùmí were silent on transgender and gender nonconformity in Nigeria. These African scholars were presenting not queer practices, but different norms disrupted by Christian colonialism. Yet years later, as a scholar of Black queer studies, I return to these works to ask, how can they inform and expand queerness in our present day? How are same-gender union and gender fluidity treated in Africa now, in the twenty-first century?

My baseline definition of queer comes from Black queer studies scholar, Cathy Cohen, who "queers" queerness. She invites us to consider queer not as a homogenous homosexual identity in binary opposition to heterosexual-

[1] Unoma Azuah, *Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* (Burscough, Lancashire: Beaten Track Publishing, 2020), 106-7.
[2] Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987).
[3] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

ity, but as a politic that foregrounds power relations and advocates for those with the least power.[4] Most notably, she highlights heterosexuals excluded from heteronormativity, such as Black and brown men and women in poverty, towards a radical queer politics. While I do maintain the popular definition of queer as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), I follow Cohen through my use of queer as a verb, a disruption of universalist, dominant, and normative frameworks of thinking. Queerness is fluid and changes in each socio-cultural context because one's relation to power and normativity is relative. In the Christian and Muslim dominant country of Nigeria,[5] women, rural, poor, and devotees of Indigenous African spiritual practices are among the most disadvantaged. With those who exist at the intersections of these identity markers as the focus of this study, I also engage radical African feminist thought. Simidele Dosekun describes this as a feminism whose purpose is to radically reimagine and reshape all power relations to transform society for the betterment of all.[6] I consider this also as a form of queer African feminism, which shares the same goals. I engage this framework to assert this paper's relevance to African contexts because I am writing as a scholar educated in the United States. The Western origins of the terms queer and feminist are not as relevant as the fact that African scholars, artists and activists of today define queer and feminist for themselves towards social transformation.

African woman scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries present an "African worldsense"[7] that situates Indigenous African spiritual practice as knowledge authority. Oyěwùmí coined the term *worldsense* to describe African cultures that privilege non-visual senses, in contrast to Western culture's obsession with sight, or worldview, as the source of all knowledge.[8] Indigenous here refers to African practices and knowledge that can be traced to pre-colonial times. I may sometimes use "traditional" and "religion" in place of "Indigenous" and "spiritual practice," respectively, following the scholar cited in that portion of the text. For this paper, I am primarily concerned

[4] Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in *Black Queer Studies: a critical anthology.* edited by Patrick E. Johnson & Mae G. Henderson. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 22.

[5] Toyin Falola and Bukola Adeyemi Oyeniyi. *Nigeria* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 156.

[6] Simidele Dosekun, "Defending Feminism in Africa," *postamble* 3, no. 1 (2007): 46.

[7] Oyěwùmí, "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects" in *The Invention of Women.*

[8] Oyěwùmí, "Visualizing the Body," 3.

with the social and spiritual worldsenses, which are intertwined. In the African worldsense, the sacred and the secular are thought together.[9] Community is made up of children, adults, elders, healers, and spirits of Earth and the dead. Ancestors are a part of everything that exists.[10] Thus, the spirituality of sexuality refers to the influence of such spirits on human desire.

I contend specifically with the desire for biological children in Igboland, as reproduction is an expression of sexuality, and with the desire for same-gender sexual intimacy and gender expression in Nigeria and South Africa. In part I, I engage an Indigenous African social sense which dictates reproduction is central to human valuation and community cultivation. Through an exploration of woman-woman marriage, I re-think the binary of heterosexuality and queerness. In part II, I engage an African spiritual worldsense through the memoirs of Nigerian author, Unoma Azuah, and South African author, Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde. River spirits and ancestral spirits, respectively, influence and support their lesbian identities and gender non-conformity. I read into the ways they claim queerness and Indigenous African practice to affirm their non-normative identities and practices. Musa W. Dube writes that African Indigenous religion—which is intertwined with culture—"must be continuously reinterpreted for different contexts and times."[11] With legislators and religious leaders citing African Indigenous tradition as justification for queerphobia,[12] I explore, how is African Indigenous knowledge and practice used to affirm queer life? I seek to further queer "queer," to further globalize the concept through deep engagement with African Studies scholarship. I focus on Indigenous African practices to argue that they push us to rethink heteronormativity, queerness, and the full horizon of human sexuality.

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[9] Musa W. Dube, "Postcolonial Feminist Perspective African Indigenous Religion(s)," in *Gender and African Indigenous Religions.* edited by Musa W. Dube, Sylvia Owusu-Ansah, and Telesia K Musili (Routledge, 2024),
25.

[10] Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Fanele, 2008), 76.

[11] Musa W. Dube, ""*Adinkra!* Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention." in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye.* edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 146.

[12] See Sokari Ekine, "Contesting narratives of queer Africa." in *Queer African Reader.* edited by Hakima Abbas & Sokari Ekine (Dakar, Senegal: Pambazuka Press, 2013) and E. Frances White, "Foreword" in *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities.* ed. Zethu Matebeni (Athlone, South Africa: Modjaj Books Pty Ltd., 2014).

## THE QUEERNESS THAT LED TO WOMAN-WOMAN MARRIAGE

African and feminist scholar, Ifi Amadiume, released the first book length study by an African on woman-woman marriage in 1987—*Male daughters, female husbands: gender and sex in an African society.* Here, she shows that gender in Igboland is a social construct influenced by wealth and social status. This text is based on fieldwork she conducted between 1980-1982 in her hometown of Nnobi, a matrifocal culture[13] with a rich oral tradition dating back eight to ten generations. Her study spans pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence Nigeria. The text is not queer in the LGBT sense, but Amadiume does queer—as in, disrupt—the early Western feminist concept that gender-based inequality and patriarchy are inherent to all cultures. She shows that in Igboland, women held positions of power and influence over women and men alike. These women were often "female husbands"—women who married one or more wives. Marriage "was the means of becoming rich through control over the labor of others by way of polygamy, whether man-to-woman marriage or woman-to-woman marriage. The Nnobi flexible gender system made either possible."[14] Women could cross into manhood through marriage union to other women. Thus, gender was closely tied to economy. Families who lacked male children or favored their female children could keep their daughters at home. These women were afforded male status and called male daughters. They could marry wives to bear children who would continue their father's lineage and inherit their wealth. With these exceptions, only sons could continue the family lineage. Thus, in contrast to Amadiume, scholars describe Igbo culture as a traditionally patriarchal culture that privileges male children.[15] The institution of woman-woman marriage also arose as a social welfare system for widowed and elderly women to have caregivers.[16]

Woman-woman marriage is still practiced to this day, long after the publication of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands.* Amadiume's work was groundbreaking for revealing pathways of women's agency in pre-colonial Igboland, but re-

[13] "Matrifocal/mother-focused: a household arrangement around the mother and her children, the focal or reference point being the mother." Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender & Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 40.
[14] Amadiume, 42.
[15] Aliyu, "Woman-woman marriage"; Enemo, et. al, "Woman-to-Woman Marriage"; Emmanuel Azubuike, "The Woman Who Married a Woman in Igboland," *The Republic*, February 21, 2025, https://rpublc.com/vol9-no1/woman-who-married-a-woman-igboland/.
[16] I.P. Enemo, M.C. Anozie, S.I. Nwatu, and O. Oguejiofor, "Woman-to-woman marriage in the South-East of Nigeria Versus the Prohibitory Regime of Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2013," *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 32, no. 3 (August 2024): 388.

cent twenty-first century scholarship emphasizes the flaws of woman-woman marriage, characterizes it as hierarchal and patriarchal. Scholar Egodi Uchendu argues that today, woman-woman marriages have deleterious consequences on elderly female husbands, female wives, and the children born from these unions.[17] She claims that female wives are not a dependable source of elder care, and they often suffer social isolation from the dominant Christian and Muslim social sphere. A 2025 article by Emmanuel Azubuike shows that there is more stigma around woman-to-woman marriages today.[18] In his family, there is silence and tension around his aunt's decision to marry a wife and become a female husband. Her wife bore a daughter, but the union did not last. The child now lives with Azubuike's aunt rather than her birth mother, because the female husband has custody of the child according to customary law. This situation led Azubuike to agree that woman-woman marriage is an outdated institution, one that will cause future social problems and confusion for the child. I.P. Enemo et. al. studied court cases in Nigeria to show that while lower courts ruled in favor of customary laws that support woman-woman marriages, higher state courts consistently ruled against defenders of the institution. In the documentary *Women Who Marry Wives*, one interlocutor describes woman-woman marriage as prostitution because the wife has little agency over her body. She is obligated to have sex with any male the female husband chooses. Amadiume herself wrote that the wives of female husbands were often treated as slaves. Uchendu furthermore describes it as a life of servitude.

In this way, woman-woman marriage is queered in the national, dominant imagination, in a Nigeria of today that is Westernized and patriarchal.[19] It does not fit neatly into heteronormativity because it is so stigmatized in Nigeria. It does not align with radical African feminism, because it disadvantages many women. Women, too, maintain patriarchy through the marriage of one or multiple wives, to advance their personal and family's wealth and power. Nor does it fit neatly into queerness. This practice has been misnamed as an example of lesbianism in Indigenous African cultures. Amadiume foreclosed this idea because love did not bring these women together, it was taboo for them to engage in sexual relations with one another, and their union was not

[17] TIERs Nigeria, The Initiative for Equal Rights, "Documentary – Where Women Marry Wives," YouTube, March 29, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwMB1YvaBYw.
[18] Emmanuel Azubuike, "The Woman Who Married a Woman in Igboland."
[19] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 8.

egalitarian. The female husband held power over her female wives, who were sworn to serve her as she saw fit. But decades later, scholars Serena Dankwa and Rafeeat Aliyu re-open this possibility: "Is it impossible that lesbian-like women in the pre-colonial past could have similarly manipulated the society sanctioned woman-to-woman marriage to achieve personal goals?"[20]

It is certainly possible that woman-woman marriages could have been and could be queer(ed) in the lesbian or bisexual sense. Female husbands and their wives could share physical, romantic, and sexual intimacy similar to lesbian relationships. Even elderly women could seek out female wives to fulfill their sexual desires, as intergenerational same-gender romance occurs throughout the African diaspora.[21] If this type of intimacy did occur, it would have to be in secret. Both parties were expected to rely on male partners for sexual pleasure. Unlike most lesbian relationships, female husbands often consulted with family and community members to choose their wife and sperm donor, if it was not the female husband's husband, and pay the bride price. Thus, to imagine romantic love and sex between female husbands and wives is to queer the norm of woman-woman marriages, is to disrupt the hierarchy embedded in the institution of woman-woman marriage. This queer imagination is largely speculative; same-gender erotic desire in pre-twentieth-century Africa is under-researched. With modernization, scholars suggest that the institution of woman-woman marriage is outdated and insufficient to address family expansion and elder care. Uchendu advocates for improved social welfare programs, but the state of Nigeria is too uncertain now to rely on that.[22] It is not my place to suggest solutions, but I imagine that queer and radical African feminist politics may be more useful for addressing these issues on the psychosocial level. The stigmatization of women who cannot bear (male) children, or may not want to birth children, is a queer and African feminist issue.

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[20] Aliyu, "Woman-woman marriage"; Serena Owusua Dankwa, *Knowing women: same-sex intimacy, gender, and identity in postcolonial Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31.

[21] As shown in the work of Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), young women were often introduced into the institution of *mati* work—partnered sex and the sharing of resources between women, and sometimes women and men—by women 40, 50, or even 60 years their senior. Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde's first lesbian relationship was at 13 years old with a 30-year-old woman, as written in Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me,* 33.

[22] Emeka Anaeto, et. al. "Nigeria, others face uncertain economic outlook — Yemi Kale," *Vanguard,* April 10, 2025, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/04/nigeria-others-face-uncertain-economic-outlook-yemi-kale/.

The institution of woman-woman marriage teaches us that same-sex union is not inherently queer, and that heterosexual relationship is not strictly the union of man with one or more women. Perhaps we can begin to think of it as a queer heterosexuality or refuse to label it at all. The institution instead reveals a different type of queerness in Igboland that expands the definition beyond an umbrella term for LGBT. Many African feminists argue that child-bearing is central to African cultures.[23] Mercy Amba Oduyoye is one, having stated that "[t]o this day," in Yorubaland, "no African, man or woman, wants to be called *obonini*, a childless one."[24] That woman-woman marriage is still practiced shows that reproduction continues to be central to African collective and individual identity. Azubuike's aunt shared that she suffered humiliation and bullying for her lack of children. Flora Nwapa wrote, "[i]t was a curse not to have children. Her [Efuru's] people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure."[25] Because children in Igbo culture are considered a gift from the ancestors,[26] the absence of biological offspring carries stigma and shame. Reproduction is both a social and spiritual matter. Childlessness is queerness in the traditional African worldsense.

With this knowledge, I read Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel, *Efuru*, as a queer text. Set in a rural Igbo village, the spirituality of reproduction is made clear early on. The protagonist of the same name had been married for over a year and has not had a child. Desperate, Efuru asked her father for advice, and he instructed her to see a dibia, or a diviner-healer. The dibia stated that to have a baby, Efuru must sacrifice regularly to the ancestors and conduct certain rituals.[27] After three months of this, she became pregnant. She and her mother-in-law thanked Orisha when this came to be, which highlights the African worldsense that a child is a gift from the Divine. Efuru's offerings to

[23] See Buchi Emecheta, "Feminism with a small 'f'!" 1988. in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory.* edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publications, 2007); Mary E. Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997); Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, "Gender, Feminist Theory, and Post-Colonial (Women's) Writing." in *African Gender Studies: a reader.* edited by Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Simidele Dosekun, "African Feminisms," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies,* edited by Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 55; Catherine Acholonu, *Motherism: the Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri, Nigeria: Afa Publications, 1995).

[24] Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa,* 29.

[25] Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 207.

[26] Azubuike, "The Woman Who Married a Woman in Igboland."

[27] Nwapa, *Efuru,* 25.

the ancestors also highlights the mutual relationship between the living and the living-dead, who are or are more closely connected to the unborn. The truth Nwapa presents within her fiction is that in this African worldsense, one must live with a conscious awareness of the ancestors; to receive, one must acknowledge them through regular giving.

By the end of the novel, Efuru is left in the imagination of the reader as a childless, single woman. She has married two men and left both of them because they abandoned her. Her only child has died at a young age. Through recurring dreams, she is called to worship Uhamiri, goddess of the lake.[28] As before, a dibia instructed her to sacrifice regularly to the goddess and keep certain rituals and objects. We soon learn from the town gossip, however, that Uhamiri's devotees are all wealthy women without children.[29] If they had given birth, it was before they committed themselves to the goddess. The African norm as it has been conceived in both Indigenous and Christian traditions expects women to have multiple children and remain with their husbands through difficulty. Efuru defies both. Although heterosexual and wealthy, she is childless, devoted to Uhamiri for the rest of her life. Thus, the Efuru at the end of the novel, I argue, is queer in this African worldsense. It is not only one's status as parent or childless that shapes African queerness but also gender identity and sexual desire.

## THE SPIRITUALITY OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER FLUIDITY

Gender in an African worldsense is a social, rather than biological, construct. The work of Amadiume precipitated this truth before the dawn of queer theory. Gender as a social construct in Nigeria meant that wealth, ritual, labor, land, and family ties rather than genitals shaped gender identity. Amadiume wrote that women who married women, to increase their lineage and wealth, could take on the status and title of manhood. Theories of gender fluidity arising from Indigenous African cultures are not only economic, however, but spiritual. Catherine Acholonu argues this case among various Indigenous African cultures such as the Kikuyu in Kenya, the Dogon in Niger and Mali, the Fon of the Benin Republic, and the Yoruba in Nigeria.[30]

[28] Ibid., 183.
[29] Ibid., 203.
[30] Acholonu, *Motherism,* 19.

Life in Indigenous African cultures is a cycle of birth, death, and re-birth. Death is not the end, and birth is not the beginning. Negotiations are made in the spiritual realm prior to physical birth. Mercy A. Oduyoye presents a creation myth from the Ezon of southern Nigeria in which the Great Mother asked each person to choose between male and female identity. Their gender would shape their destiny. The last line of the myth reads: "[o]nly by very special religious ritual could any of this be changed."[31] This suggests two queer-like theories. First, that gender is a choice and second, that gender and destiny are alterable under certain conditions. Thus, Indigenous African knowledge makes room for gender fluidity.

Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde was a Zulu lesbian who presented a queer South African spiritual worldsense in the publication, *Black Bull, Ancestors, and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma.* He was born December 7, 1975, and died May 24, 2018. I consider his text as the beginnings of a trans memoir because Nkabinde transitioned from female to male after its publication. I refer to Nkabinde as he, although the stories and examples from this memoir are written from the she perspective to communicate his same-gender desire and gender nonconformity. A sangoma is a traditional diviner-healer who works with the ancestors in their bloodline, community, or worldwide. Nkabinde grew up with an awareness of many spirits living inside him, as his twin brother, his grandmother and uncle all died the day he was born. Most influential was his ancestor and great uncle Nkuzi, also known as black bull. At twenty-four, Nkabinde initiated into the Zulu *Manduwu* tradition and accepted the ancestors to live inside him. He experienced changes in his personality, emotions, and behavior dependent on whether a feminine or masculine spirit was present. With Nkunzi, Nkabinde rarely menstruated, drank more alcohol, and craved sex with women. Same-gender desire and union in South Africa are not unique to Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde. He writes that all sangomas who work with both male and female spirits express gender fluidity.[32] Dube writes that among the Nguni and Shona in Southern Africa, men who are spirit mediums act as women.[33] Thus, gender fluidity is normal and accepted among some Indigenous Southern African cultures. There are also hints of a trans imagination throughout Nkabinde's memoir, such as his declaration that he would have an operation to remove his breasts if he were

[31] Oduyoye, 23.
[32] Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors, and Me,* 73.
[33] Dube, "Postcolonial Feminist Perspective African Indigenous Religion(s)," 32.

rich.[34] He had been a tomboy since childhood. Nkunzi's possession may have influenced Nkabinde's gender transition. I imagine his trans identity as a syncretization of both cultural-religious norms and individual identification with queerness.

Sangomas marry ancestral wives, who is a person of any gender chosen by the ancestors choose to support their healing work. Sangomas and their Ancestral wives are usually women and, as in woman-woman marriages, are not expected to engage in sexual relations with the sangoma. However, the reality is far from this. When he was alive, Nkabinde sought out and conducted interviews with more than thirty same-gender desiring sangomas for the Gay and Lesbian Archives same-sex sangoma project. Nkabinde observed that "although same-sex relationships within ancestral marriages between women are supposed to be taboo, some modern sangomas are using these marriages to have secret sexual relationships in rural areas."[35] He believed ancestral marriages were always used for sexual and romantic same-gender intimacy. Nkabinde asserted that his same-gender desire was solely his own and supported by the ancestors. One of his interlocutors shared that her ancestors told her she must never have sex with men. They created a path for her that aligned with her own erotic desires. Her story also suggests that some ancestors of hers may have engaged in same-gender sexual relationships before they died.[36] Nkabinde wrote of another interlocutor, "Bongiwe's sex life is also her ancestor's sex life."[37] A sangoma must learn to control the ancestors and negotiate with them, which is to say that same-gender intimacy cannot be forced by the ancestors. It is also an expression of the sangoma's sexual orientation. The way Nkabinde writes about sexuality—"initiated into the lesbian life"—reflects Dube's assertion that the sacred and the secular are thought together in this African worldsense.[38] The queerness of sangomas is a niche example, but the work of Unoma Azuah also shows us that women

[34] Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors, and Me*, 19.

[35] Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde, Nkabinde, Nkuzi and Ruth Morgan. "'This has happened since ancient times… it's something you are born with': ancestral wives among same-sex sangomas in South Africa." In *Tommy boys, lesbian men and ancestral wives: female same-sex practices in Africa.* edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa. Johnnesburg, South Africa: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2005: 257, quoted in Ruth Morgan, "Legacy of a Lesbian Sangoma https://mg.co.za/article/2018-06-06-legacy-of-a-lesbian-sangoma/.

[36] Nkabinde, "ancestral wives among same-sex sangomas," 241.

[37] Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*, 82.

[38] Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors, and Me*, 85; Nkabinde, "ancestral wives among same-sex sangomas," 242.

who engage in same-gender romantic and sexual relationships do not have to be initiates of a spirit to be supported by them.

The water spirit manifests in many cultures of the African diaspora, and is often considered the guardian of women, femininity, and women who desire women. She may be known as lake goddess Uhamiri, as discussed in the previous section; river goddess Mami Wata, in West African and Afro-Caribbean cultures; Osun, orisha of the river and Yemoja, orisha of the ocean in Ifá; Erzulie or Lasirenn in Haitian Vodun; and river goddess Onishe among the Igbo Asaba people.[39] Onishe is a recurring presence in the memoir, *Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* by Unoma Azuah. Azuah understands the goddess to affirm her same-gender desire and gender nonconformity. Her grandmother introduced her to Igbo traditional cosmology. She taught that Onishe's "power and spirit is not fixed to a specific gender, because she is said to be androgynous in essence."[40] This is in stark contrast to the androcentric, heteronormative Christianity that Azuah was taught in Catholic boarding school and by her mother. Rather than reject Christianity, however, she integrated both the Indigenous religion of her grandmother and Christian motifs into a lesbian-affirming spiritual practice. She connected her suffering through lesbophobia with the suffering of Christ and found comfort in the syncretism of both religions.

Traditional Igbo cosmology is accommodating of this integration and of Azuah's sexual difference. After a difficult birthing experience during the height of the Biafra War, her mother took her to a traditional medicine woman, then a traditional medicine man, to look into her destiny. Dube writes that diviner-healers were and are central to African communities.[41] They are skilled in addressing illness, interpersonal disputes, solving crimes, and foretelling the future for protective measures. The medicine man told Azuah's mother what she refused to accept from the medicine woman:

> This child will neither marry a man as a life partner, nor bear children...This child belongs to the River Goddess of Oshimili: Onishe...

[39] See Randy P. Connor and David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 32-3. and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 11.

[40] Unoma Azuah, "Poetry, Religion, and Empowerment in Nigerian Lesbian Self-Writing," *African Journal of Gender & Religion* 25, no. 1 (2019): 161.

[41] Dube, "On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s," 144.

> Onishe is her guardian goddess. She is not in her life to harm her. She is a spirit child all right, but it does not end there. It is much more than that. Cutting the ties from Onishe would not change anything. She is absolute. She has not taken her life. She sustains her life…What makes your life worthwhile may not make the life of another worthwile. We can't all have the same path. This is her destiny, and you can't say it is not as good as any others.[42]

This he said in response to her grandmother's and mother's concern that only reproduction and marriage could make Azuah's life worthwhile. Again, we can see childlessness here as a form of queerness. This oracle also suggests that same-gender desire was Azuah's destiny. As Oduyoye wrote: "one's destiny are premundane choices that are unalterable."[43] The medicine man did cut Azuah's ties with Onishe upon her mother's and grandmother's request, but she continued to dream of the goddess throughout her life and resonated deeply with the element of water. As a young girl, she rejected traditional female roles, as she preferred to play rough with boys and secretly kissed other girls. Christian conservative leaders and teachers taught her shame, but through Indigenous knowledge, reading, and LGBT community cultivation, Azuah accepted herself and her sexuality.

These examples together show that same-gender desire and genderfluidity are part of an Indigenous African worldsense. The support of ancestral and water spirits means that sexual and gender identities are not just individualistic but are part of a collective cultural identity. Queerness in the African worldsense echoes the Bantu concept of Ubuntu: I am because we are, we are because I am.

## CONCLUSION

Here I have shown that the African spiritual and social worldsenses that accommodate and accept same-gender union, same-gender sexual relationships, and gender fluidity. Thus, I have argued that Indigenous African practices queer heterosexuality and further queer queerness, which challenges queer studies to expand its binary universalist notions of each. Human sexuality and desire, both erotic and reproductive, do not come from oneself alone. It is influenced by the spirits and people in one's community. This is the spiritu-

[42] Unoma Azuah, *Embracing My Shadow,* 106-7.
[43] Oduyoye, 23.

ality of sexuality. Despite the imposition and assimilation of colonial religion into African cultures, Indigenous beliefs and practices also take preeminence in the everyday lives of Nigerians[44] and South Africans.[45] The globalization of LGBT thought and pride has empowered Africans like Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde and Unoma Azuah to share their stories. They re-shape and liberate what it means to be South African and Nigerian, queer and human, and follow the call to integrate and reimagine Indigenous African practice into modern life. By looking to African knowledge—particularly queer African feminist scholarship and Indigenous cosmology—we can arrive to a more global, diverse understanding of human genders, sexualities, and identities.

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[44] Falola and Oyeniyi, *Nigeria,* 161.
[45] Dube, "Postcolonial Feminist Perspective African Indigenous Religion(s)," 23.

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