

Death without mourning: homosexuality, *homo sacer*, and bearable loss in Central Africa

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Introduction

Recent scholarly investigations on LGBTIQ people in Africa have pointed out that so-called African cultures and family values often provide ideological support for anti-homosexual legislation enacted by a number of African governments since the early 2000s (see Nyeck 2019; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013; van Klinken 2014; 2011; Kaoma 2012; 2009; Nyanzi 2015; 2013). Officially, these anti-homosexual laws aimed at protecting the so-called traditional African heterosexual family against the danger of homosexuality, which was generally construed as antisocial, anti-kinship, anti-procreative, and above all ‘bare’¹ sexual behaviour. These moral and social norms, which enjoin any mature African citizen to form a family and/or to procreate, have often served as the main justification for the current witch hunts against LGBTI people in many African societies (cf. Nagadya and Morgan 2005; Ndjio 2016; 2013). In various African countries where social and political homophobia is endemic, citizens who transgress these pro-marital and natalist ideologies by deliberately adopting a non-conventional sexual identity or by engaging in an economy of sexual childlessness and non-reproductive sexual practices are persecuted legally and ostracized socially. Yet in his ethnographic study about the lives of the effeminate *yan daudu* male homosexuals in the Hausa-speaking region of northern Nigeria, for instance, Rudio Gaudio argues that these same-sex loving men who fulfil their moral and social obligations by marrying and having children are less stigmatized and can even enjoy some tolerance from the community (Gaudio 2009).

Taking up these discussions about the complex representation of sex and gender non-conforming subjects in sub-Saharan Africa, I investigate the ‘ungrievable’ deaths of some single and childless homosexual activists in Cameroon who were not given the proper funerals as is generally the case in Cameroonian society. I will show how same-sex loving men and women who not only refuse to comply with the hegemonic heteronormativity of postcolonial African societies but also challenge what Lee Edelman has termed the politics of ‘reproductive futurism’ (Edelman 2004) are excluded from the regime of mourning when they die.

The article is guided by a set of questions highlighting the growing problematization of death in the cases of some sexually non-conforming people in the wake of the generalization of a politics of sexual morality in present-day

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¹By ‘bare sexuality’ or ‘bare sexual behaviour’, I refer here to an unproductive sexual practice and attitude that contrast with the officially promoted productive or reproductive sexuality.

Cameroon. How does the sexual orientation and identity of a deceased person impact on the regime of mourning in Cameroonian society, where there is a growing distinction between deaths that are socially and culturally framed as 'grievable' and those construed as endurable? Why has same-sex identity become an intolerable evil or an unacceptable wickedness that makes some deaths not a sorrowful moment? What are the socio-moral representations of death in relation to the demise of non-reproductive homosexual subjects? Why do Cameroonian mourners, who often engage in endless weeping upon the loss of their kin, show no compassion for the death of an unmarried and non-procreative homosexual person? What explains the exclusion of the dead bodies of some homosexuals from funerary rites? What are the ideological, cultural and social underpinnings of this virulent form of homophobia that follows some homosexual subjects even after their deaths?

Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998), or a sacred yet dispensable subject who can be killed or left to die at any time in total indifference, this article argues that the prevalence of both homophobic and procreationist ideologies celebrating *vitalis moralis*, or the ethics of life, and reproduction at the expense of allegedly unproductive homosexual eroticism results in the casting of unmarried and childless same-sex loving men and women in the role of villains undermining the continent's demographic dynamism. They are turned into *homines sacri* whose life and death are inconsequential, because they have already been framed as dispensable, useless or bare.

This article is primarily based on field research conducted between 2008 and 2017 in the gay communities of Douala and Yaoundé in Cameroon. My long-term collaboration with several local LGBTIQ associations² enabled me to collect data on the predicament of many underprivileged LGBTIQ individuals who were experiencing various forms of stigmatization on the part of the general public as well as their families. In addition, I had access to LGBTIQ associations' databases. The information gathered includes homophobic attacks, arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, and illness or death of peers. Information was also gathered on the lives of marginalized LGBTIQ subjects during visits to a number of patients hospitalized in public hospitals or by attending the funerals of some local homosexual activists whose deaths mobilized members of the LGBTIQ community at large.

The first part of the article discusses the place of funeral and mourning in contemporary Cameroon – which is often presented as a mourning society. The second section deals with the *de-ritualization* of the dead bodies of some homosexual subjects, as well as the exclusion of their deaths from the moral economy of mourning even by their own family members. The third part focuses on the new orders of truths on homosexuality and homosexual subjects produced by nativist and pro-natalist ideologies that problematize homosexual eroticism in relation to a certain ethic of life. These discourses question the will of homosexual individuals to establish a family or to procreate.

²For example, in the course of a PEPFAR/UNAIDS-funded project on HIV/AIDS infection among the local MSM (men who have sex with men) of which I was the Principal Investigator, I collaborated with four local LGBTIQ associations that were involved in the project.

Death and mourning in Cameroon

Like many Central African societies (see Vaughan 2008; Jindra and Noret 2012), Cameroon is a mourning society where any misfortune or tragic event that negatively affects people's lives generally triggers lamentation (see Gufler 2000; Mebenga Tamba 2016; Ndjio 2006). Yet despite the numerous tragic and unhappy situations that cause sorrow, no heart-breaking event arouses more grief and pain than death, especially when it concerns the passing of close friends, trustworthy colleagues, kin, family members, and so on. No other painful occurrence makes people feel as miserable as death.

Death may be a trigger of social disorders within a society; it might exacerbate conflicts within the community and among family members, especially when it prompts witchcraft accusations that the deceased might have been mystically killed by a relative, or when it leads to a struggle for control over the deceased's fortune among siblings and other family members (Goody 1962; Ashforth 2005; Geschiere 1997). However, death may also reinforce communal spirit and solidarity among family members, or dramatize a sense of belonging among members of a clan or an ethnic group, as Anthony Appiah's seminal *In My Father's House* indicates (Appiah 1992; see also Geschiere 2005; Reynolds Whyte 2005). This is why people generally mourn on the occasion of the death of a close relative.

Yet over the past three decades mourning has taken a more dramatic turn in this country whose cities have been transformed into 'necropolises' (Ndjio 2006), and where insecurity, violence and terror have become the daily experience of the vast majority of city dwellers whose lives are permanently subject to the power of uncertainty, and above all to the tyranny of death. Because of the pervasiveness of death and the polymorphous presence of tragedy, contemporary Cameroonian society has become a grieving society where corpse removals, funerals and burial ceremonies permeate everyday life (see Beuvier 2014; Gufler 2000; Ndjio 2006). Indeed, in most of the country's urban areas, it is common to see long processions of mourners every weekend, as they block the city's main roads while accompanying, amid wailing chants, the dead body of their relative or family member from the mortuary or the deceased's home to the cemetery (cf. Mebenga Tamba 2015; 2009).

By a mourning society I mean here not only a society where one 'cries the death', to paraphrase Hermann Gufler, who has studied the rituals of death among the Yamba populations of the western Grassfields region of Cameroon (Gufler 2000), but also a society that saturates its public sphere with funeral services dramatizing the power of death and its grip on the lives of its members (Ashforth 2005; Jindra and Noret 2012; Dilger and Luig 2013). In addition, a mourning society is a society in which it is virtually impossible not to be regularly disturbed or annoyed by the lamenting cries of women from the neighbourhood, or the weeping of a neighbouring friend, colleague or fellow passenger in the bus or taxi, saddened by the unexpected demise of a close relative or family member. Moreover, the concept accounts for a community in which people spend much of their time noisily mourning loved ones who have passed away, especially when the deceased was the family's breadwinner (Gufler 2000). People often weep so copiously that they collapse or lose strength and have to be taken to a local healthcare centre for emergency care.

Contemporary Cameroonian society attaches so much importance to mourning that the mortuaries of some public hospitals set aside a special place to enable people to mourn their deceased relatives without disturbing other visitors or patients. Because of the growing social and symbolic importance of mourning in recent years, several groups of professional female mourners are often hired by bereaved families to animate funerals and wakes with their affected and exaggerated lamentations; their prices vary according to the nature of the women's spectacle, and especially the tonality of their crying or screaming (see Beuvier 2014; De Boeck and Plissart 2004). Weeping for deceased people with whom one has no social or cultural ties is one of the mutations in the African moral economy of mourning noted by Cameroonian anthropologist Luc Mebenga Tamba. These manifestations mark a new phenomenon, distinct from mourning rituals linked to a regime of kinship and ethnicity or friendship bonds, where it is assumed that we mourn only those with whom we share some ties or connections (Mebenga Tamba 2015).

Despite the fact that people in contemporary Cameroon increasingly respond to the death of their nearest and dearest with weeping, most Cameroonians still discriminate when mourning their next of kin or relatives who have passed away. As will be demonstrated in the next section, the same people who are keen to give themselves up to unending mourning and unrelenting laments when some members of their family pass away often show indifference when other members die.

***Homo sacer*: the untouchables, the spectres and ungrievable death**

In urban popular language in Cameroon, *pleureurs* (convulsive mourners) refers to people who are unable to contain their grief, bereaved by the death of their loved ones. Yet Cameroonians do not always feel grief when death strikes in their community. This discrimination, which is at the heart of the mourning regime in Cameroon, can be related to pervasive customary cultural practices and imaginations that establish a moral distinction between deaths. Indeed, in this country, as in many other African societies, some types of death are represented as 'good deaths' while others are construed as 'bad deaths' (van der Geest 2004; Kalusa and Vaughan 2013). In her analysis of the social representation of bereavement among the Meru populations of Tanzania, for example, Liv Haram notes that these mountain people generally conceive of death in terms of 'good death' and 'bad death'. She defines a good death as one reserved for 'people who have lived long and prosperous lives or have been blessed with lots of children and great-grandchildren, and have lived as good, moral people' (Haram 2013: 226–7). People whose deaths are perceived as good deaths will be 'properly and heavily mourned' (*ibid.*: 227). Moreover, these deceased people will be given a 'proper funeral with many visiting mourners' (*ibid.*: 227). There are some types of death that are considered 'bad' because they are 'a waste of time and money' (*ibid.*: 223) for the bereaved families or relatives. From an emotional point of view, a good death is generally experienced by many people as unbearable and mournful, while a bad death is often lived as bearable and untroubled. The spread of HIV/AIDS has increased bad deaths in most African communities, where people are tired of attending funerals and burial ceremonies (*ibid.*: 223).

This article proposes a new interpretation of these tricky concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deaths. It does so by underlining not the socio-economic profile or social status of the deceased, on which most studies rely for an understanding of death as either good or bad; instead, it focuses on marginality, notably the marginal sexual identity of the deceased person, as a critical concept to analyse the framing of some deaths as bad or bearable.

Since the explosion of a violent political and social homophobia that has rocked most African countries over the past decade (see Geschiere 2017; Epprecht 2013; 2008; Hoard 2007; Kaoma 2012; 2009; Bosia and Weiss 2013; van Klinken 2014; 2011), people who are declared to be or suspected of being ‘homosexual’ have become the new recluses in a number of African communities. Even public medical institutions have been turned into places of medical discrimination, effectively excluding patients whose unconventional sexual identity does not fit the heteronormative values promoted by many postcolonial African governments (cf. Ndjio 2012). In postcolonial medical discrimination, in a certain sense patients identified as ‘homosexual’ have taken the place formerly occupied by mentally disturbed people, lepers and HIV/AIDS sufferers. If the current medical order has more or less trivialized or ‘normalized’ the presence in health centres of other marginal social categories, this does not yet seem to be the case for patients identified as ‘homosexual’.

The recent eruption of sick homosexual bodies in the public arena has marked a significant epochal shift in the moral economy of the stigmatization of ‘homosexual’ subjects, who are increasingly seen as dangerous ‘sexual aliens’ (Ndjio 2016). This ‘othering’ of sexual minorities should be seen in the context of the Cameroonian government’s anti-homosexual politics and its violent exercise of sovereign power over the lives of persons identifying as homosexual. The dissident sexuality of the latter threatens the alleged homogeneous heterosexual Cameroonian community, while destabilizing the national sexual boundaries the postcolonial state has established between so-called ‘authentic’ and ‘autochthonous’ sexual practices and those construed as ‘alien’ (see Ndjio 2012; Ladž 2011; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013). In addition, a dominant nativist representation of homosexuality as an un-African, Western-imported sexual practice has led to the profiling of ‘homosexual’ subjects who are considered to be uprooted Africans who flout so-called African traditional sexual norms and values (cf. Ndjio 2013). In some instances, same-sex loving people are politically or socially branded as enemies from within or traitors to the nation, and therefore routinely subjected to state violence (see Ndjio 2016).

In many respects, in contemporary Cameroonian society homosexual subjects now epitomize a modern type of *homo sacer*, a marginal figure in Roman law that was popularized by Giorgio Agamben (1998). In contrast to Agamben’s discussion of this concept with respect to sovereign power and a certain form of biopolitics, I conceptualize this notion with reference to individuals who, because of their dissident sexual identity and orientation, have lost the social right to be mourned according to their society’s customs. The figure of *homo sacer* symbolizes those outcasts whose demise is similar to those of the *chiens écrasés* (run-over dogs) for which nobody is willing to make a death announcement; this concept also refers to people who are buried like mad dogs. These are people whose lives have been made ‘*une vie nue*’ (a bare life, in the sense of an unworthy and

less valuable life) because their very existence is thought to bring dishonour to their family and their community.

In times of what Simon Watney calls the expansion of the ‘politics of intense moral purity’ (1990: 100), the archetype of a barren and unattached ‘homosexual’ becomes not only ‘the spectre of a world driven by desire *sans* ethical commitment’, as Jean Comaroff (2007: 223) would put it, but also the iconic figure of someone who can be subjected to a bare death. The homosexual subject is a symbol of the untouchable: their dead body cannot be touched by any family member because it is associated with notions of disgust, danger and pollution.³ In many respects, the agony of people identified as ‘homosexual’, whose family and community members leave them unattended in hospitals, where they often experience medical neglect, or who are deprived of their basic human right to be properly buried or offered a decent funeral, recalls João Biehl’s description of poor Afro-Brazilians as *homines sacri* who are confined to ‘zones of abandonment’ because they belong neither to the world of the living nor to that of the dead (Biehl 2001).

In Cameroon, as in a number of sub-Saharan African societies, the bodies of heterosexually identified subjects belong either to the community or to the family (see Reynolds Whyte 2005; Geissler and Prince 2013). Sometimes the state or government can lay claim to the dead bodies of citizens who are identified as homosexuals for purposes of juridical or police investigation. Yet a number of cases recorded during my fieldwork suggest that the bodies of persons identified as ‘homosexuals’ belong to nobody; that is why they can be abandoned in the mortuaries or dumped in communal graves. When the thirty-one-year-old LGBTIQ activist with whom I was working died of AIDS in 2011, his body was abandoned in the mortuary of Yaoundé Central Hospital by his relatives, who had not helped the deceased during the long illness that finally claimed his life. Both his illness and his death dramatized the conflict with his devoutly religious family over his sexual orientation. Indeed, the young LGBTIQ activist considered himself the ‘black sheep of [his] family that no one cares about’. When asked to explain his relationship with his family during an education workshop I was coordinating together with a human rights lawyer from Yaoundé in a local LGBTIQ headquarters in 2010, Olivier⁴ made these comments:

I used to live with my uncle, my mother’s younger brother, and everything was fine between him and me, even if there were rumours circulating in the neighbourhood that I was a homosexual and slept with men. But I always denied it each time he asked me about my alleged homosexuality. Unfortunately, one evening he came home unexpectedly from a trip and caught me having sex in the living room with my boyfriend at the time. I was thrown out of his house like an unclean person [*malpropre*]. I had to give up my studies because he stopped paying my school fees. Now I no longer have family; my new family are my friends from the LGBTIQ movement. We support each other; that is the most important thing for me.

Following Olivier’s death, the hospital authorities made several unsuccessful public announcements and threatened to bury the young man’s body in a *fosse*

³On this notion, see Mary Douglas (1984 [1966]).

⁴Pseudonyms are used in some case studies in this article.

commune (communal grave) if family members did not come to collect it. They changed their minds only after some members of an LGBTIQ association to which the deceased was connected finally agreed to take care of this unwanted body. Being left to be buried by people who are not the deceased's relatives is one of the most socially unacceptable forms of desacralization and dehumanization of the dead in Cameroonian society. Likewise, being buried in a communal grave and away from one's soil or ancestral land is tantamount to equating the dead body with that of a mad dog or the most despised or marginal social figure. And this is what happened to the dead body of the young, unmarried LGBTIQ activist.

Thus, by refusing to retrieve from the hospital mortuary the body of their deceased kin and by relinquishing it to the hospital authorities, who themselves handed it over to members of a local LGBTIQ association, who in turn finally managed to bury it in a small cemetery, the family clearly indicated that this body, which had already been socially alienated during the man's lifetime, was no longer theirs or had ceased to belong to the community.

We don't mourn faggots

Dying gay and childless is a double punishment you can inflict on your family.⁵

During my fieldwork in various neighbourhoods of Yaoundé and Douala, my two research assistants, who were connected to the local LGBTIQ milieu, and I recorded a number of cases that give some hints as to the way in which contemporary Cameroonian society deals with the deaths of people with transgressive sexual identities or of people identified as homosexual and childless in their lifetime. Over the course of June 2011, for example, a well-known Cameroonian LGBTIQ activist died of infections complicated by HIV/AIDS at Yaoundé Central Hospital, where he was hospitalized less than two weeks after his release from Kondengui Central Prison having spent more than a year in custody on suspicion of 'homosexuality'. No local tabloid alluded to the passing of a man who was a prominent figure in LGBTIQ activism in Cameroon. Nor did his death trigger any form of mobilization of the community at large, as had happened when the populist and anti-homosexual intellectual Charles Ateba Eyene died on 21 February 2014. In the family house where the funeral took place (despite the reluctance of the head of the family, who had initially requested that the funeral be held elsewhere), only a few people attended what some people from the neighbourhood branded a '*deuil d'un pédé*' (funeral of a faggot). Even the famous *veillées funèbres* (funeral wakes), which generally attract many people from the neighbourhood, recorded a very poor attendance. Most of the participants were the deceased's fellow homosexuals, who reportedly were admonished by one family member to keep a low profile and not to exhibit themselves in such a gathering where gay people were not welcome.

At his burial, which took place in a small cemetery in Yaoundé, only four of his LGBTIQ colleagues showed up to pay their last respects to a dear friend with

⁵An informant, Yaoundé, 28 June 2012.

whom they were engaged in the gay liberation movement in Cameroon. None of his close relatives considered it necessary to take part in the funeral – not even his mother, despite him being her only male child. She, like other family members, had severed all ties after the deceased's sexual orientation had been disclosed publicly. This explains why there was neither mourning nor weeping for this asocial death.

Despite the fact that Mr Eloundou was a fervent and devout Christian, he was denied the right to be buried as a Christian because the Catholic clergy were categorically opposed to the idea of a homosexual man, who epitomized what Michel Maffesoli (2012: 127) would call '*la sexualité du diable*' (the devil's sexuality), being laid to rest in their sacred land. Even the priest who was hired by his friends to say a prayer for the deceased's soul turned down the request when he learned that the dead man had been a homosexual and a strong advocate for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Cameroon.

Mr Eloundou's death highlighted the social alienation and radical otherness of a young man who was marked by his family as a sexual outcast when he came out in 2006. Indeed, in an unpublished report⁶ documenting some aspects of Mr Eloundou's life, it was revealed that, prior to his death, the young man was sharing a studio with one of his friends after being expelled from the family home by his father, who reportedly threatened to kill his 'dishonourable' son if he ever set foot in his home again. Only one of his older sisters, who lived abroad, did not sever ties with him. In that document, Mr Eloundou explained why he was ostracized by his family to the point of being forced to give up his studies because nobody was willing to support him financially. One of the reasons why his father could not forgive him for his homosexuality, he stated, was that he was the only male among his parents' seven children. His father, a retired army officer, did not want to pass on his inheritance to a homosexual son.

Likewise, during his lifetime, Eric O. Lembembe, a journalist and well-known LGBTIQ activist with whom I had previously collaborated on several research projects in Cameroon, maintained conflictual relations with his close relatives; they did not tolerate the fact that he was openly homosexual and very active in LGBTIQ liberation activism in Cameroon. Like Mr Eloundou, he was compelled to vacate the family home and find a new house elsewhere, because his parents feared that he could 'contaminate' his two younger brothers with his homosexuality, as he once explained to me during one of our conversations. Thus, when he was brutally killed in July 2013 in what looked like a homophobic murder, I did not see any of his family members mourning or weeping for the loss of the thirty-three-year-old man who was affectionately called '*mademoiselle*' or '*la go*' (young and sexy girl) by his friends. None of his family members showed any hint of sorrow or grief. Despite the fact that Eric Lembembe was a social junior who had not yet fulfilled his social obligations towards his community (to marry and have children), his family found his death not too hard to bear.

During the *veillées funèbres* that I and some members of two well-known local LGBTIQ human rights associations attended, I was confused by the unfriendly and unemotional ambience of the ceremony, which contrasted with the generally

⁶This report was written by the Association pour la Défense des Droits des Homosexuels (ADEFHO) in Cameroon, with which I have been collaborating since 2007.

animated and lively atmosphere of such an event. My confusion led me to ask a middle-aged man who was sitting next to me why the vigil for the young man had attracted only a few people and why there was so little show of mourning, unlike what would otherwise be common practice in Cameroonian society. The man gave me this simple and straightforward response that alerted me to the changes in the local imagination and experience of mourning: '*Chez nous les Beti on ne pleure pas les pédés* [We the Beti people don't mourn faggots].'
'*Le deuil c'est pour les personnes normales et non les gens qui font les choses du diable* [Funerals are reserved for normal people and not for people who do devilish things].' The man did not need to explain further why the bereaved family was unwilling to give a proper and respectful funeral to its deceased member, or why the *deuil* (funeral) of the homosexual person was de-culturalized and de-Africanized to the point of bearing a resemblance to funerals performed in the Western world. Indeed, what I witnessed that evening in a popular neighbourhood of Yaoundé had nothing to do with the highly culturalized and ethnicized funerals I was accustomed to attending in many areas of Douala and Yaoundé. The culturally and socially alienated funerals of young deceased LGBTIQ activists were similar to those generally reserved for marginal figures of society who have been de-socialized, notably people accused of practising witchcraft or persons who have committed suicide.

In May 2012, Nadine, a twenty-five-year-old lesbian woman, who was my master's degree student and one of my research assistants, died of what was officially recorded as severe cerebral malaria. As an only child, she was the pride of her middle-class parents, who had great expectations for her. Her sudden death was a hard blow for them. But there was something that her parents did not know about their daughter's intimate life: her homosexuality. It was a secret she had always managed to hide from her conservative parents, who would have been devastated if they had learned that their beloved child loved women and had no intention of marrying or having children, as they had hoped. That is why she never turned up in the family home with any woman whose appearance might have aroused suspicion in her parents.

But during her funeral service at the mortuary of Douala General Hospital, an incident occurred that subsequently had a negative impact on the young woman's funeral rituals. During the procession, one young woman, who was cross-dressing, stepped out of the line and came closer to the coffin, which was open to enable family members and friends to pay their last respects to their loved one. At the sight of the inert body of her lover, she started to weep with emotion. In her laments she called the deceased her '*amour*' (lover) and reminded her of the promise they once made to each other: that they would never be parted. Outraged by what he had just heard from the young mourner, the disgruntled father ordered the cessation of the ceremony. In his anger he declared: 'I consider that I no longer have a child and I don't want to mourn homosexuals in my house. Go and do this somewhere else and not in my house.' Before he left the mortuary, the man threatened to use violence against anyone who dared bring the dead body of his daughter to his house. Later, I learned that there were no funeral vigils in the family home: the deceased woman was buried on the same day in the cemetery of the *Bois des Singes* and not in her native village, as initially planned. No member of the family deemed it necessary to accompany the deceased to her final resting place.

The comments that followed this family drama proved to be crucial because they revealed a new twist in the local imagination of queerness with respect to a philosophy of life. An older woman apparently connected to the bereaved family did not hesitate in accusing the deceased young woman of having ‘killed’ her entire family even before her own physical death. ‘This girl was really wicked, despite her deceptive appearances,’ she said. She then asked: ‘How can you be a homosexual when you know that you’re the only child of your parents and that they are expecting you to give them children to expand the family?’ In line with her friend’s statements, another woman made these comments: ‘Poor family. I really feel sorry for this family. I’m sure this family lineage will disappear forever when the man and his wife die. Who’ll talk about this family again since there are no descendants to keep alive the memory of the family?’ And then she added:

If at least she had had a child before she died, she might have been forgiven for her homosexuality. It is for that child that people would mourn her. In our society, we don’t just mourn the person who died; we also mourn on behalf of the children she left behind. These are the consequences of the homosexuality that white people teach our young people today through their films where one can see people of the same sex making love.

The woman’s comments inspired this philosophical reflection on the part of the only man in the group: ‘People must understand that the family is first of all the offspring [*descendance*], and without descendants there is no family.’

The different cases described above underscore a phenomenon that is still understudied in African anthropology and queer studies: namely, the desacralization and de-ritualization of the deaths of people identified as ‘homosexuals’, and of people with no *descendance* or progeny in contemporary Cameroonian society. Childless homosexuals whose dead bodies are treated with indifference by the general public, including by their family members, who are dehumanized, buried without dignity, dumped into communal graves like mad dogs, deprived of the right to a funeral, and de-ritualized in such a trivial manner, recall the dramatic fate of the figure Giorgio Agamben called *homo sacer*. Although the collective mistreatment of the dead bodies of people identified as ‘homosexual’ might not necessarily relate to the kind of biopolitics discussed by the Italian philosopher, it reveals a certain mode of representation of homoeroticism and queer identity by nativist and pro-natalist ideologies that celebrate a procreative sexual life, while dismissing a homoerotic form of life as anti-life. These principles of procreation and reproduction generally inscribe homoerotic forms of life in a register of cannibalistic eroticism.⁷ According to these norms, socially disavowed sexual practices such as homoeroticism not only ‘eat’, devour or consume life, as often happens in cannibalistic witchcraft-related practices; they also undermine the fundamental principles of the reproduction and regeneration of life that allow society to withstand tragedy and loss.

In other respects, the cases described above indicate that what I have previously referred to as ‘bare death’ or the ungrievable loss of persons identified as

⁷Thomas Hendriks uses the concept of ‘*érotiques cannibales*’ (cannibal eroticisms) to underline sexual practices that are associated with occultism (see Hendriks 2018).

homosexual subjects appears as a logical consequence of their homosexual life, which had been represented as 'bare life', to borrow Agamben's term. In her *Frames of War*, Butler argues that the grievability of death is inseparable from the value we attach to certain lives, and that lives which were already framed as dispensable cannot be mourned or grieved (Butler 2009). In other words, there is always a connection between 'bare life' and 'bare death', as the cases of 'un-reproductive' homosexual subjects show (see also Butler 2004).

This idea of 'bare life' or 'bare death' is reflected in the comments made by some internet users following the death of a well-known homosexual jetsetter from Yaoundé. On social media, his death provoked only disparaging and homophobic comments, such as: '*un pédé de moins, c'est toujours une bonne nouvelle pour le pays* [one less faggot is always good news for the country]', '*la pédérasie en deuil* [pederasty in mourning]', '*au moins son sale derrière va se reposer en paix en enfer* [at least his dirty backside will rest in peace in hell]', '*qu'il aille au diable déjà sa vie nous servait à quoi à la société* [may he go to hell! What was his life useful for to society]?' and '*il est mort comme il a vécu: une vie inutile que personne ne regrettera* [he died as he lived: a useless life that no one will regret]'.

Homosexual, *homo sacer* and *vitalis moralis*

One fine morning, I was listening to a popular talk show on a local radio station in Douala when one of the guests, Dr Abdelaziz, who was introduced as an anthropologist, philosopher and traditional doctor, made these statements:

One of the reasons why we should strongly condemn homosexuality in our society is that it is an unproductive sexuality and a waste of sexual energy and force. Homosexual people don't make children because it is impossible for two men or two women who sleep together to procreate. Even God himself cannot make that miracle. As Africans, we all know that life without children has no future, because when you pass, nobody will be there to mourn you. Nobody will remember you. We also make children not only to take care of us when we get old, but also because it is a guarantee for a good mourning [*bon deuil*].

And he continued: 'To live without producing offspring is to decide to be like a tree that cannot bear fruit, and in our societies we are not affected when such a tree falls down.'

Dr Abdelaziz was expressing in plain language an opinion that now permeates contemporary Cameroonian society: namely, the idea that homosexuality is an unproductive and infertile sexuality, which, unlike heterosexual eroticism, does not permit the perpetuation of human life and the human species. Indeed, in the wake of the sexual biopolitics of the Cameroon government, with its eminently confrontational and violent responses to homosexual subjects, new sexual ideologies emerged around 2006 to which little attention has yet been given: these can be described as procreationist ideologies.⁸ Beyond their epistemological and

⁸Examples of such procreationist and pro-natalist discourses can be found in several essays published by Cameroonian intellectuals (cf. Mbele 2006; Ayissi 2009).

methodological divergences, these nativist discourses all endorse a certain ‘ethics of life’ to which homosexuality, often perceived as an *immoderata carnis petulantia* (an immoderate carnal obsession), would be opposed. According to these philosophies that have entangled homosexual eroticism within registers of infertility and childlessness, homosexuality undermines Africa’s reproductive and procreative power, its demographic vitality, and the development of its human capital. It is alleged that African subjects engaging in same-sex acts voluntarily or involuntarily renounce the historical mission that champions of natalism might have assigned to all African men and women: to contribute to the maintenance of the continent’s population growth, and to what one Cameroonian analyst calls the ‘preservation of the human being and its species over time’ (Ayissi 2009: 162).

Moreover, these pro-natalist ideologies present same-sex sexuality as a new Malthusian device deployed by the Western world to curb the growth of the African population. In many African countries, and especially in Cameroon, the subject identified as ‘homosexual’ now embodies the detestable figure of a traitor to the nation, an agent or a surrogate of Western imperialist forces plotting against African countries whose demographic growth would be worrisome to Western powers.

This *vitalis moralis* resonates in a text published in 2009 by the Cameroonian philosopher Lucien Ayissi under the title ‘*La logique hédonistique de l’homosexualité au regard de l’éthique de vie*’ (‘The hedonistic logic of homosexuality with regard to the ethics of life’). The author’s main argument can be summed up as follows: in its new imperialist project, the West has imported and imposed on Africa a hedonistic pederasty, with the absolute purpose of sexual and carnal enjoyment. This is what Ayissi refers to as ‘hedonophilia’ – a form of sexuality that is guided primarily and essentially by a pathological passion for the pleasures of the flesh and enjoyment (*jouissance*). According to Ayissi, this libertine homosexual hedonism differs fundamentally from the spiritual *homophilia* that prevailed in ancient Greece and that had an essentially psychagogic function – that is, pedagogical and educational. Whereas the ancient form of pederasty celebrated by ancient philosophers such as Socrates and Plato primarily aimed at developing wisdom and virtue in the *eromenos* (the young male who was often the disciple or the learner) by the *erastes* (the adult male and also the master or initiator), the homosexual eroticism that currently thrives in Africa is exclusively motivated by *aphrodisia* or carnal pleasures. As the author points out:

the reductive logic of the hedonism of homosexuality is, unlike the psychagogic and philosophical-spiritual *homophilia* of Socrates and Plato, lacking a relation to the ethics of life. The ethics of pleasure that underlie this logic are part of a utilitarianism and consumerism that consist of moralizing carnal pleasure and absolutizing it, in oblivion of the preservation of human life and species. The problem with the hedonistic logic of homosexuality is that it cannot provide appropriate answers to the metaphysical question related to our conatus. (Ayissi 2009: 162, my translation)

Lucien Ayissi adopts an adversarial and vindictive stance in relation to homosexual eroticism, which he accuses of cultivating vile and beastly sexual behaviours in Africans. The Cameroonian philosopher also denounces current homosexual practices, which, according to him, are characterized by their ‘predilection for evanescent and ambiguous pleasures’ (Ayissi 2009: 163): ‘In terms of the ethics of life, homosexuality is discredited because it gives sexual pleasure the excessive

visibility it does not deserve. It greatly devalues the body by reducing it to the mundane function of aphrodisiac manufacture' (*ibid.*). According to Ayissi, the outrageous sublimation of *aphrodisia* that he observes in homosexual relations is equivalent to what he finds in postmodern societies of the Western world.

Ayissi's insistence on the need to maintain human reproduction and to preserve life in human sexual relations suggests that a certain African nativist philosophy primarily dismisses homosexual eroticism because of the 'disregard of homosexuality for life in favour of carnal pleasures and its eventual systematization [which] can deal a fatal blow to the human species', as he points out (Ayissi 2009: 167). He rejects homosexual eroticism because it encourages what he calls the 'subordination of life in search of a moralized and absolutized carnal pleasure' (*ibid.*).

Ayissi's comments also suggest that homosexuality is vilified by a certain nativist discourse because it amounts to an 'upheaval of the law of the living [*loi du vivant*]', as Georges Balandier would put it (1984). Moreover, homosexual hedonism is dismissed as a dangerous sexual practice and orientation because it allegedly replaces this *loi du vivant* with that of unproductiveness and infertility. Adepts of homosexual eroticism allegedly have the propensity to give preference to sexual pleasure over procreation, or to favour *aphrodisia* over *vita*. In Cameroon, where new nativist discourses have made demography, and especially what Lee Edelman calls 'procreative futurism' (Edelman 2004), a powerful weapon against the so-called Western imperialist project, sexual practices that do not produce children are generally perceived badly. This is the case with same-sex sexuality, which tends to be associated with death, decline and chaos.

Ayissi's text offers a hedono-thanatological⁹ understanding of homosexual desire. It represents homosexuality as a form of eroticism that is guided by two contradictory primordial 'impulses'. The first is *jouissance*, which is driven by the frantic and limitless search for carnal pleasure. Homosexual hedonism allegedly transforms the African homosexual subject into a desirable body that is said to place (homo)sexual consumerism in the pantheon of his or her priorities. This discourse represents the homosexual individual not only as a lecherous subject with unbridled and unrestrained sexuality, but also as a 'pleasure machine' (*machine à plaisir*) driven only by sexual appetites. The second impulse is the desire for death that allegedly characterizes the current libertine homoeroticism. The urge towards death often finds expression in the unnecessary spending and sterile debauchery of sexual energy that is considered the main characteristic of homosexual relationality.

This problematization of same-sex desires by the new nativist and procreationist discourses partly explains why, in contemporary Central African societies dominated by a cult and even a fetishization of natality¹⁰ and procreation, any individual or group of people engaged in unproductive sexuality are seen as a threat to society or the community at large. Moreover, the recriminatory idea of same-sex

⁹This term makes reference to the association of same-sex desire with hedonism (*hedonos*) and death (Thanatos).

¹⁰We find a similar celebration of procreative sexuality and the suspicion of unproductive sexual behaviour in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to Thomas Hendriks, Congolese from Kinshasa often describe homosexual eroticism as '*érotiques cannibales*' (cannibalistic eroticisms) (see Hendriks 2018).

desires expressed in these discourses explains why some homosexual people in present-day Cameroon have become what was referred to earlier as *homines sacri*. Reflecting on Ayissi's interpretation of homosexual hedonism, it is tempting to characterize the current African *homo sacer* as a non-conforming African subject who is socially ostracized, culturally alienated, and politically and legally persecuted because of his or her refusal to inscribe his or her sexuality in a moral economy of procreation and reproduction.

Lee Edelman's argument that queer people in the Western world are often profiled as subjects with a 'relentlessly narcissistic, antisocial, and future-negating drive', because they are supposedly not ready to surrender their sexual freedom to the conservative ideology of 'procreative and reproductive futurism' (Edelman 2004), also applies to many people from Central Africa identifying as homosexual. The cases alluded to here show that these subjects were denied proper funerals when they passed away, because, during their lifetime, they had rejected what Edelman would call the 'rhetoric of future' (*ibid.*): they challenged the dominant social, cultural and political order that makes the phallus and the vagina of Africans powerful instruments for the achievement of an African demographic future. Moreover, childless and non-procreative homosexual subjects were viewed as sexually non-conforming subjects compromising the celebrated new African generation. In short, with these young same-sex loving men and women, African demography was seen to have no future. That is why their deaths were framed as irrelevant or met with responses such as 'good riddance'.

Conclusion

In her ground-breaking study of the economically disadvantaged sugarcane workers in Brazil's rural Nordeste State, Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that, because of the high rate of infant mortality, destitute mothers have ceased to mourn their dying children and have developed an uncomplaining attitude towards death. Their familiarity with tragedy has contributed to them hardening their hearts and drying their eyes (Scheper-Hughes 1992). A similar stoical and indifferent attitude towards death has been observed among the Meru from the northern region of Tanzania. Indeed, according to Liv Haram, repeated deaths and frequent funerals are often framed as a 'waste of money and time'. This is partly due to the fact that local populations are 'tired of mourning' and 'can no longer mourn honestly' (Haram 2013: 223), as one of her informants put it.

While both studies point to the pervasiveness of death and mortality as the main cause of people's insensibility to bereavement in these societies, this article focuses on the deceased's non-conforming sexual identity – or, more precisely, their status as infertile homosexuals – which causes their kin relatives or family members to refrain from grieving for them, or which makes their death bearable. Unproductive homosexuality has become a critical social factor in understanding the substantial change in postcolonial African regimes of mourning, and especially the de-socialization and de-ritualization of the deaths of specific individuals or social groups in contemporary Cameroon.

Moreover, this article has demonstrated that homophobic and pro-natalist ideologies that have taken a more radical form in Cameroon over the past

decade have transformed childless homosexual persons into *homines sacri* whose lives and deaths are worthless or do not matter. These extremist anti-homosexual sentiments have excluded both the lives and the deaths of same-sex loving men and women from a meaningful social existence, by turning them into either a 'bare life' or a 'bare death'. For the same reason, these sexual outcasts are not buried in a proper and respectful manner, which, according to many African traditions and customs, generally means being buried in the land of one's ancestors by close relatives or family members.

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Abstract

Contemporary societies in Central Africa are known for their mourning ethos: communities often engage in endless lamentation upon the death of their loved ones. Yet people experience the death of a family member differently, depending on the deceased's sexual identification. While the death of a person identifying as heterosexual is generally felt as unbearable, that of a person identifying as homosexual is experienced as bearable. Based on field research conducted in Cameroon, this article analyses the way in which contemporary Central African societies experience the death of persons identifying as homosexual. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, the article argues that, as a result of the pervasiveness of anti-homosexual ideologies and procreationist doctrines promoting *vitalis moralis* or the ethics of life, childless persons identifying as homosexuals have become '*homines sacri*' whose deaths arouse little grief from the community because their existence was perceived as 'bare' or useless even before their death.

Résumé

Les sociétés contemporaines d'Afrique Centrale sont réputées pour leur éthique de deuil; les communautés se livrent souvent à des lamentations sans fin à la mort de leurs proches. Pourtant, les gens vivent la mort d'un membre de la famille différemment, selon l'identité sexuelle du défunt. Alors que la mort d'une personne s'identifiant comme hétérosexuelle est généralement ressentie comme insupportable, celle d'une personne s'identifiant comme homosexuelle est plutôt vécue comme supportable. Basé sur des recherches de terrain menées au Cameroun, cet article analyse la manière dont les sociétés d'Afrique Centrale font face à la mort de personnes considérées comme homosexuelles. S'appuyant sur la notion d'*homo sacer* de Giorgio Agamben, l'article fait valoir qu'en raison de l'omniprésence des idéologies anti-homosexuelles et des doctrines procréatrices promouvant un *vitalis moralis* ou une éthique de la vie, les personnes sans enfant s'identifiant comme homosexuelles sont devenues des *homines sacris* dont la mort suscite peu de chagrin de la part de la communauté car leur existence était déjà perçue comme «nue» ou inutile avant même leur mort.