Remembering the Gender and Sexual Archive of the Black Diaspora in Tunisia: a Decolonial Approach to Historical Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: The available studies on the cultural history of the Black diasporas in the Ottoman Mediterranean have focused on religious and other cultural manifestations, leaving out the inquiry about notions and practices related to gender and sexuality. Taking a cue from works on the Black Atlantic and the African continent, this article investigates the notions of gender and sexuality underlying the sub-Saharan worldviews and offers a template to interpret the subjecthood of enslaved sub-Saharans in the Maghribi diaspora. The first part of the essay lays out a historical contextualisation of the Black diaspora in early nineteenth-century Tunis. Then I take the reference to the practice of al-musāḥaqa (lesbianism) among the Black slaves in an 1808 Arabic manuscript as a starting point to investigate, by surveying different anthropological studies, whether al-musāḥaqa can be thought of as pertaining to the archive of sexual epistemology which the enslaved would have taken to Tunisia and, more importantly, to enquire into how we can understand it within a non-anthropocentric historical cosmology—which, ultimately, can contribute to the necessary decolonisation of feminist and queer studies, and history and anthropology more generally.

KEYWORDS: Gender; Sexuality; Slaves/Enslaved; Black Diaspora; Tunisia; Decolonial.

RESUMEN: *Recordando el archivo sexual y de género de la diáspora negra en Túnez: una perspectiva decolonial a la antropología histórica.*– Los trabajos que versan sobre la historia cultural de las diásporas negras en el Mediterráneo otomano se han centrado en manifestaciones religiosas y culturales, y han dejado de lado las concepciones y prácticas relacionadas con el género y la sexualidad. Partiendo de estudios sobre el Atlántico Negro y el continente africano, este artículo investiga las nociones de género y sexualidad que subyacen a las cosmovisiones sub-saharianas y ofrece un modelo para interpretar la subjetividad de las poblaciones sub-saharianas esclavizadas en la diáspora magrebí. La primera parte del ensayo ofrece una breve contextualización histórica de la diáspora negra en la Túnez de principios del s. XIX. Luego tomo la referencia a la práctica de al-musāḥaqa (lesbianismo) entre esclavas negras que aparece en un manuscrito árabe de 1808 como punto de partida para ver, a través de diferentes estudios antropológicos, si al-musāḥaqa puede ser considerada parte del archivo epistemológico sexual de las poblaciones esclavizadas en Túnez y, sobre todo, para investigar cómo se podría entender en el marco de una cosmología histórica no-antropocéntrica. En última instancia, el artículo pretende contribuir a la necesaria decolonización de los estudios feministas y queer, y de la historia y la antropología de manera más general.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Género; Sexualidad; Esclavitud; Diáspora negra; Túnez; Decolonial.

INTRODUCTION

> While *a piece of each Black woman remembers the old ways of another place*—when we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power—other pieces of us, less functional, eye one another with suspicion (Lorde, 2007, p. 50).[1]

This article engages with Audre Lorde's statement about the remembrance that articulates the experience and the practices of Black women in the diaspora. Lorde's essay discusses the difference and the racist, (hetero)sexist and homophobic violence on which the unacceptance of difference is grounded. With her customary sharp eye, Lorde dissects oppressive mechanisms and their logic but also finds historical instances of Black women's solidarity and collective support. In the essay, Lorde recalls experiences of female leadership and bonds between African women, and affirms that women were "evaluated not by their sexuality but by their respective places within the community" (Lorde, 2007, p. 50). This article takes up the historical depth ("old ways") and geographical reach ("another place [in Africa]") of the remembrance Lorde evokes, and offers a template to interpret the subjecthood of enslaved sub-Saharan women in the Maghribi (North African) diaspora. More precisely, the following pages are concerned with the notions of gender and sexuality underlying the sub-Saharan worldviews where the enslaved belonged, and the practices which articulated their lives therein as well as, plausibly, in their diasporic experience. By doing so, it aims at sketching a model that can be used to reconstruct, imagine, and *remember* the history—and *her*story—of the Black diaspora in modern Tunisia.[2] As I continue to elaborate below, I envision the remembrance Lorde evokes as including unconscious ways of transmitting memory. As scholars have noted, "remembering" and "recalling" are to be distinguished— "people remember much more of what they have experienced than they recall, indeed much more than they are aware" (Bloch, 1998, p. 116).

Since the early 1990s, studies on trans-Saharan slavery have shown the extent to which sub-Saharan populations and their cultures have shaped the modern Muslim Mediterranean. Roughly at the same time, the wave of revisionist historiography questioned the nationalist framework and the elite- and androcentric narratives which had prevailed in Maghribi studies and opened new methodological and thematic horizons. As a result, we developed a more comprehensive understanding of the slave trade across the Sahara as entrenched in larger systems of commodity trade, religious pilgrimage, and intellectual exchange stretching from the Sudan, North Africa, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Levant (Montana, 2013; Lydon, 2005; Valensi, 1967). It also stimulated the emergence of analyses focusing on the local realm as part of larger systems such as the Ottoman Empire or the trans-Saharan system, on the one hand, and historical subjects other than the male elites, on the other (Robertson and Klein, 1983; Temimi, 1994a; Ennaji, 1999; Hunwick and Powell, 2002). The historiographic approach to the subaltern populations emphasized the structural oppression they faced, although it increasingly also showed their role in making history and their own lives (Larguèche, D., 1992; Larguèche, A., 2002). Studies on the history of sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa also thrived from the early 1990s on—with works such as Fatima Mernissi's (1987; see also Peirce, 2009) having set an important precedent. They increasingly adopted an interdisciplinary and transnational comparative approach, although (self)censorship also imposed silences—particularly for local scholars (Booth, 2003).

The more recent transnational turn is facilitating that we go beyond the fallacious albeit pervasive dichotomic conception of the continent between North/white and sub-Saharan/Black Africa—and to acknowledge, at the same time, the long history of the divide on both sides of the Saharan desert. The history of trans-Saharan slavery is the history of a cultural, social, and political transfer that shaped the Maghribi and Muslim Mediterranean worlds in significant ways. It is also a history full of painful silences and taboos around slavery and racialised hierarchies (Marouan, 2016), although it is important to bear in mind that status in Tunisia was not only shaped by colour (Valensi, 1986; Bédoucha, 1987; Scaglioni, 2020). Perhaps what is less studied in the literature on slavery in the Middle East and North Africa is, precisely, the impact that the enslaved populations had on these different diasporas where they settled – issues which in the trans-Atlantic world have been tackled from an "Afrocentric" (Asante, 1998) approach.[3] The available studies on the impact of the Black diaspora in the Ottoman Mediterranean have tended to concentrate on cultural and religious manifestations (Hunwick, 2004; Jankowsky, 2010; Kapchan, 2013; El Hamel, 2013; Curtis, 2014). The "creolised cultural reformulations" which were formed as a result of the mix between sub-Saharan and local Maghribi or Middle Eastern components are important because they underscore the agency and the defiance of the enslaved, in general, and of the women among them, in particular. Ehud Toledano (2007) has highlighted the principal role that women played in the Zar and Bori healing cults which spread in the Middle Eastern diaspora, as well as the various gender and class boundaries that such creolised rituals breached.

This essay is not exactly about creolisation insofar as the latter discusses the cultural mix and the processes of cultural mutation. The aim of this article is rather to offer a template to interpret the subjecthood of enslaved sub-Saharans, and especially the women among them, in the Maghribi diaspora. To do this, I build on Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price's (1992) proposal for a general anthropological approach that reveals the general *values* which the enslaved populations transferred to the different diasporas in which they were scattered. In *The Birth of African-American Culture*, Mintz and Price (1992, pp. 9-10) suggest that

[a]n African cultural heritage, widely shared by the people imported into any new colony, will have to be defined in less concrete terms, by focusing more on values, and less on sociocultural forms, and even by attempting to identify unconscious "grammatical" principles, which may underlie and shape behavioral response.

Mintz and Price propose that in our attempt to reconstruct the cultural components which the enslaved took to the different diasporas, we identify basic assumptions about social relations, the values guiding them, and the general ideas about how the world functions phenomenologically. They argue that this approach is more suitable than the one on sociocultural institutions because the latter are much more bound to historical and spatial conditions. I take up this premise whereby focusing on the unconscious "grammatical principles" is more suitable to reconstruct the cultural history of the Black diaspora(s), albeit to some extent "speculative" given the difficulty of tracing their transmission historically; as Audre Lorde's claim that "a piece of each Black woman" still "*remembers* the old ways of another place" captures. "[S]uppositional wonderings, speculations, playful musings, and the employment of questions that begin with, 'What if,' 'How might,' or 'Why did,'" underpins Paul E. Bolin (2009, p. 110), "are actually a serious and necessary part of meaningful investigation into the past." "[W]hispers," "prayers," "fragments of lives and dramas that we have only glimpses of," writes Antoinette Burton (2010, p. vii), "serve as testimony to the fugitive work of gender and the equally fleeting presence of women as subjects across a vast landscape of the past." The following pages pursue the spirit of generating much-needed historical inquiry and discussion around the epistemologies and practices structuring the sub-Saharan sexual and gender archive—an archive which, most likely, travelled with the enslaved to the different diasporas in which they were scattered, including the Tunisian one.

Yet by focusing on the "grammatical principles," I should make clear from the beginning, I am not embracing an a-historical approach that essentialises sub-Saharan cultures (Mintz and Price, 1992, p. 14; Oyêwùmí, 2016, p. xiv). There can be little doubt that the cultural, social, and epistemological transfer and creolisation resulting from the centuries-old slave trade entailed a complex, heterogeneous, and dynamic series of processes. On the one hand, the enslaved populations were ethnically, linguistically, and more broadly culturally heterogeneous. In the Tunisian case, Inès Mrad Dali (2014) has warned about the perils of homogenising Black slaves with a wide range of different origins. On the other hand, the particular circumstances of the different and often likewise multicultural diasporas shaped how each of the particular sub-Saharan manifestations developed. The historical and spatial conditions of both the local and diasporic societies, then, are relevant and in fact, the first section of this essay discusses aspects related to the social, cultural, and political history of the enslaved Black populations in early nineteenth-century Tunis. In such contextualisation,

I show that elderly women played leading roles in the common households in which the West African community used to gather in the capital of the Tunisian Regency. This, in fact, is key to "speculate" about the preservation of the "grammatical principles" conforming to the gender and sexual archive of the enslaved populations.

The first part of the article thus develops a brief historical contextualisation of the Black diaspora in early nineteenth-century Tunis, which goes hand in hand with the analysis of a missive written in 1808 by a West African scholar named Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī, one of the few available sources on the enslaved sub-Saharans in late-Ottoman Tunisia.[4] Al-Timbuktāwī's manuscript addressed the Bey Hammuda Pacha and the Tunisian "'ulamā" and aimed at persuading them of the need to ban the religious rituals of the sub-Saharan populations in the Regency. Toward the end of the missive, the scholar affirmed that the rituals involved "the worship of the *jīnn* (…) [and] idols and [the practice of] lesbianism (*al-musāḥaqa*)" (al-Timbuktāwī, 1808, p. 69a; Temimi, 1994b, p. 84; El Mansour and Harrak, 2000, p. 75). I take this textual trace as a starting point to investigate the contours of the sexual epistemology of West African diasporic populations in early nineteenth-century Tunisia. Thus, the rest of the article is devoted to surveying anthropological studies focusing on different aspects of sub-Saharan cultures related to gender and sexuality, in which I identify "grammatical principles" that the uprooted enslaved populations are likely to have taken to the different diasporas, including the Tunisian one, and belabored upon.

The Arabic term employed by scholar al-Timbuktāwī, *al-musāḥaqa*, illuminates a long Islamicate tradition discussing love and sex between women (Habib, 2007, 2013; Amer, 2009). A wide range of medieval and early modern treatises, decrees and poetry in the Islamicate world both celebrated and condemned practices and desire among people perceived as pertaining to the same gender. Samar Habib (2007, p. 4) has argued that such extensive literature reveals "that there can be no doubt as to the existence of female homosexuality, *at least* as a category, in the pre-modern Arabian imagination." Whereas the starting question is whether *al-musāḥaqa* can be thought of as pertaining to the sub-Saharan archive of sexual epistemology which the enslaved took to the Tunisian diaspora, the bulk of the article investigates *how* we may understand it. In short, I ask: what would *al-musāḥaqa* mean in a system—which I analyse in detail throughout the essay—whereby gender is defined according to the social role of the individual rather than the anatomical features, in which gender crossing is practised (and thus anatomically-defined women can become males) and in which human sexuality is conceived of as induced by the spirits?

While doing so, I also aim at interrogating the mainstream/Eurocentric conception of gender as a category reflecting an individual's social, political, and economic position according to the assigned biological sex; and to question the Eurocentric genealogy of "homosexual identity" under capitalism and the modern global world represented by the rubric of "global queering" (Altman,

1996). Ultimately, the sub-Saharan epistemologies and the "grammatical principles" guiding formal and informal practices display an entrenchment in the complex as well as dynamic symbolic systems which can prove inspirational for feminist and queer studies – including history and especially theory, as the latter is overwhelmingly produced in/by the global North to study (and often shape and prescribe) the global South. Besides, both the global South, especially Africa, and the past tend to be seen as "backward" and "provincial," and I contend that this investigation may prove the contrary and contribute to the decolonisation of the studies on gender and sexuality.

THE TUNISIAN BLACK DIASPORA IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY: FROM MANUSCRIPT TRACES TO UNVEILING TRANS-SAHARAN GENDER AND SEXUAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

In 1808 Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī penned a missive addressing the ruler of the Tunisian Regency Hammuda Pacha and the Tunisian *"ulamā."* The missive, entitled *Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sūdānu Tūnis min al-kufr* (*Unveiling the Infidel Religion of the Blacks of Tunis*), aimed at persuading the Tunisian authorities of the need to ban the practices of the sub-Saharan populations in the Regency (El Mansour and Harrak, 2000, p. 13).[5] Al-Timbuktāwī's introductory *nisba* (filiations) signals he was the son of a judge (*ibn qāḍī*), which is indicative of the scholarly milieu in which he was brought up. The *nisba* also indicates that he was born in Dawjaqa, which historians Mohamed El Mansour and Fatima Harrak (2000, p. 13) suggest is probably the town of Diaguku in the region of Fuuta Jalon, in present-day Guinea. The scholar then moved to Jenné, the prestigious scholarly centre, and to Timbuktu, where he projected himself – he identified as *"al-Timbuktāwī ufuqan,"* that is, where his horizons were set. Most likely, our author belonged to the Fulfulde-speaking Muslim elites in Fuuta Jalon who developed reputations as scholars, Sufi leaders, and authors of ʿajamī literature in the Fulfulde language.[6]

The sub-Saharans who formed the core of al-Timbuktāwī's missive, whom he referred to as "the Blacks of Tunis (*sūdānu Tūnis*)," were slaves brought to the Regency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Together with reactivating the Mediterranean corsairs and the trade in enslaved Europeans, the trans-Saharan trade had regained prominence during the reigns of 'Ali Bey II (ruled 1759-82) and especially of his son Hammuda Pacha (ruled 1782-1814) (Abun-Nasr, 1987, p. 180). As soon as Hammuda Pasha ascended to the throne, he launched an ambitious programme to reorganise Saharan commerce, itself a historically shifting route. As a result of the revitalisation of the trans-Saharan slave trade in the second half of the eighteenth century, as Ismael Musah Montana (2013) has shown, a Black diasporic community, mainly formed by West African Hausa people, had come into being in the capital city of Tunis by the time al-Timbuktāwī dwelled in it.[7]

The missive al-Timbuktāwī wrote is to be understood within the large and trans-historical body of Islamicate writing against practices deemed un-Islamic, on the one hand, and as revealing of the political situation at the turn of the nineteenth century in both the Sudan and Tunisia, on the other (Cuffel, 2005; al-Safi, Lewis, and Hurreiz, 1991; Bruzzi and Zeleke, 2015; Boddy, 2007). In fact, al-Timbuktāwī's admonition was a reaction against the Tunisian tolerance to sub-Saharans' cults which *jīhād* leaders in West and Central Africa banned in the aftermath of the Fulani war and the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate (1804-8) (Lovejoy, 2016). In Hausaland, a region where many of the sub-Saharan slaves brought into Tunisia originated from, *jīhād* leaders banned—or attempted to ban—*bori* spirit possession and healing rituals which they considered a form of polytheism, just as al-Timbuktāwī did. But precisely what al-Timbuktāwī's militant missive reveals is that the Black diaspora in Tunisia could perform rituals that were increasingly persecuted in their regions of origin in the aftermath of the *jīhādī* revolutions, and thus that they could preserve different cultural and identity-related aspects relatively freely.

In early nineteenth-century Tunisia, the *sūdānu Tūnis* whom al-Timbuktāwī decried formed separate communities and established corporate organisations according to their ethnic and geographical places of origin (Montana, 2004, 2009, p. 156). They assembled in communal households (Ar. *dīyār*, sing. *dār*), where they performed the *bori* rituals and developed the kind of community support systems that have been described in other Atlantic and other Ottoman Black diasporas. Such support systems were key to the maintenance of the Black diasporic consciousness associated with the "psychological crisis brought about by enslavement, and transplantation into an alien environment" (Hunwick, 2004, p. 149).

Women, particularly elderly women, played leading roles in such households and thus held important degrees of authority and power over the community. These elderly women—referred to as *godia* (in Hausa) or *'ajūz* (in Arabic)—were the chief priestesses of the rituals performed in the *dīyār*. Beyond their liturgical duties, these women also played key roles in preserving indigenous West African cultural values.[8] The insights revealed by the British diplomat Arthur Tremearne on the *bori* rituals of the Hausas in Tunis in 1914 confirm not only that Black diasporic communities continued to "form distinct communities" at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also that the women-led rituals and households remained the strongest form of West African community bonding in Tunisia (Tremearne, 1914, p. 30). The fact that the West African community came together in the *dīyār* of the capital on the occasion of *bori* rituals led by elderly priestesses makes the "speculation" on the transmission of sub-Saharan sexual "grammatical principles" in Tunis plausible.

In his final exhortations, al-Timbuktāwī addressed gender and sexuality-related questions. "Many Muslim women enter with the [Blacks] into this reprehensible business," by which he meant "the worship of the *jīnn* (…) [and] idols and [the practice of] lesbianism (*al-musāḥaqa*)" (al-Timbuktāwī, 1808, p. 69a; Temimi, 1994b, p. 84; El Mansour and Harrak, 2000, p. 75). Ac-

cording to the West African scholar, "their husbands cannot restrain them, for it is no secret that the men of this age are under the thumbs of their womenfolk" (al-Timbuktāwī, 1808, p. 69a). Several scholars have suggested that al-Timbuktāwī's accusations of lesbianism were one more argument he deployed to achieve his aim of convincing the Tunisian political and religious authorities of the need to ban the sub-Saharans' polytheistic practices (El Mansour and Harrak, 2000, p. 42; Montana, 2011, p. 190). Elsewhere I have argued that the gender-related arguments were not only used strategically, but they were also a means of disciplining Muslim as well as "infidel" women and men (Goikolea-Amiano, 2020).[9] In what follows I set out to investigate whether such "lesbianism" can be thought of as pertaining to the sub-Saharan archive of sexual epistemology which the enslaved took to the Tunisian diaspora. More importantly, I scrutinise the system of gender and the non-anthropocentric cosmologies informing practices and notions of human sexuality which might lead us to think of *al-musāḥaqa* in different ways and, ultimately, to apprehend the history of the Black diaspora as the history of the transfer, exchange, and subsequent merging of a multiplicity of epistemologies and practices.

INTO THE SUB-SAHARAN GENDER AND SEXUAL ARCHIVE

> Black people, within varying constraints and with varying results, have elaborated upon a common West African cultural heritage in the domain of (sexual) subjecthood in the Diaspora (Wekker, 2006, p. 214).

Before the infusion of Western notions, Oyèrónké Oyêwùmí (2016) argued, the body was not the basis of Yorùbá social roles, thought, and identity; thus women and men, as social categories, did not exist until recently. Oyêwùmí conceives of such an "epistemological shift" in Yorùbá conceptions and practices as a result not only of nineteenth-century European colonialism but also of the centuries-long colonial process including the Atlantic slave trade (Oyêwùmí 2016, p. xv). In the case of the West and Central African diaspora in Tunisia, the epistemological shift would not be restricted to the influence of European or "Western" thought, but also related to Arab and other Islamicate populations with which the Blacks interacted throughout the trans-Saharan space and the Maghribi diaspora.

In what follows, I build on anthropological studies focusing on different aspects of sub-Saharan cultures related to gender and sexuality. First I look at the widespread institution of marriages between females to signal the underlying "grammatical principles" concerning understandings of sex and gender. I draw comparisons trans-nationally within the African continent and the trans-Atlantic Black diaspora. Although the way these marriages functioned presents variations from society to society, some commonalities may be observed. Such common features constitute the core of the "grammatical

principles" that the uprooted enslaved populations would have transferred to the different diasporas, including the Tunisian one.

Then I survey the larger non-anthropocentric systems within which the outlined gender and sexual "grammatical principles" and epistemes belonged, again drawing on different transnational contexts. The *bori* rituals in Tunisia and other parts of the Ottoman Mediterranean were embedded in cosmologies in which humans interacted with non-human beings. Within non-anthropocentric cosmologies, human and non-human beings interact and, such an interaction, changes both humans and their world.[10] It is within this non-anthropocentric spiritual and social system that the gender and sexual epistemologies and practices are articulated. Yet articulated does not mean *constructed*—at least in the most radical constructivist terms. I endorse Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000, p. 16) critique of the assumption that "the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end 'social facts,' that the social somehow exists prior to them (...) One empirically knows of no society in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them."

This is a point in which historical Maghribi and sub-Saharan cultures arguably converge, as in the Islamicate tradition and worldview humans interact with several non-human beings such as spirits (Arabic *junūn*, sing. *jīnn*)**,** angels (*malā'ika*) and demons (*shayaṭīn*), among others (González Vázquez, 2015). Non-humans and their qualities are mentioned in the Qur'ān and the aḥadīth (sayings and deeds of the prophet Muḥammad), the two most prestigious sources of Islamic legitimacy. Notwithstanding, in each Islamicised society—including the Maghrib and sub-Saharan Africa—there are and have been different understandings of how such relationships function.

"Heterogender" Marriages and Kin: a Non-Biological Epistemology of Gender

> They have no religion. They are neither Christians nor Mohammedans nor Jews. They live in a primitive way *and have wives and children in common* (al-Ḥassan al-Wazzān, in Allen, 1962, p. 21, emphasis added)

Leo Africanus' *Della Descrittione dell'Africa et delle cose notabili che ivi sono* (1550) includes a self-translated travelogue that he had written in Arabic when he was still al-Ḥassan al-Wazzān representing the Moroccan sultan in the so-called Lands of the Blacks (*bilād al-sūdān*, in Arabic) in 1513. Al-Wazzān stayed for a month in the Kingdom of Bornu (in current northern Nigeria and one of the three major African regions that provided slaves into Tunis in the early nineteenth century [Frank, 1851; Montana, 2013, pp. 42-47]), where he noted down the above observation. In the glossary of the simplified travelogue in English, translator and editor Roger Allen (1962, p. 28) explained that the italicized phrase meant that wives and children were "shared by everyone." But what that meant

to al-Wazzān or the locals remains obscure, and of course the Fasi traveler's perception is likely to have been biased. Still, some cultures in sub-Saharan Africa and its Atlantic Diaspora record kinship bonds including "cowives" and their children, which can resonate with al-Wazzān's passing remark.

In the Kingdom of Dahomey (now part of Benin), for example, Melville Herskovits described thirteen types of marriage unions, distinguishable for the different types of payments which assured control of the children (Herskovits, 1938). One of the Dahomean sub-types described by Herskovits is called "the goat given to the buck," which consists of the union between two female individuals.[11] One of them "supports all the payments and gifts decreed for this form of marriage in the same manner as though she were a man," and in fact, she is regarded by the woman she has married "as a husband, and is called 'husband'" (Herskovits, 1938, p. 320).

Marriages between anatomically-defined females are a widespread institution in many historical sub-Saharan societies (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999; Murray and Roscoe, 1998, pp. 255-266; Rupp, 2009, pp. 87-90). Although the way they function presents variations from society to society, some commonalities may be observed. As in Dahomey, in Igbo culture (in south-eastern Nigeria), as well as among several tribes in the north of Nigeria and among the Bavenda (in the northern part of South Africa) marriages between females were also common among the upper and especially the ruling classes (Amadiume, 1987; Meek, 1969, pp. 209-211; Stayt, 1968, pp. 143-144). This type of marriage was a way for the already prosperous women to accumulate more wealth, whereas the female wives were "of commoner or slave status" (Herskovits, 1938, p. 319) and occupied "the position of servants and [we]re obliged to do all the menial work" (Stayt, 1968, p. 143). Among the Igbo, according to Ifi Amadiume (1987, pp. 46-47), "the 'female husband' had the same rights as a man over his wife," although "[w]hen a woman paid money to acquire another woman, this was referred to as buying a slave."

On the contrary, among the Nandi in Kenya female husbands were not particularly rich (Smith Oboler, 1980, p. 74). Instead, they were women of advanced age who failed to bear a son. In fact, the driving force of these marriages was to provide a male heir who would continue with the male property line (Oboler, 1980, p. 69). The rights over offspring that Nandi female husbands had are common to other sub-Saharan unions between females. Among the Dinka in Nilotic Sudan, for example, widows married young girls, whom they handed over to men, and the offspring were regarded as children of the widow and her dead husband (Seligman and Seligman, 1932, pp. 164-165). The name of the aforementioned Dahomean union also derived from the "externalization," as it were, of reproduction: the female husband chose a man from among her acquaintances or family members to fulfill the function of "the buck" (Herskovits, 1938, pp. 301-303).

One part of the "grammatical principles" underlying these types of unions is related to the political economy of reproduction. Reproduction was necessary to ensure marital property, but that did not exclude marriages between females: the impossibility of offspring in the case of a union between two females and those with barren or widow wives was formally remedied via extra-marital sex between a man and the female wife. This shows the capacity of these unions for the social organisation—including space, kinship, and partnership arrangements—beyond heterosexuality. Gloria Wekker (2006, pp. 34-38) has shown that in the Afro-Surinamese working-class mati contemporary culture the "cowives" consider each other and each other's children kin. The prevalence of this institution among the descendants of enslaved Africans in Suriname, she has argued, indicates that certain West African "grammatical principles" related to kinship traveled to and further developed in this Caribbean Diaspora.

These marital unions in sub-Saharan Africa also suggest a non-biological epistemology of gender, and gender flexibility. Such marriages occurred between individuals in male and female *roles*, not between anatomically-defined "males" and "females." Thus anatomically-defined females—at least some—could become male by adopting the roles and the position traditionally ascribed to men. In other words, the female or male-sexed body did not prefigure the sort of social roles, status, and power these individuals could attain; gender, in that sense, was also flexible, and changeable. These marriages, therefore, could better be termed "heterogender," i.e., as happening between people with different genders as defined by social role rather than anatomic outlook.[12] It is important to note, moreover, that cross-genderism was not restricted to the institution of marriage: among the Igbo daughters could become sons, and among the Yorùbá an anatomically-defined female who belonged to the paternal kin would play the role of the father of a child as she enacted the obligations of the father's side (Amadiume, 1987; Oyêwùmí, 2016).

Similar systems of gender flexibility and gender variance beyond the binary are of course present in several world cultures, in both the past and the present. The so-called *berdaches* in pre-colonial Native America were male-bodied individuals who adopted the culturally-defined role of a woman, often donning women's garb; and female-bodied individuals took up the ways of men (Blackwood, 1984).[13] The *khanīth* in Oman, for example, are anatomically "male" but socially classified with women concerning the strict rules of segregation; their gender identity stems about their sexual behaviour as "passive" homosexuals, which shows that "[b]ehavio[u]r, and not anatomy, is the basis for the Omani conceptuali[s]ation of gender identity" (Wikan, 1982, p. 175). In the previously mentioned pre-colonial Yorùbá system the social categories of "women" and "men" did exist but seniority or the position within the household were much more important in defining the social position of a person. In Europe, genitally-defined gender only became paradigmatic from the later Middle Ages (Dangler, 2015, pp. 18-19; Karras, 2005, pp. 3-4).

The aforementioned marriages between anatomically-defined females were a *formally*-established institution.

As such, they were based upon the general premise of the centrality of reproduction, and within a system in which gender was not based on anatomy. In the next section, I consider some *informal* aspects defining the institution of marriage, including that between the female husband and wife; and I survey the conceptualisation of (homo)sexual desire within its cosmological framework.

Spirit-Induced Homosexual Desire and Heterogender Sex

> In the old days, if your parents found out that you were unwilling to marry, they would go and seek advice from faith healers, who would tell them you had a male spirit. They had to comply with the culture and do what had to be done with women like that. These women had to marry other women because they represented a male (…) you were allowed to marry another woman and look for a man so your wife could bear your children. You were allowed as many wives as you could pay *lobola* (bride price) for. But if people did not believe that you had a male spirit then your life was restricted (…) So, young women who were lesbians had to tell lies in order to live the way they wanted (Machida, 1996, pp. 118-119).

Tina Machida's account situates lesbianism as the condition underpinning marriage between females. Her essay recounts a lesbian collective experience in late twentieth-century Zimbabwe, but it includes the above reflection on "the old days." Machida interprets the healers' diagnose of lesbians' "male spirit" as constituting a lie, although many sub-Saharan cultures conceptualised same-sex desire as the result of the spirits' influence on humans. Among the Native American two-spirit people, too, gender flexibility was legitimised on spiritual visions or dreams (Blackwood, 1984). Before delving into the sexual epistemology whereby spirits shaped human sexuality, let us discuss the premise Machida puts forth when she considers homosexuality among the cultural reasons for marital unions between two females to happen.

For one thing, the formal nature of the marriages between female husband and wife in numerous sub-Saharan African cultures shows that they were an institutionalised form of social organisation and that, as such, their legitimacy was formally assured. As already explained, reproduction was at the centre of marriage unions as it was key to ensuring marital property; but the political economy of reproduction included extra-marital sex in the cases in which reproduction was impossible. What we lack is more information on the *informal* aspects related to the institution, which is key to establishing what role sexuality played in it. Whereas Machida affirms it played a foundational role, this issue has caused much controversy in the literature dealing with these marriages.

Scholars have held different views concerning whether the marital bond favoured sex between the female husband and the female wife. The aforementioned Herskovits' study is one of the most cited sources in works discussing the sexual implications of such an institution. In discuss-

ing "the goat given to the buck" type of marriage in Dahomey, Herskovits (1983) highlights the wealth accumulative drive that lies at the core of the already prosperous woman to perform such a marriage. He adds:

> This fact does not imply a homosexual relationship, although it is not to be doubted that occasionally homosexual women who have inherited wealth or have prospered economically establish compounds of their own and utilize their relationship to the women, they "marry" to satisfy themselves (Herskovits, 1983, pp. 319-320).

Scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Eileen Jensen Krige (1974) have denounced the misconception and even manipulation of institutions such as marriage between females by Western scholars. Krige (1974, p. 11) denounced that "Herskovits imputed to it sexual overtones that are foreign to the institution". Yet what Herskovits' observation reveals is the consideration that people whose sexual desire did not conform with the heterosexual one might have used the available institutional mechanisms on their behalf.[14] In other words, if formal marriages between females aimed at assuring marital property and wealth through reproduction, we should also assume that sex and sexuality in sub-Saharan cultures were not merely reproduction-oriented and that heterogender sex did take place, both within or without the bond of marriage.

Amadiume (1987, p. 7), for her part, condemns the use of "prejudiced interpretations" of African institutions by Black lesbians "to justify their choices of sexual alternatives which have roots and meanings in the West." Among others, Amadiume cites Lorde—the piece from which the introductory excerpt of this essay was extracted. Lorde cites Herskovits' work on Dahomey and affirms that some of the Dahomean marriages between women undergirded "lesbian relationships" (2007, p. 50). Sexual relations arguably do not figure among the *formal* prerogatives guiding the institution of marriage between women. However, the informal aspects are central in my attempt to identify the "grammatical principles" underlying the sub-Saharan sexual epistemologies. Oyêwùmí (2016, p. 63), for her part, considers procreation as the primary function of Yorùbá marriage but mentions the institution of *àlè*, through which sexual relationships were established between both married and unmarried people. Unfortunately, however, she does not discuss it further. She also dismisses "homosexuality" as an "option" used to obtain "sexual satisfaction," although she does not provide any evidence for stating it.

Ideas and practices related to sexuality are conformed by both formal and informal aspects, however, and these, too, vary historically and cross-culturally. Evelyn Blackwood, in fact, proposed a typology of relations between females that was based on the level of integration of such relations into larger social processes, thus distinguishing between those which pertain only to the immediate social context (informal) and those which are part of a network or social structure extending beyond the relationship (formal) (Blackwood, 1986, p. 10). Edward

Evan Evans-Pritchard's oft-cited article on the Azande in southern Sudan offers interesting insights to envision both the formal and the informal aspects. Evans-Pritchard refers to *bagburu*, an Azande ceremony that formalised the friendship of two females. Similar to the blood-brotherhood rituals between Azande men, the *bagburu* did not involve sex—at least formally—but rather broadened women's social and trade networks. However, the anthropologist affirms, "Zande men think that this bond of friendship between women may be a respectable cover for homosexual intimacies" (Evans-Pritchard, 2003, p. 100). Evans-Pritchard transcribes lengthy parts of the accounts of two male informants, and while on the one hand they reflect some patriarchally-informed male anxiety in the face of female homosociability, on the other hand they indicate that there is more than the projection of such anxiety. First, these men employ the terminology which is used in semi-formal homosexual bonds among Azande men ("boy wives"), based on gender crossing, which resonates with the above-mentioned marriages between females. Moreover, when referring to a couple made of two women, one of the men asserts: "The one who is the wife cooks porridge and a fowl and brings them to the one who is the husband." The terminology confirms that they were considered husband and wife even without marriage, as they were discussing the friendship-sealing ritual. And, according to Evans-Pritchard, the same man adds:

> The wife puts water before her lover as though she were her [male] husband. She has her penis in her bag – she takes it around with her. They carve a sweet potato into the shape of a circumcised penis. The woman-husband makes a hole through the sweet potato and then ties it with cord through it to her loins so that she is like a male. She washes herself with water and anoints herself with oil (Evans-Pritchard, 2003, p. 101).

What these reported declarations reveal is the informal aspect of an institution that, in the case of the Azande, was not even formalised as marriage but was used by women for sexual purposes. Yet other men declared to Evans-Pritchard that "female homosexuality (lesbianism) was practiced in polygamous homes in the past and still (1930) is sometimes." Barry Adam also mentioned "lesbianism (…) among [Azande] co-wives" (Adam, 1986, p. 24). Again, this shows that even if institutions such as polygynous households, ceremonies of friendship seal between women, or marriage between females did not *formally* stipulate sexual relations, it is not unreasonable to think "speculatively" that heterogender sex between the female spouses could constitute the *informal* realm of such marital institution. In Machida's account, the "lesbian" desire – induced by a male spirit – actually constituted one among the informal but culturally intelligible reasons for the existence of the institution.

In fact, let's return to her account. Machida tells us that, if found "unwilling to marry," the parents would take the woman to a faith healer "who would tell them [she] had a male spirit." That, according to her, had a univocal cultural meaning and entailed a specific procedure: "They had to comply with the culture and do what had to be done with women like that," which is "to marry [an]other wom[a]n because [she] represented a male." Similarly, an elderly Zimbabwean woman interviewed by Marc Epprecht (1998, p. 636) suggested that the woman possessed by a male spirit (such as a *sviriko* or *tokoloshe*) "could take multiple female 'wives,' or refuse to be married" to a man. This conceptualisation of homosexual desire finds an echo elsewhere in the continent. James Christensen (1954, pp. 92-93, 143), for example, noted that among the Ashanti people (in modern-day Ghana), women who have relations with other women are described as "feminine men (*obaa banyins*)" and considered to have a heavy soul. Wekker, too, showed that mati women in the Surinamese diaspora are thought to be driven by "a male god (*apuku*)" who is the one who is sexually attracted to women. Likewise, in Morocco men who are unable to marry and establish a family are said to be possessed by a *jinnīyya* (female spirit), usually to ʿĀisha Qandīsha (Crapanzano, 1973, 1981; González Vázquez, 2013, p. 64).

In the *bori* epistemology, as practiced by the Black diaspora in Tunisia, a human's inability to marry was also interpreted as the result of the intervention of the opposite-sex spirit on the human (Tremearne, 1914, p. 137). In his 1914 account on Tunisian *bori*, Arthur Tremearne asserts that all human beings have at least one *bori* of the same sex, although from puberty until marriage most humans also have a *bori* of the opposite sex (Tremearne, 1914, p. 19). Whereas the same-sex *bori* is "a kind of second soul" which resides "[s]ometimes outside the body, sometimes in the head" of the human, the relationship with the opposite-sex *bori* presents more complexities. According to Tremearne, humans have sexual relations with the opposite-sex *bori*, thus "when a boy or girl thinks of marriage, he or she must consult his or her female or male *bori*, for it does not like being ousted by a human rival—hence the precautions taken to protect the bride and bridegroom" (Tremearne, 1914, p. 393.) Some *bori*, particularly female ones, even "try to injure their human rivals". This shows that spirits' jealousy of "their" humans' (sexual) involvement with other humans operates as the force intervening humans' relational and sexual lives.

The jealousy of the opposite-sex spirit also comes through as the driving force of its intervention in "its" humans' sexuality in other sub-Saharan and diasporic cultures. According to Kjersti Larsen (2008, p. 118), in Zanzibar a man who has sex with other men is said to be driven by the jealousy of his female spirit, who makes sure that he is neither attracted to other women, nor attractive to women. The jealousy of the god also appears in Wekker's work on the Afro-Surinamese Winti cosmology as structuring the explanation of same-sex sexual desire. According to her, the strong male god "carrying" every mati woman is jealous of "its" woman's engagement in sexual relationships with flesh-and-blood males, and thus makes her feel attracted to other women (Wekker, 2006, pp. 192-193).

All the above examples convey a conception of human sexual desire as shaped by spirits. And yet, some differ-

ences can be noted. In some cases, the sexual orientation of the human (influenced/informed by the spirit) is framed within a heteronormative paradigm: "lesbian" desire is either associated with masculinity ("lesbians" are "feminine men," among the Ashanti, or "represent a male," in Machida's account on Zimbabwe) and they are associated with "heavy souls" and male spirits or gods, as in Afro-Surinamese culture and Zanzibar. Female masculinity is one of the constant patterns in the history of sexuality and across the globe, according to Leila Rupp (2009).

In the mati universe explored by Wekker, the (sexual) self is conceived less fixedly. In the Afro-Surinamese Winti cosmology, human subjectivity is understood as "multiple, malleable, dynamic, and possessing male and female elements" (Wekker, 2006, p. 192). Thus "[i]n the mati work no real, authentic, fixed self is claimed, but one particularly strong, masculine instance of the multiplicitous 'I,' who loves to lie down with women, is foregrounded" (Wekker, 2006, p. 193, see also pp. 102-106). A similar fluidity emerges from the conceptualisation current Native American queers—who refer to themselves as "two-spirit people"—are putting forward based on the pre-colonial epistemologies in which homosexuality was defined with spirituality (Lang, 2003, pp. 207-208).

When affirming that people who are unable to marry are considered to be prevented from it by the jealous *bori* of the opposite sex, Tremearne does not mention same-sex desire explicitly, nor does Vincent Capranzano for the Moroccan case. Yet still, the possession of a (strong) opposite-sex spirit as an explanation for the failure to comply with heteronormative prerogatives such as marriage seems to fall under similar epistemological patterns to those in which same-sex is explicitly stated. Even more, the "inability to marry" appears in Machida's and Epprecht's Zimbabwean informant's account, which indicates that unwillingness to marry is connected to—if not used to subtly indicate—homosexuality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above-mentioned similarities and differences take us back to history and to where we started: enslaved African populations were ethnically, linguistically, and more broadly culturally heterogeneous. So were the diasporas into which they settled, and which they at the same time shaped and were shaped by. I have here looked at some general principles underlying the gender and sexual sub-Saharan "grammar" which we can speculate that travelled—to a larger or lesser degree—to the different world diasporas where the enslaved settled, and where it mixed with the local culture. In the trans-Saharan case, as already mentioned, there were shared conceptions and spiritual-cum-social non-anthropocentric frameworks. To what extent the gender and sexual epistemes were shared and how they merged is beyond the scope of this article. Cultural conceptions and practices are very much bound to history and local specificities, thus in a way each diaspora and each Black community would have constituted a particular case. And yet, sub-Saharan communities

throughout the Muslim Mediterranean did form the kind of community support systems that have been described in other Atlantic diasporas. In the Tunisian case, particularly elderly women held important degrees of authority and power over the community. As I have shown, the women-led rituals and households remained the strongest form of West African community bonding in Tunisia throughout the nineteenth and up to the early twentieth century.

Having these historical insights into account, while at the same time acknowledging the trans-historical elements which structured diasporic consciousness, the kind of "common orientations to reality" *pace* Mintz and Price, and Lorde's remembrance of "the old ways of another place," I have looked at the "grammatical principles" underlying formal sub-Saharan historical institutions and conceptions of gender and sexuality. The widespread forms of marriage between a female husband and a wife in different sub-Saharan cultures testify that social roles were not restricted to specific anatomic features, nor to social and political organisation including space, kinship, and partnership arrangements. Reproduction was at the centre of *some* such marriage arrangements for its key role in ensuring marital property, but that, too, did not hinder forms of marriage in which reproduction was impossible. The political economy of reproduction envisioned extra-marital heterosexual sex to provide offspring for couples made by barren, widow, and anatomically-defined females. Whereas the institution, as such, is unlikely to have traveled to the diaspora, the gender and sexual "grammatical principles" underlying it are, instead, likely to have made it to the diaspora. Especially because these general principles were embedded in dynamic, albeit ancestral, symbolic systems.

Despite differences, the connections among the ways in which diverse African cultures have conceived not only of non-biological gender but also of (homo)sexuality are striking. The sub-Saharan as well as Maghribi non-anthropocentric conceptions of same-sex (or hetero-gender) desire emerged as being induced by the spirit of the opposite sex, whose jealousy influenced the human's desire. The jealous female or male spirit thus made the human exclusively attracted to and attractive to same-sex humans. Building on different sources, I have argued that "heterogender" sexuality might have been among the informal aspects informing the constitution of marriages between female husbands and wives. More important for the issue of the Black diaspora in Tunisia is that whereas homosexuality was not explicitly mentioned as the effect of spirits' intervention in early twentieth-century Tunisian *bori* rituals, the principle of jealousy as an impediment to marriage between humans was. Perhaps, then, the conceptual changes between al-Timbuktāwī's missive (with his mentioning of *al-musāḥaqa*) and Tremearne's work (in which a more vaguely-defined inability to marry comes through) can be attributed to the passing of slightly over a century and the consequent epistemological shifts in definitions of gender and sex.

By excavating into the "grammatical principles" underlying the gender and sexual epistemologies in several

sub-Saharan cultures, this essay has also aimed at problematising the narratives which assume that gender is universal cross-culturally, as Oyêwùmí (2016) has pointed out. Hers is an important warning: "by writing about any society through a gendered perspective, scholars necessarily write gender into that society" (Oyêwùmí, 2016, p. xv). Because Western hegemony in the production of knowledge is also entrenched in the system of global hierarchies, the production of feminist scholarship situated in the West has a formative effect on the way we envision global history and societies. In this regard, this article has aimed at complicating the Eurocentric genealogy of "homosexual identity" under capitalism and the modern global world represented by the rubric of "global queering." The past and Africa are still too often conceived of as "backward" and "provincial," and yet also increasingly evoked as a template for theorising and for conceiving of our personal and collective past ancestry. "Ezili, not queer politics, not gender theory" is, according to Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2018, p. 4), "the prism" through which many contemporary Caribbean authors "project their vision of creative genders and sexualities" and, consequently, the prism she uses to theorise them. At the same time, queer and feminist studies, as well as history, anthropology, and theory must continue to decolonise their methodologies, curricula, and ethnocentric universalising narratives by drawing on the global South and subaltern subjects and communities such as the enslaved sub-Saharans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1   Emphasis added. The essay, entitled "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," was originally published in 1978.
2   A white, European scholar like myself writing about Black diasporic communities in Tunisia from the perspective of gender & sexual practices raises questions of positionality and power in academia. I acknowledge the various categories around which my privilege is articulated. At the same time, there's more to my identity and especially to my politics that have driven me to engage in this investigation. I am also a precarised Basque queer woman whose research is politically-informed in favour of dismantling patriarchy, racism, capitalism, colonialism and heteronormativity. These are oppressive regimes that are never discrete but rather function intersectionally (as we've learnt from Crenshaw and others), which mingle with other categories around which hierarchy is structured, sometimes unexpectedly, in complex social, cultural, and political systems that are, as yet, never void of. It is in this spirit that I pursue what I call "a decolonial approach to historical anthropology."
3   An example of the Afrocentric approach is Paul E. Lovejoy (2009). New ways of understanding the Middle East and North

Africa are emerging, and several conferences on the Maghrib as the product of trans-historical creolisation and racial regimes have taken place in the past few years. The "Maghrib Conference on Race, Gender and Migration" held in Fez in December 2019, was co-organised by the scholars Yacine Daddi Addoun, Marie-Pierre Ballarin, Mariana Candido, Timothy Cleaveland, Myriam Cottias, Brahim El Guabli, Chouki El Hamel and Moha Ennaji. See also Laura Menin (2020).
4   I have worked on the original Arabic text in its manuscript form as well as its two available transcriptions: Aḥmad al-Timbuktāwī. (1808) "Hatk al-sitr 'ammā 'alayhi sudāni Tūnis min al-kufr," A-MSS-09564(02), Tunisian National Library. The transcriptions have been taken from Temimi (1994b) and El Mansour and Harrak (2000, pp. 49-79). My citations include page numbers of the manuscript, followed by both Temimi's and El Mansour/Harrak's transcriptions.
5   See the complete citation of the manuscript and transcribed source on note 4.
6   On Fuuta Jalon, see John H. Hanson (2017).
7   For a brief survey of the different definitions of Hausa, see Edmund Abaka (2011, p. 186).
8   Even by the beginning of the twentieth century the chief priestesses had to be West African and speak Hausa to direct the rituals (Tremearne, 1914, p. 30).
9   I also investigate whether the sexual intimacy that the rituals allegedly promoted was perceived as disrupting the domestic Tunisian social and sexual order (or not).
10 While the ontological turn in the social sciences in the last few decades has emphasized the necessity of conceiving of space and social relations as including non-humans, few works have focused on the Maghrib, despite the importance of *junūn*, as stated in González Vázquez (2017).
11 In this article, and partly building on Blackwood and Wieringa (1999), I use "females" to refer to the anatomical body, whereas "woman" indicates the social gender which is commonly thought to be associated with females in many cultures.
12 I am borrowing the term from scholarship on pre-colonial Native American tribes. Tietz (1996), cited in Lang (2003, p. 206).
13 Interestingly, the term "berdache" derived from an Arabic term for male prostitutes or "kept boys" (Angelino and Shedd, 1955, pp. 121-126, cited in Lang, 2003, p. 215).
14 March Epprecht (1998, p. 634) has a similar take on the Zimbabwean custom that ensured that children born through extra-marital relations still belong to the husband's family: "[m]en who felt sexually attracted to males did not need to fear that this feeling would compromise the socially-necessary performance of heterosexual virility."

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