

Sexualities

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Sexualities

Elliot Evans

Early 1990s Abidjan: the third most populous French-speaking city in the world and the cosmopolitan economic centre of Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). In the Adjamé district, Mathurin and Ferdinand walk together, both wearing red shirts tucked into belted jeans. Mathurin's arm rests on Ferdinand's waist as they walk together side by side through public gardens, those around paying no attention at all, even despite the film crew following the couple. Speaking in French,¹ Ferdinand explains:

woubis have great radar. They know exactly where to find each other. Whether in Europe, America ... or here in Adjamé. Ghettos or not, *woubis* always manage to have their hideouts. They're like bats, they live hidden. They move in groups, like birds nesting in the trees. They gather bit by bit, and you don't see them until suddenly the tree is teeming with them. That's *woubis* for you.²

Woubi-can is a secret, coded language spoken by the *branchés* of Ivory Coast – *branchés* being another coded word 'encompassing several categories of same-sex desire and practice'.³ The term is derived from the French 'brancher'

¹ Since protagonists in the film speak multiple languages (generally French or Dioula), I will cite only the English subtitles here.

² *Woubi Chéri*, dir. by Philip Brooks and Laurent Bocahut (California Newsreel, 1998).

³ Matthew Thomann, 'HIV Vulnerability and the Erasure of Sexual and Gender Diversity in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire', *Global Public Health*, 11.7–8 (2016), 994–1009 (p. 994).



Figure 1. Ferdinand and Mathurin walk together in *Woubi Chéri*, dir. by Philip Brooks and Laurent Bocahut. California Newsreel, 1998.

meaning ‘to be plugged in’, connected, hip.⁴ As the charismatic leader of L’association des travestis de Côte d’Ivoire (Travesti Association of Cote d’Ivoire), Barbara, explains:

[W]e have our own dictionary, our own way of talking. So, for example, when we say *woubi*, *woubis* are boys who play the role of the woman, who aren’t necessarily *travesti*, who remain boys and who love men. Me, I am a *travesti*, it’s special. Well, they call me *woubi* too because despite everything, I am a boy but I behave like a woman. And then there are the *yossis*. They are boys who sleep with women, *travestis*, and homosexuals. They are boys who keep their role. They play the role of the boy. They are the ones who behave like boys. They are the husbands of the *woubis*.⁵

⁴ Thomann, ‘HIV Vulnerability’, p. 999.

⁵ Matthew Thomann and Robbie Corey-Boulet, ‘Violence, Exclusion and Resilience among Ivoirian Travestis’, *Critical African Studies*, 9.1 (2017), 106–23 (p. 112).

There are further terms – *controus* are those who oppose this *branché* community, sometimes violently. *Toussou bakari* means a woman (*toussou*) who loves women. Other expressions allow members of this community to discreetly discuss sexual preferences, acts, and compatibility.⁶

Barbara, Mathurin, and Ferdinand all appear in the documentary *Woubi Chéri* (Darling Woubi) (1998) by Philip Brooks and Laurent Boca hut. The film's numerous protagonists speak in both French and Dioula (or Dyula; Jula), a language spoken by millions across the West African countries of Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The film documents the lives of this *branché* community, with protagonists explaining their identities and relationships, their hopes, and day-to-day realities. Ultimately, *Woubi Chéri* culminates in a colourful *djémé* – a traditional feast – held by Barbara and L'association des travestis de Côte d'Ivoire in the Bingerville suburb of Abidjan.

While sexuality is often considered to be a private affair – something of personal rather than public concern – nation states have in fact carefully and fiercely regulated sexual practices and identities for centuries. Consider various legislation in numerous countries outlawing sodomy; state support for monogamous heterosexual unions through the institution of marriage; incentives for giving birth to children (as under the Third Reich, for instance); or laws restricting sex work. Michel Foucault has argued that nation states have regulated sexuality through disciplinary power: examining it through scientific investigation; governing it through legislation and institutions. Such disciplinary institutions include prisons and hospitals, schools and asylums: consider, as one example, the Salpêtrière institution in Paris, which operated from the mid-seventeenth century and was used to confine and observe female sex workers, 'hysterics', and other sexual deviants.⁷

Foucault's focus on power as it manifests through governance by the nation state is, however, no longer sufficient to consider sexualities as they manifest today: contemporary sexualities map out the complex web of transnational, global forces at play around us under globalized (or *almost* globalized) late capitalism. These forces include multi-national organizations; non-governmental organizations (NGOs); pharmaceutical companies; digital and communication technologies; social media and mass media. As George Chauncey and Elizabeth Povinelli argue, research into sexuality has turned to 'the effect of the increasingly transnational mobility of people, media, commodities, discourses, and capital on local, regional, and national modes

⁶ Thomann and Corey-Boulet, 'Violence, Exclusion and Resilience', p. 109.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

of sexual desire, embodiment, and subjectivity'.⁸ Recent studies of globalization are not principally concerned with 'the fact of a set of global economic, political, and social connections' so much as with 'their scale, intensity, and density in post-Fordist capitalism and [...] their effect on the social practices, identities, and imaginaries of people throughout the world'.⁹ The intensity of these global connections is such that it affects all of our sexual identities and practices: sexualities in the UK in 2020 are shaped variously by global apps such as Tinder, Hinge, and Grindr; multi-national pharmaceuticals producing Viagra, contraceptive devices, and pregnancy tests; and – at the time of writing – a global pandemic (Covid-19) shaping each of our attitudes towards intimacy.

But the 'global' is not neutral – not everyone benefits (or benefits equally) from this increasingly transnational hyper-connectedness. What dominates is the 'First World', the 'West', the 'Global North': often, in effect, former colonizers. Indeed, as Dennis Altman writes: 'in a sense, globalization is capitalist imperialism writ large [...] What was once accomplished by gunships and conquest is now achieved by shopping malls and cable television'.¹⁰

To return to the protagonists of *Woubi Chéri*, how have Ivorian sexualities been shaped by national and global forces? Events within the country have certainly played a large role in shaping Ivorian sexualities, and not only those within the *branché* community. Formerly colonized by France, Ivory Coast won independence in 1960 and enjoyed a highly successful economy for the next twenty years. Some have linked this economic success to the country's relatively liberal views on sexuality during the 1970s.¹¹ Conversely, civil conflict in 2010–2011 following the disputed presidential election fought between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara led to increased violence against *travestis* at the hands of the Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), who had been established as the new national army when Ouattara eventually took power.¹²

And yet, these 'national' events cannot be explained in a vacuum, but only from a more global perspective – indeed, they are inextricable from the country's relation with and to other nations; from the ongoing legacy of

⁸ George Chauncey and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, 'Thinking Sexuality Transnationally: An Introduction', *GLQ*, 5.4 (1999), 439–50 (p. 439).

⁹ Povinelli and Chauncey, 'Thinking Sexuality Transnationally', p. 440.

¹⁰ Dennis Altman, 'Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities', in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. by John C. Hawley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 19–42 (p. 31).

¹¹ Claudine Vidal, 'Guerre des sexes à Abidjan: Masculin, féminin, CFA', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 17.65 (1977), 121–53.

¹² Thomann and Corey-Boulet, 'Violence, Exclusion and Resilience'.

French colonization and efforts of decolonization; to the country's location within a globalized world economy. Reinterpreting the examples above along these lines, first, Ivory Coast's economic success in the 1970s was due to a continued relationship with France (and also with the US) that many have described as neo-colonial, even while President Houphouët-Boigny ostensibly established an independent nation.¹³ Second, the increased violence against *travestis* on the part of the FRCI led to greater support for these individuals from NGOs operating within Ivory Coast. These organizations had formerly focused on sexual minorities alone, and had even been hostile to gender minorities, including *woubis*. Their change of direction may be explained in relation to global forces, and some have argued that it is at least partly motivated by 'an increasing interest in transgender issues on the part of international donors'.¹⁴

John C. Hawley notes that 'there is a long tradition of multiple sexualities in Africa, but it is a tradition that has been violently interrupted by Western colonialism'.¹⁵ While homosexuality is often decried as a foreign, Western imposition – as 'un-African' – by some political leaders in Africa,¹⁶ laws criminalizing homosexuality in African countries are very often colonial legacies. Laws against homosexuality in countries colonized by Britain such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Ghana (just to cite a few examples from the African continent) are built upon laws against 'unnatural acts' imported by Britain to its former colonies from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. While France decriminalized homosexuality before it colonized West Africa, and therefore did not import any such law, the colonial legacy remains a factor in West African relations with Western NGOs. Indeed, Matthew Farmer has argued that transnational NGOs negotiate the 'colonial baggage' of working in formerly colonized nations.¹⁷

Sexualities are not innate or inbuilt. Our various sexual identities are not simply expressions of variations in biology (our genetic code; our hormonal or chromosomal makeup). They are, rather, just as much formed *by* and

¹³ Abou Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Thomann and Corey-Boulet, 'Violence, Exclusion and Resilience', p. 106.

¹⁵ John C. Hawley, 'In Transition: Self-expression in Recent African LGBTIQ Narratives', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 11.1 (2017), 120–34 (p. 120).

¹⁶ See, for example, Thérèse Migraine-George, 'Beyond the "Internalist" vs. "Externalist" Debate: The Local–Global Identities of African Homosexuals in Two Films, *Woubi Chéri* and *Dakan*', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 16.1 (2003), 45–56.

¹⁷ Matthew Farmer, *Transnational LGBT Activism and UK-Based NGOs: Colonialism and Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

through culture: laws governing what is socially acceptable; the references we have available to us in media representations; and, crucially, the language we have available to describe and make sense of ourselves. María Lugones argues that the related concepts of sexuality and gender are not only inseparable from colonialism, but in fact can be understood as a colonial invention. Colonizers used gender and sexuality as a tool of subjugation in the imperial project: 'colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers'.¹⁸ Gender and sexuality are thus a 'mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing', and, as such, 'heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other'.¹⁹

Altman has theorized the potential existence of a global gay identity, and as Migraine-George notes, 'the protagonists of *Woubi Chéri*, who live in the highly urbanized and cosmopolitan context of Abidjan, refer to a global gay community with which they (at least partly) identify'.²⁰ Yet, as the *woubi-can* language outlined by Barbara above shows, the Western model of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer-questioning (LGBTIQ) identities simply does not map onto many local contexts. Language is key to shaping our sexual identities. The assumption that Western terms and models of sexuality are universal, and will therefore fit everywhere, is a form of linguistic imperialism. The *imposition* of these Western terms (through the work of NGOs or public health discourse) amounts to cultural colonization.

To offer an example of this from the Ivorian context, Thomann describes the way in which human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention programmes in Abidjan funded by large transnational NGOs have the effect of erasing local identity terms and gender diversity in favour of the supposedly 'neutral' term preferred in public health discourse: MSM (an acronym used to refer to men who sleep with men).²¹ Clearly the *branché* identities Barbara outlines above encompass something more complex than MSM – not all *branchés* are men for a start, and even among men there are very different gendered positions ranging from *woubi* to *yossi*. And yet Thomann describes the way in which local organizations' funding is dependent on them 'recruiting' more and more 'MSM into intervention programming, data which they can then

¹⁸ María Lugones, 'Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System', *Hypatia*, 22.1 (2007), 186–209 (p. 186).

¹⁹ Lugones, 'Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System', pp. 186–87.

²⁰ Migraine-George, 'Beyond the "Internalist" vs. "Externalist" Debate', p. 50.

²¹ Thomann, 'HIV Vulnerability'.

use to prove a “return” on donor investments.’²² While some Ivorians have ‘internalised and reappropriated’ the MSM category, actually identifying *as* an ‘MSM’, Thomann argues that ‘it remains a deeply normative category’, and one that is enforced by US-based funding. The particular organization Thomann writes of is Heartland Alliance International, whose global arm is ‘a nearly \$82 million Chicago-based NGO’. Heartland funds HIV prevention programmes in Abidjan, including those delivered by *Alternative* (Alternative) and *Arc-en-Ciel* (Rainbow).²³

In this way, wealthy ‘global’ NGOs based in the West are shaping the sexual language and identities of West Africans. The amount of money involved in these public health interventions have led to Thomann and others describing them as an industry, one that ‘shapes new forms of sociality among sexual and gender minorities.’²⁴ As one worker at *Alternative* in Abidjan says: ‘in Africa, we [*branchés*] have become a bit like AIDS. We’re an industry. Meaning that most people are taking more care of what is going back in their pockets than the lives of *branchés*. Organizations care about *branchés* insofar as they can fill their pockets.’²⁵

By focusing on the example of Ivorian sexualities, I in no way mean to suggest that only peripheral or non-Western sexualities are constructed through the web of transnational structures and systems. While the nature of globalization means that wealthier countries (as well as organizations based in those countries) have a greater material and cultural influence globally – consider the global dominance of English as *lingua franca*, for instance – sexual identities within Western countries, the global North, or former colonial powers are just as constructed.

To offer a specific example from the UK, Jamie Hakim argues that the emergence of ‘chemsex’ (extended sex parties organized, generally by gay men, through hook-up apps and fuelled by drugs such as Gamma Hydroxybutyrate (GHB) and crystal methamphetamine) in the UK is inseparable from the societal condition of neoliberalism.²⁶ Such parties offer a release from the competitive individualism of neoliberal capitalism, and are also influenced by global capital flooding areas of London such as Vauxhall, the gentrification of which has led to the closure of resident gay clubs and sex venues, pushing the community to private domestic space. Hakim notes that the flow of global

²² Thomann, ‘HIV Vulnerability’, p. 998.

²³ Thomann, ‘HIV Vulnerability’, pp. 997–98.

²⁴ Thomann, ‘HIV Vulnerability’, p. 1004.

²⁵ Thomann, ‘HIV Vulnerability’, p. 1005.

²⁶ Jamie Hakim, ‘The Rise of Chemsex: Queering Collective Intimacy in Neoliberal London’, *Cultural Studies*, 32 (2018), 249–75.

capital to London, and the many migrants brought with it, has also led to a rise in chemsex parties due to new arrivals seeking to make bonds and alleviate loneliness.²⁷ Oliver Davis builds on Hakim's work to demonstrate how the representation of chemsex by global media platforms (VICE Media, specifically, which boasts shareholders including the Walt Disney Company and 21st Century Fox) has shaped its governance in the UK.²⁸

More broadly, Edward Said's *Orientalism* argued that the Western idea of the 'Orient' was a fantasy tied to imperialism.²⁹ Joseph Massad, following Said, has argued that the West has positioned the 'Orient' as its sexual 'other'.³⁰ In previous centuries, it defined itself in opposition to the 'sexual licentiousness' of Islam, with France justifying its invasion of Egypt in 1798 as a *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission), and with many (including notable literary figures including André Gide and Oscar Wilde) viewing North Africa as a playground for experimenting sexual tourists from Western countries. More recently, the West has defined itself as a liberal 'saviour' in opposition to Islam's supposed sexual repression, again justifying military intervention on such grounds.³¹ The very idea of 'Frenchness' – not to mention the nation-state of France itself – does not and could not exist in isolation from its former colonies and legacy of imperialism, its current overseas territories and its relation to other colonial and postcolonial structures.³² Any possibility of a collective French sexual identity would be equally inseparable from any of these realities.

Describing the ways in which sexualities are formed and produced by transnational factors as I have done throughout this article should not be taken as a denial of the agency of sexual subjects. As well as being shaped

²⁷ Hakim, 'The Rise of Chemsex', p. 267.

²⁸ Oliver Davis, 'Prison Everywhere? The Imbrication of Coercive and Pastoral Governance in the Regulation of "Chemsex" and New Psychoactive Substances', in *Prohibitions and Psychoactive Substances in History, Culture and Theory*, ed. by Susannah Wilson (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 209–34 (p. 219).

²⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³⁰ Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³¹ Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Righting Wrongs', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103 (2004), 523–81.

³² For an exploration of one literary construction of French sexual identity defined in opposition to racialized 'others' (including Arab 'repression'), see my analysis of *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*: Elliot Evans, 'Liberté sexuelle: Pleasure and Identity in Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001)', in *Plaisirs de femmes: Women, Pleasure and Transgression in French Literature and Culture*, ed. by Carrie Tarr, Elliot Evans, and Maggie Allison (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), pp. 123–38.

by global forces, the protagonists of *Woubi Chéri* are certainly their own agents. While their sexual practices and identities may be formed through transnational forces, they not only show resistance to dominant narratives, but bend them to fit their needs. These protagonists create space for themselves in the world: through community by subverting the traditional *djémé* to render it a celebration of gender and sexual diversity; through the language of *woubi-can*, using French and Dioula to create words that are not only hidden to mainstream society, but creatively express and fashion their own realities and identities.³³ Barbara in particular is portrayed in the film as a force to be reckoned with. Reflecting on her experience, she shows an agility that manages to side-step many of the forces that would constrain her, telling the filmmakers: 'you have to be creative, live life like an artist'. As well as elucidating the global forces that shape our realities, research in the field of sexualities must also offer a way forward by highlighting these areas of creative resistance.

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³³ Matthew Durkin, 'Laurent Bocahut and Philip Brooks, directors. *Woubi chéri*. 1998. 62 minutes. French. Côte d'Ivoire. California Newsreel. \$24.95', *African Studies Review*, 60.2 (2017), 286–87 (p. 287).

