LGBTQ+ and African Ethics: Between Tradition and Human Rights

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Abstract— The discourse on LGBTQ+ identities and rights has gained increasing prominence across the globe, including in African societies, necessitating philosophical reflection. While human rights frameworks advocate for inclusivity and acceptance, traditional African ethics largely view sexuality through the lens of communal values and natural order. This tension raises critical questions about African cultural identity, morality, and the evolving influence of globalisation. Employing the methods of analysis and phenomenology, this paper argues that the LGBTQ+ movement, though presented as a universal human rights struggle, is largely shaped by Western ideologies that may not align with African ethical thought. Furthermore, it contends that if left unchecked, the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities could significantly erode Africa's traditional moral values on sexuality, already weakened by modernity and digital influence. The paper concludes that while human dignity is universal, an African philosophical anthropology rooted in communal ethics and moral education can provide a framework for addressing this complex issue in a manner that preserves African identity and values.

Keywords: African ethics; cultural identity; LGBTQ+; human rights; African philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary discourse on human rights and sexual identities has increasingly positioned LGBTQ+ issues at the crossroads of cultural values, ethical frameworks, and universal rights claims. Across the African continent, this discourse has evolved into a complex battleground where traditional ethical systems contend with global human rights frameworks, raising profound questions about cultural sovereignty, moral education, and the very nature of human dignity (Alumona, 2024). As African societies navigate the tensions between preserving cultural identity and engaging with evolving global norms, a philosophical examination becomes not merely academic but urgently practical. Traditional African ethical systems have historically conceptualised sexuality primarily through heteronormative frameworks deeply embedded in communal values, procreation, and ancestral continuity (Bujo, 2009; Wiredu, 1996). The family unit, understood not merely as a nuclear entity but as an extended network of relationships spanning generations, forms the cornerstone of many African ethical frameworks. Within these systems, sexuality carries significance beyond individual expression, it represents the continuation of lineage, the fulfilment of communal responsibilities, and the maintenance of social harmony (Magesa, 1997). This understanding stands in notable contrast to the increasing emphasis on individual autonomy and sexual self-determination characteristic of contemporary human rights discourses.

The arrival of LGBTQ+ identities and rights movements in African public spaces has therefore presented more than a mere clash of viewpoints, it has initiated a profound philosophical questioning of what constitutes African identity in an increasingly interconnected world. As Gyekye (1997) thoughtfully observes, "Every living culture maintains its vitality by constantly recreating itself in response to new challenges" (p. 217). The question, then, is whether the integration of LGBTQ+ frameworks represents a natural evolution of African ethical thought or an imposition of external value systems that threatens authentic cultural expression. This tension has manifested in various ways across the continent. Legal frameworks criminalising LGBTQ+ identities coexist with growing visibility and advocacy for sexual minorities (Gloppen & Ravlo, 2021). Religious institutions both indigenous and those established through colonial contact frequently invoke moral arguments against LGBTQ+ acceptance while human rights organisations advocate for inclusivity based on universal dignity claims (Chitando & van Klinken, 2016). Meanwhile, young Africans increasingly engage with global perspectives through digital platforms, creating new spaces for identity formation that transcend traditional boundaries (Nyeck, 2021). The significance of this philosophical inquiry extends beyond academic discourse. As Cobbah (1987) presciently noted in his analysis of African values and human rights, the question of how societies conceptualise dignity and personhood has profound

implications for legal frameworks, social practices, and individual lives. When we examine the ethics of LGBTQ+ issues in African contexts, we are simultaneously examining how societies negotiate between tradition and change, between communal values and individual rights, and between local knowledge systems and global normative frameworks.

This paper navigates these complex intersections by first examining the ontological foundations of sexuality in traditional African ethical systems. It then analyses the philosophical underpinnings of LGBTQ+ rights discourses, particularly exploring tensions between Western individualism and African communalism. Finally, it considers possibilities for a philosophical anthropology that might honour African ethical traditions while engaging meaningfully with contemporary human rights frameworks. Throughout, the paper maintains that while human dignity is indeed universal, its expression and protection may take culturally distinct forms that deserve philosophical consideration.

THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SEXUALITY IN AFRICAN ETHICAL SYSTEMS

African ethical systems are characteristically holistic in their approach to human existence, viewing individuals as intrinsically connected to a complex web of relationships extending horizontally across communities and vertically through generations (Mbiti, 1969). This relationality profoundly shapes how sexuality is understood, forming what might be termed an ontological foundation for sexual ethics that differs significantly from contemporary Western frameworks. Unlike philosophical approaches that begin with individual autonomy, African ethical systems frequently commence with the ontological question: what maintains the harmony and flourishing of the community across time? Within this ontological framework, sexuality carries a distinctive significance as the means through which life-force is transmitted and ancestral continuity maintained. As Magesa (1997) eloquently articulates, "For African religions, human sexuality is the locus of life... Any willed action against the transmission of life whether by commission or omission is considered evil, wrong, and unethical" (p. 115). This perspective positions sexuality not merely as an individual expression but as a sacred conduit through which the community sustains itself across generations. The implications of this understanding extend beyond mere moral proscriptions; they constitute an ontological orientation that shapes how personhood itself is conceived. Procreation, as a result, assumes paramount importance in many African ethical systems. This is not merely a demographic or biological concern but a profoundly spiritual one, connecting the living with both ancestors and unborn generations. Mbiti's (1969) famous formulation that in African thought, time extends significantly into the past but only minimally into the future except through

childbearing, underscores how central procreation is to African ontology. The inability or unwillingness to participate in this generational continuum through procreation has traditionally been viewed as a serious ontological disruption rather than simply a lifestyle choice.

This procreative emphasis should not be misunderstood, however, as reducing sexuality to mere reproduction. African ethical systems frequently acknowledge the relational and pleasurable dimensions of sexuality while situating these within a wider communal framework. As Azerabor (2010) notes, "The African conception of the good is not purely hedonistic—it encompasses pleasure while directing it toward communal flourishing" (p. 142). Sexual pleasure, in this understanding, is affirmed but contextualised within relationships that contribute to social harmony and generational continuity. The ontological significance of gender complementarity appears frequently in African cosmologies and creation narratives. From the Dogon concept of paired beings to Yoruba accounts of gendered divine energies, many African philosophical traditions conceptualise creation itself as emerging from the dynamic interaction of differentiated but complementary forces (Asante & Mazama, 2009). These cosmological patterns are often seen as providing templates for human relationships, establishing gender complementarity not merely as a social convention but as a reflection of cosmic order. This cosmological dimension adds particular complexity to contemporary discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in African contexts. When traditional ethics frames heterosexuality not merely as normative but as cosmologically ordained, it establishes a significantly different starting point for ethical discourse than frameworks that begin with individual rights or autonomy. As Chepkwony (2021) observes, "In traditional African thought, heterosexual marriage is not merely preferred; it is understood as the earthly manifestation of cosmic harmony" (p. 17). This cosmic framing explains why LGBTQ+ identities are often viewed not simply as moral transgressions but as ontological disruptions that threaten the very fabric of existence.

Nevertheless, historical evidence suggests that African societies have demonstrated various responses to sexual and gender diversity. Archaeological findings, oral traditions, and anthropological records indicate that certain pre-colonial African societies accommodated diverse sexual and gender expressions, although typically within carefully prescribed ritual or social contexts rather than as individual identity claims (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Among the Dagaaba of Ghana, for instance, certain spiritual roles were historically associated with gender non-conformity, while female-female marriages (without sexual dimensions) existed among the Nandi as social institutions addressing inheritance and lineage continuation (Dankwa, 2021; Nzegwu, 2006). The arrival of colonial legal codes and missionary teachings significantly transformed these indigenous approaches to sexual and gender diversity, often

imposing more rigid norms and criminalising practices that had previously been accommodated within traditional frameworks (Tamale, 2020).

This historical complexity challenges simplistic claims about either the complete acceptance or uniform rejection of sexual diversity in pre-colonial African societies while highlighting how contemporary attitudes have been shaped by colonial encounters. The ontological foundations of sexuality in African ethical systems thus reveal a framework that differs significantly from the individualistic rights paradigm that frequently frames LGBTQ+ discourses. Rather than approaching sexuality primarily as an expression of personal identity, traditional African ethics typically situates it within a comprehensive ontological system concerned with communal harmony, generational continuity, and cosmic order. This fundamental difference in starting points helps explain why the introduction of LGBTQ+ rights frameworks can appear not merely as moral disagreements but as challenges to the very foundations of African philosophical thought.

LGBTQ+ RIGHTS DISCOURSES AND THE QUESTION OF CULTURAL IMPOSITION

The global advancement of LGBTQ+ rights has been framed predominantly through the language of universal human rights, individual autonomy, and non-discrimination. This framing, while powerful in Western liberal democracies, raises complex questions about cultural sovereignty and philosophical commensurability when applied across diverse cultural contexts. In African settings, these questions become particularly acute, as they interact with histories of colonialism and ongoing concerns about cultural imperialism (Oyewumi, 1997).

The philosophical foundations of contemporary LGBTQ+ rights discourses can be traced largely to Western liberal thought, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and negative liberty. As proponents argue, individuals should be free to determine their sexual and gender identities without interference, provided they cause no harm to others (Donnelly, 2013). This position derives significant philosophical strength from Kantian notions of personal autonomy and Millian conceptions of liberty, both central to Western ethical traditions but less emphasised in many African philosophical systems (Wiredu, 2004). African critics of LGBTQ+ rights movements frequently identify this individualism as profoundly inconsistent with African communal ethics. As Cobbah (1987) argued in his seminal analysis of African values, "The African conception of human beings as communal beings and not isolated individuals is almost directly opposed to the Western view of individualism" (p. 322). When sexuality is understood primarily as a matter of individual self-expression, it appears disconnected from the web of communal obligations and generational responsibilities that traditionally define African approaches to sexual ethics. This philosophical disjuncture

becomes particularly evident in debates about sexual identity as a rights claim. Contemporary LGBTQ+ frameworks often present sexual orientation and gender identity as intrinsic aspects of personhood that deserve recognition and protection.

In contrast, many African ethical systems have historically conceptualised sexuality primarily in terms of actions and relationships rather than identities (Epprecht, 2013). The very concept of a sexual identity as a defining personal characteristic represents a specifically modern Western development that may not easily translate across cultural contexts.

The language of universal human rights further complicates these philosophical tensions. While human rights frameworks present themselves as universal, critics from various cultural backgrounds have questioned whether their philosophical foundations are truly universal or whether they represent a particular Western tradition masquerading as universal (Mutua, 2002). When international organisations and Western nations pressure African countries to recognise LGBTQ+ rights, complex questions emerge about cultural sovereignty and the right of societies to maintain their ethical frameworks. Proponents of LGBTQ+ rights in African contexts respond to these critiques in several ways. First, they often point to evidence of pre-colonial sexual and gender diversity, challenging the notion that LGBTQ+ identities are entirely Western importations (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Second, they argue that cultural traditions should not be invoked to justify discrimination or violence, suggesting that culture itself must evolve in response to human rights principles (Tamale, 2014). Finally, they question whether opposition to LGBTQ+ rights genuinely reflects indigenous African values or whether it has been shaped by colonial-era legal codes and imported religious conservatism (Epprecht, 2008).

These competing perspectives reveal the complexity of determining what constitutes cultural imposition versus legitimate ethical evolution. As Wiredu (1996) has argued, all cultures distinguish between what he terms "cultural particulars" (specific practices that may change over time) and "cultural universals" (ethical principles with broader applicability). The challenge lies in determining whether sexual diversity falls into the former category or whether its prohibition reflects more fundamental ethical principles that deserve preservation.

Digital globalisation has further complicated these questions by creating unprecedented access to diverse cultural perspectives, particularly among younger Africans. Social media platforms, international entertainment, and global advocacy networks have created spaces where African youth encounter and sometimes embrace LGBTQ+ identities and rights frameworks, often generating intergenerational tensions (Nyeck, 2021). These developments raise profound questions about cultural transmission in a digital age and challenge simplistic notions of cultural authenticity. The philosophical question of cultural imposition versus evolution cannot be resolved

through appeals to cultural purity or simplistic universalism. Instead, it requires nuanced engagement with questions of cultural sovereignty, the historical development of ethical frameworks, and the complex ways cultures interact and transform over time. As Gyekye (1997) wisely observes, "Cultures are not closed systems; they are dynamic, ever-changing in response to internal pressure or external influence" (p. 217). The challenge lies in distinguishing between organic cultural evolution and forms of influence that might undermine African philosophical sovereignty.

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY FOR ADDRESSING LGBTQ+ QUESTIONS

The tensions between traditional African ethical frameworks and contemporary LGBTQ+ rights discourses call for philosophical approaches that neither uncritically accept Western paradigms nor rigidly adhere to traditionalism without reflection. An African philosophical anthropology, a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be human within African thought systems, offers promising resources for navigating these complex questions while maintaining cultural coherence and ethical integrity. Central to developing such an approach is the African concept of personhood, which differs significantly from Western individualistic frameworks. In many African philosophical traditions, personhood is not automatically conferred through biological existence but is gradually achieved through moral development, communal relationships, and the fulfilment of social responsibilities (Menkiti, 1984). As Wiredu (1992) explains, "In African thought, a person is not simply an individual of human parentage but rather an individual of human parentage who has demonstrated through participation in communal life that he or she is deserving of the status of personhood" (p. 104).

This dynamic conception of personhood offers several advantages for approaching LGBTQ+ questions. First, it situates ethical evaluation not in fixed identities but in one's contribution to communal flourishing. Second, it acknowledges that ethical frameworks evolve through communal dialogue rather than individual assertion. Finally, it maintains the centrality of relationality while allowing for contextual application of ethical principles to changing social circumstances. Drawing on this foundation, an African philosophical anthropology might approach LGBTQ+ questions through what could be termed "dignified communalism", a framework that maintains the African emphasis on communal harmony while acknowledging the inherent dignity of all community members. This approach would reject both the uncritical imposition of Western individualism and forms of communalism that suppress individual dignity and wellbeing (Oyeshile, 2006). Such an approach finds support in indigenous ethical principles like Ubuntu, which emphasises mutual recognition and interdependence. As Tutu (1999) articulates, "Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as

a human being in isolation... We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas we are connected and what we do affects the whole world" (p. 31). This interconnected understanding of humanity provides resources for recognising the dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals while maintaining communal frameworks for ethical evaluation. Several contemporary African philosophers have begun developing approaches that navigate these tensions productively. Nyeck (2020), for instance, proposes what she terms "ethical listening" as a methodological approach to sexuality debates, a practice of attending carefully to marginalised voices while maintaining respect for communal ethical frameworks. Similarly, van Klinken (2018) examines how certain African religious communities have developed "contextual theologies" that engage questions of sexual diversity through African philosophical categories rather than imported Western frameworks.

A promising aspect of an African philosophical anthropology is its emphasis on moral education rather than legal prohibition as the primary mechanism for ethical formation. Traditional African societies typically addressed sexual ethics through comprehensive educational systems that prepared young people for responsible relationship formation rather than primarily through punitive measures (Dzobo, 1992). This educational emphasis suggests possibilities for addressing LGBTQ+ questions through dialogue and formation rather than criminalisation and exclusion. The concept of harm also requires reconsideration through African philosophical anthropology. While Western ethics often conceives harm primarily in terms of direct violations of individual autonomy, African ethical systems frequently consider harm in terms of disruptions to communal harmony, spiritual balance, and generational continuity (Magesa, 1997). This broader conception of harm raises legitimate questions about potential impacts of changing sexual norms on community structures while remaining open to evidence about actual rather than assumed harms.

Ultimately, an African philosophical anthropology suggests that ethical questions surrounding LGBTQ+ identities might be productively approached not through abstract rights claims or rigid appeals to tradition, but through communal dialogue grounded in shared values of human dignity, social harmony, and moral responsibility. This approach acknowledges both the importance of cultural continuity and the reality that cultures evolve in response to new circumstances and deepening ethical insights. Such a philosophical approach would likely reach different conclusions from both Western liberal frameworks and rigid traditionalism. It might, for instance, maintain the centrality of heterosexual marriage and procreation within African ethical systems while questioning whether criminalisation and exclusion of sexual minorities advances or undermines communal flourishing. It might also distinguish between public recognition of diverse sexualities and their integration into core social institutions,

potentially finding contextual accommodations that neither fully embrace Western frameworks nor subject LGBTQ+ individuals to violence and rejection.

CONCLUSION

The complex intersection of LGBTQ+ issues and African ethics reveals fundamental tensions between different philosophical approaches to human sexuality, personhood, and community. This paper has argued that these tensions cannot be resolved through simplistic appeals to either universal rights frameworks or uncritical traditionalism. Instead, they require careful philosophical engagement with both African ethical traditions and contemporary human rights discourses. The ontological foundations of sexuality in African ethical systems reveal a comprehensive framework that situates sexual ethics within broader concerns for communal harmony, generational continuity, and cosmic order. This approach differs significantly from contemporary Western frameworks that emphasise individual autonomy and identity-based rights claims. Understanding these different starting points is essential for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue on LGBTQ+ issues.

The question of cultural imposition versus evolution remains central to these debates. While LGBTQ+ rights are often framed through universal human rights language, their philosophical foundations in Western liberal thought raise legitimate questions about cultural sovereignty and philosophical commensurability. At the same time, all cultures evolve through both internal reflection and external encounter, making simplistic appeals to cultural purity equally problematic. An African philosophical anthropology offers promising resources for navigating these complex questions. By drawing on African conceptions of personhood, communal dialogue, and moral education, it becomes possible to develop approaches that maintain cultural integrity while responding thoughtfully to contemporary challenges. Such approaches might reach different conclusions from both Western liberalism and rigid traditionalism, potentially finding contextually appropriate ways to acknowledge human dignity without uncritically adopting Western frameworks.

These philosophical reflections have significant practical implications. They suggest that public policies addressing LGBTQ+ issues in African contexts might productively focus on preventing violence and discrimination while maintaining space for communal ethical frameworks that differ from Western liberal norms. They also indicate the importance of intergenerational dialogue within African communities as they navigate changing social perspectives in a globalised world. In conclusion, while human dignity is indeed universal, its expression and protection may take culturally distinct forms that deserve philosophical consideration. An African philosophical anthropology rooted in communal ethics and moral education offers valuable resources for addressing LGBTQ+

questions in ways that honour African cultural identity while recognising the evolving nature of all ethical traditions in our interconnected world.

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