

'Queering' Africa through *homo inclusio africanus*:

A reading of Osvalde Lewat's *Les Aquatiques*, Pan-African Grand Prize for Literature

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Abstract

In the light of the ideology of the Pan-African prize, literary communication and queer theories, this article proposes a reading of the novel *Les Aquatiques* (2021) by Osvalde Lewat, the winner of the first Pan-African Grand Prize in Literature. The novel stages the life and death of a young African homosexual - Samuel Pankeu - who is the victim of a homophobic crime perpetrated by a gang of (pre)adolescent Africans, encouraged by their parents and teachers. Moneyang et Gueboguo interpret Lewat's fiction as a denunciation of homophobia in Africa, and a way of paying tribute to all the lives of African homosexuals violently torn from the continent by their African peers. Thus, they argue that even if it was not the main goal of the AU, it would be productive to approach the consecration of *Les Aquatiques* as an implicit distancing of the AU's governing body from violence against LGBTQI+¹ people in Africa. The conceptual approach, based on what they identify in the novel and coin as the *homo inclusioafricanus*, is an invitation to (re)think of Pan-Africanism and Africa in a different way - queer and inclusive. The aesthetics of *homo inclusioafricanus* in the heart of Lewatian production advocates for the emergence of a fundamentally indocile African citizen, intentionally working to repair their world to include all Africans, including the long-excluded queer. One observation emerges: violence against African homosexuals by other Africans is one of the great barbarities of our time. The continent should get rid of it as soon as possible, as there is a risk that another genocide will soon be taking place on the continent.

Keywords

Homo inclusio africanus, *Les Aquatiques*, Africa, homosexualities, inclusion

1 An acronym used to refer inclusively to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other non-heterosexual or non-cisgender people.

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Introduction

Because literary prizes play an essential role in legitimizing and promoting literary works, this article analyzes the stakes involved in the Pan-African Grand Prize for Literature awarded to Cameroonian-born writer Osvalde Lewat for her novel *Les Aquatiques* (2021). The prize, initiated by the AU through His Excellency Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo - current President of the Democratic Republic of Congo and President of the AU in 2022 - «[is] open to Africans from here and elsewhere, from the continent and its diaspora». The Jury was made up of five people. The ideological *raison d'être* of this literary award stipulates, in article 3 of its regulations, that the winning work «must reflect the great values enshrined in the Charter of the African Union: solidarity, pan-Africanism and the peaceful cohabitation of peoples». The Grand Prix, conceived as a unifying project for Africa and its historicities, is aimed at all Africans, beyond the national borders arbitrarily fixed since the Berlin Conference and inherited from colonization. Its aim is above all to show that African literature has a major role to play in the AU's political program, and thus contributes to the emergence of «the Africa we want²».

Such a statement echoes the Pan-African project, taken in its broadest sense - despite its variations, (re) interpretations, multiple meanings and sometimes stammerings - of emancipation and rehabilitation of peoples of African descent. Founded in reaction to the (post) colonial domination suffered by Africans and Afro descendants throughout the world, domination based on color³ or race, pan-Africanism fights for the well-being of the peoples of Africa and its diaspora. This is achieved through the pursuit and propagation of the idea of emancipation, total liberation, the reconstruction of destroyed identities and cultures, and above all, the unity of Africans and black populations beyond geographical and linguistic borders. This movement, which is open to all Africans, concerns their economic, political, social and cultural life, making the award a moment of great influence for the continent, politically speaking and for pan-Africanism ideologically speaking. On the one hand, it enables the AU, with an endowment of \$30,000 allocated to the winner, to consolidate its influence and leadership by establishing itself as an ardent ally of Pan-Africanism. The prize is one of the first of its kind, if not the largest literary award created by an African inter-state grouping to celebrate writers of African origin. On the other hand, it offers high visibility to an African author, affirming that African literature has a role to play in building the dreamed Africa. By awarding the Pan-African Grand Prize for Literature to Osvalde Lewat, the nineteenth President of the AU is indicating that *Les Aquatiques* is a decisive work in the redefinition of Pan-Africanism, precisely at a time when many Africans want to see the emergence of Pan-Africanist ideologies adapted to structural challenges.

From a hermeneutical point of view, the challenge is to identify the message conveyed by *Les Aquatiques* about contemporary Africa, and how it might inspire contemporary pan-Africanism. To do this, let's look at a few major references in literary communication. First, Ricœurian Ioana Vultur (2014) explores

2 Preamble to the Panafrican Grand Prize for Literature (2021).

3 In chapter 2 of his book, Du Bois (1996) argues that the problem of the 20th century is that of the color line between races.

literature as a form of communication, proposing to apprehend it in relation to the discursive situation of everyday communication. In the latter, three pillars are brought into play: the message, society and the individuals who inhabit it; thus, for Vultur, everyday communication will consist of saying something (a message), about something (our world, society) to someone. However, because literary communication is metaphorical and indirect, the author points out that it requires decoding: «The reader must seek the meaning of the text, not the author's intention [...] Readers are called upon to imagine and configure the work».

In the (re)contextualization of *Les Aquatiques*, the reader is invited to embrace an interactional position with the work in relation to its socio-historical context; the quest for the meaning of literary communication will always be a work of (re)actualization. Next, Yves Citton (2007, p. 265) defines this process of actualization as an exploitation of «the differences between the actuality of reading and the historical context of writing, with the aim of shedding a disorienting light on the present». It calls on the reader to question the work in relation to the society in which he or she lives, encouraging a back-and-forth movement. That's why to be effective, literary criticism must seize the discursive relay to identify and highlight the games, issues, messages and relevance of the winning work.

This article therefore deciphers a critical part of the quintessential message of *Les Aquatiques*, through what we refer to as «homoinclusio africanus», understood as the call for the emergence of a fundamentally indocile African citizen, intentionally working to repair his or her world to include all Africans, including long-excluded homosexuals. In this appeal, which lies at the heart of the novel, the focus is on inclusio. It is declined as the necessity of a process of enclosure of the mesosexual in Africa as part of the Holon, i.e. the «all-African». Any attempt to exclude the identities of the same socio-sexuals in the construction of the pan-African ideological game alienates a significant section of true Africans, whose «need for federation» is paradoxically proclaimed. Ultimately, this exclusion offers a vision of a falsely purified Africa.

The homoinclusio africanus stipulated by *Les Aquatiques* therefore runs parallel to other pan-Africanist ideologies with a media profile, with an antithetical vision of true pan-Africanism, the twin sister of anti-gay sentiment because homosexual reality is said to be an import from the West, and those in Africa who identify with it become de facto pariahs, pariahs who, the continent, in a mission, would have to eradicate from social bodies. This social bloodletting with its permanent violence against the bodies and psyches of African homosexuals, would be seen as an act of public health to preserve the immaculate mystical purity of this all-Africa under construction.

Based on this observation, we propose to apprehend homoinclusio africanus on the one hand, through a reading of Lewat's novel, insisting on the queer and inclusive way of (re)thinking pan-Africanism and Africa as spaces «equitably open to all Africans(e)s» (Mbembe, 2013, p. 242), regardless of their (homo)sexualities. On the other hand, through the emergence of a new citizen, the ordinary African, deeply indignant about established anti-homosexual norms, who sees homosexuals as perfectly normal people, important allies in the struggles to build and emancipate the continent. In this sense, homoinclusio africanus is similar to the «homocritic» of Marcel Kouassi N'Dri (2016) who is also an ordinary African characterized by «serene, critical and relevant attitudes towards homosexuals» (p. 23). However, the homoinclusio africanus wants to be an African who is determined not to obey the homophobic and unjust laws of his society, which is not the case with Kouassi

N'Dri. This posture of non-conformity is endowed with a subversive potential against the heteronormativity in force in most contemporary African societies. This tilts *Les Aquatiques* into the field of literatures of resistance, more specifically that of queer francophone African literature.

Legitimizing queer African fiction

It's a truism that literary prizes are an important means of legitimization. By awarding its first Grand Prix to Osvalde Lewat, the AU is indicating that one of the major issues in *Les Aquatiques*, namely the denunciation of homophobia, deserves to be taken into consideration. In this respect, we hypothesize that the value of Lewat's work lies above all in its queerization⁴ of Africa, which positions the novel as a spokesperson for African LGBTQI+ voices silenced by iniquitous laws inherited from the colonial era. The book revives and nourishes the public debate on the homosexual condition in Africa while militating for the emergence of a more inclusive society. Such, moreover, is the scope of African queer literature, a vast field including the writing of African homosexualities that should be brought to light.

Although the term «queer» is no longer defined solely by so-called transgressive sexualities, we have nevertheless chosen to speak of an African queer novel to suggest that in African literary production, non-heteronormative sexual orientations are redeployed as a dialogue between the sexual and the non-sexual (Altman, 2001). This dialogue creates a space in the in-between (issues around sexual minorities and social realities) to be placed alongside what is ideologically projected and politically claimed as the norm in Africa. Our approach to queer converges more closely with those developed by Samuel Minne (2023), Muriel Plana and Frédéric Souana (2015) who insist that queer is not limited to the simple representation or study of homosexuality in literature. It designates «the perverse», the strategies by which works subvert sexual categorizations and the gender system (Minne, 2023): «Anything that escapes the sexual norm, disrupts it or calls it into question.» (Plana & Souana, 2015, p. 7). From then on, the queer African novel, as we understand it, will consider two points. First, it will focus on the representation of African homosexualities, which is not insignificant in the French-speaking African context where these are still violently repressed in most countries. Boniface Mongo-Mboussa on the subject of writing about homosexuality in French-speaking Africa, points out that there is still a «denial of reality» (Crémieux, 2013, p. 129) among writers, most of whom take an ambiguous stance on the issue. This partly explains the scarcity of homosexuality in French-speaking African literature but also the many silences,

detours and other stratagems these authors use to (dis)write about it. In this sense, the choice to represent homosexuality head-on, following the example of Ken Bugul, Max Lobe, Fatou Diome, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr (2018), Karim Deya and many others, is necessarily subversive. From this perspective, the queerization of Africa that Lewat proposes involves an alternative formulation of the continent: from now on, the homosexual is the hero, and this non-heteronormative is paralleled by other social realities such as bad governance, homophobia, poverty or oppression by the ruling class.

4 The term is adopted and widely used in queer studies in French. It appears in Plana and Souana (2015, p. 309)

Les Aquatiques opens with the signing of a friendship pact between two young high-school students: Samy and Katmé. To seal this bond, they reveal their secrets to each other: Samy confesses to Katmé that he is homosexual, and Katmé reveals that his current mother is not his real mother - the real one died a long time ago. A strong, lasting friendship develops around these confidences. After high school, the two friends take different paths: Samy became an artist and art teacher while Katmé became a teacher. Married to the prefect of the capital of Zambuenta⁵, she has two daughters, of whom Samy is godfather. The narrator describes a strong friendship that is «total» and «exclusive» (p. 147), but a serious event changes Samy's destiny: the local press publishes an article revealing his homosexuality. The article creates an uproar: it's better to be accused of «embezzling public funds or murder» (p. 107) than to be suspected of homosexual practices. Samy is arrested and thrown into prison without trial. After his release, a pack of pre-adolescents and their parents attack him in his workshop in the Aquatic district, torturing him, burning him with an iron, before beating his head to a pulp, because he was «a boy-girl» (p. 258), a «dirty faggot» (p. 261) who had no right to «breathe the same air» as them (p. 211). Recounting Samy's murder, one of the murderous children declares:

It's the girls who plant the flowers, not the boys [...] he's messed up our neighborhood... he puts his hands on his hips [...] We get really annoyed when a boy who isn't even a real boy says that to us [...] we just wanted him to stop putting purple flowers [sic] in our neighborhood [...] we only pushed him a little [...] he fell, his head went bang! [...] We didn't feel sorry for him, because a boy-girl isn't like us real boys...it pissed us off that a grown man would beg us like that, so we dropped it on his willy. The blood came out, poof! he was crying like a girl [...] we were laughing [...] Afterwards, **** said we were going to be late for school, that we were leaving. (pp. 255-259).

Katmé embarks on a quest to find the truth and restore the memory of her friend-brother. Considering this murder as one of the most serious crimes, the death of Samy, whose only crime is to have been born homosexual, is undoubtedly the tragic event of the novel, which could just as easily have been entitled: *The homosexual question in Africa, the case of Zambuenta*⁶.

In this narrative, Osvalde Lewat, through Samy's story, establishes an exhaustive and uncompromising diagnosis of the homosexual condition in contemporary Black Africa. The findings are appalling. Nearly sixty years after independence, the greatest danger facing homosexuals in Africa is not depression, AIDS, poverty or even suicide, but rather media lynching and murder, under the complicit gaze of a government that nurtures an institutional homophobia inherited from German (Beachy, 2010), French (Aldrich, 2001) and British (Phillips, 1997) colonization. The narrator warns: «In the popular African imagination, torturing and killing a homosexual is nowadays a unanimously applauded patriotic act.» (p. 263). This observation is borne out by a survey conducted by the narrator; survey in which she asks passers-by whether homosexuals should continue to be arrested today.

Just stop them? You have to rip out their anuses, then pour caustic soda over them,» declared a shirtless, sweaty young man carrying plantain bunches in a rickshaw. - If my son is homosexual, I'm going to report him to the police myself,» assured a lady who was about to get into the back of a cab and had interrupted

5 Fictitious sub-Saharan African country

6 An allusion to the book by Charles Gueboguo (2006) *La question homosexuelle en Afrique : le cas du Cameroun*. L'Harmattan.

herself to contribute to the common reflection. - These people, these people, are like cancer, they need to be eradicated, with full genital chemotherapy,» said the man in the orange bow tie. - Homosexuals are sorcerers, they practice black magic, they need to be exorcised,» urged another. - Of course, what kind of question is that even to ask!» raged the young woman with the alcohol-burnt lips. (p. 120).

The killing of homosexuals continues to be unanimously supported. Admittedly, Africa has often been the scene of calls for such violence (Gueboguo, 2011, pp. 130-150), as evidenced by the many campaigns, bills and slogans such as «Kill the Gays» in Uganda. However, Lewat shows that homophobia in Africa is taking a singularly worrying turn with the emergence of new ruthless vigilantes: child killers. In the novel, Samy's death is not initiated by adults, but by five homophobic pre-adolescents. This illustrates the warning given by Awondo (2019, foreword) when he speaks of «the *ensauvagement* of society by homophobia». As such, the appearance of these early-onset killers raises a number of questions: Who are they? How and why do they kill? What does society think of their murders?

Homophobia and child killers

The phenomenon of child killers is nothing new in post-colonial Africa. Since the 1990s, the emergence of thousands of child soldiers has been strongly criticized by several social actors and writers, including Ahmadou Kourouma and Emmanuel Dongala⁷. According to a UNICEF report published in November 2021, Africa has the highest number of child soldiers, with more than 21,000 between 2016 and 2020⁸. However, while child soldiers generally come from a difficult and unstable family background, child killers of homosexuals come from a stable family nucleus, and although they are not of easy means, their parents look after them and their education, protecting them from homosexuals who seek to «spoil» [their] children» (Lewat, 2021, p. 210), but also pass on society's fundamental «values», awaken their moral awareness and, above all, keep nothing from them about the way society works. These children are therefore up to date on current events in their country, and especially on the legal problems of homosexuals.

In *Les Aquatiques*, the five children who initiate Samy's murder are all in elementary school, in good health and living ordinary childhoods. So why such barbaric acts? Their psychological study reveals a childhood lulled by hate speech directed at homosexuals by adults. To show the extent of the damage, Lewat gives children a voice. This is done through the *mise en abyme* of the account of Samy's murder that the police publish in the newspaper, ironically named *Émancipations*. This account reveals their feelings about homosexuals:

- They are ashamed to be associated with homosexuals, to live in the same neighborhood: «If our friends from other neighborhoods know that he got out of the central [prison] and he came back to our neighborhood, the shame is only going to kill us at school.» (p. 208). The toddlers have already understood that the homosexual is *persona non grata*. An outcast with whom they should never identify. To tolerate him in their neighborhood would mean that they themselves are homosexuals;

⁷ Read *Johnny chien méchant* (2002) by Emmanuel Dongala and *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) by Ahmadou Kourouma.

⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/west-and-central-africa-region-among-most-affected-grave-violations-against-children>

-They abhor the sight of homosexuals. It makes them very angry to see a boy who «really looked like a girl» (p. 207). This would not justify their protection, but rather a blasphemy, with the same violence meted out to women. Here, the perpetuation of patriarchy with its physical and symbolic violence is guaranteed;

- They perceive the homosexual as a subhuman who «is not even a man [he] is less than a dog, less than a mouse» (p. 211). For this reason, children know they must fight homosexuals and not let them «breathe the same air» as themselves (p. 211). They are harmful «mice», so decimating them is a sign of social health. This «deratization» of homosexuals in the social field echoes the «decafardization» of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda⁹. The murder of a group is thus legitimized first by its dehumanization, its animalization, which then morally justifies the disinfection of the space for the health and perpetuation of the large group;

- From primary school onwards, they've learned that you don't defend «a dirty faggot» (p. 211). You don't take the side of a pest, otherwise it will encroach on your space and corrupt your offspring. It's a moral choice between safeguarding the integrity of one's space, and hence the future of one's offspring, and accepting cohabitation with another that one has already deemed corruptible. Altericide seems the lesser evil here;

- They are brought up to have no positive feelings towards homosexuals. The homosexual is and remains «bad even if he [Samy] taught us how to make gourds» (p. 210). Indeed, when Samy settles in the Aquatic neighborhood, he teaches his future tormentors how to make gourds, which they can then sell. The service provided by the victimized subject is never of any use. The homosexual's existence becomes a Kafkaesque journey where the only viable outcome seems to be fatal;

- Finally, they understand that they can act with impunity because the approval of the large group acts as social immunity: «Me, my teacher asked the whole class to applaud me.» (p. 213). Another adds: «Can't you kill a boy-girl? A boy-girl who talks with flowers like a half-crazy man isn't a real person, is he? Are you going to arrest us? [...] In my class, at school, the teacher said we'd done a public health project.» (p. 213).

As we can see, instead of being a bulwark against institutional homophobia, the school is a significant instrument of it. Its aim is not to teach young children the right to human physical integrity; on the contrary, it is complicit in the purging of homosexuals in Africa. Because inclusive, quality education is vital for preserving peace and fostering social stability, we can only lament this observation. And we can't help thinking that the (post)colonial school in Africa is not acting under the yoke of «academic success, but [of] moral and social bankruptcy» (Azeyeh, 2010), insofar as it has struggled, since its colonial establishment, to embrace the challenge of promoting Africans who cherish the dignity and well-being of all. Consequently, the eruption of child-killing and social immunities appears to be the culmination of homophobia in post-colonial Africa.

In this sense, Lewat's message is similar to that of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*: homophobia dehumanizes both the homosexuals who are its victims and the homophobes who perpetuate it. We're faced with a cyclical movement of enslavement of victims and perpetrators, which will only be exhausted when the whole social space breaks up. Instead of «protecting and

⁹ The Hutu executioners referred to the Tutsis as «cockroaches». The population was invited to hunt the cockroaches for the sake of public health.

preserving Africa's youth», the homophobia thus transfused into these children turns them into precocious killers whose thirst for blood cannot be predicted. Their emergence on the socio-political scene seriously undermines the hope of lasting peace and cohesion in Africa. By inviting Africans to break free from the shackles of homophobia, Osvalde Lewat sets out to build an inclusive Africa through *homoinclusio africanus*.

Homo inclusio africanus: elements of a portrait

A good understanding of *homoinclusio africanus* can only be achieved in the light of the homophobia that Lewat denounces: in most countries on the continent, homosexuality is often subject to severe penalties, resulting in acerbic homophobia. In the face of such violence, the indefensibility of the victims is emphasized. Their murders go unpunished and anyone who takes up their cause is exposed to the same perils. Thus, it is common to hear of a «murdered faggot's brother» (Lewat, 2021, p. 43). Homosexuality remains anxiogenic reality, both for the homosexual and for those close to him or her. Lewat's novelistic discourse is as worrying as it is realistic. It reflects homophobic violence in Africa, and there is rarely any question of indignation on the part of the population or the authorities. Drawing our attention to this collective hypocrisy, Awondo (2019) points out that, these days in Africa, such violence is dealt with in a one-sided way. Faced with such acts, the reaction of the various actors will always evade brutality, to highlight «the immorality of homosexuality» (p. 4). It's hard not to see in this leitmotiv an illustration of the dictatorship of thought: if you don't react in this way, you're considered a traitor who promotes homosexuality in Africa. It's easy to see why Africans rarely express indignation about the plight of homosexuals, some preferring not to risk exposing themselves to such violence.

This cowardly attitude perpetuates the continent's impasse and shows that the challenge of an inclusive (pan)African society remains problematic, jeopardizing the peace, security and well-being of its homosexual citizens. Lewat proposes solutions. As it stands, countering homophobia in Africa will not be the job of politicians, the international community or activists. Change, she seems to be saying, will come mainly «from below», i.e. from resistant individuals. Indeed, only solid friendships between heterosexuals and homosexuals will lead to the emergence of an inclusive African society. These friendships have the potential to bring about the emergence of *homoinclusio africanus*, embodied by the character of Katmé. First and foremost, *homoinclusio africanus* is an indomitable individual. Katmé disobeys her country's homophobic laws and refuses to see homosexuality as a problem, believing that every individual has the right to control his or her own body. This is what she would later say to Samy when he asked her if she could fight for him: «I'm not fighting for the recognition of homosexual rights or the decriminalization of homosexuality in this country. Everyone does what they want with their bodies, I don't care.» (p. 130) Here, the heroine refuses to tackle the issue of decriminalization. On the other hand, we note the paradox when she says she doesn't want to tackle the issue of gay rights even though that's precisely what she's doing, professing that every adult should do what they want with their body. Clearly, in the name of respecting adult privacy, Katmé refuses to respect the human rights policy that denies homosexual rights. It's easy to see why she's neither horrified nor surprised when Samy confesses his homosexuality; on the contrary, she's taken aback by her friend's situation. Not only does she keep it a

secret, but she also realizes that this confession calls on her to take on a mission: to transform herself into «a little mother, a chosen sister, a tutelary big sister who loves, watches over [and] protects» her friend (p. 95).

This decision can be seen as a way of countering the government's intrusion into the privacy of homosexuals who are recognized as having the right to have sexual relations with other consenting adults of the same sex. Her reaction is a reminder of the individual's responsibility to obey or not obey the unjust laws of his or her society. She also demonstrates that the *homoinclusio africanus* is an empathetic citizen, touched by the plight of homosexuals. Katmé understands that, as a homosexual, Samuel needs her protection and support. Empathy is complemented by a sharp critical eye on the homosexual question. Indeed, if Katmé and Samuel manage to keep their friendship alive, it's above all because Katmé has kept her «brother's» homosexual identity a secret. Living in a homophobic society, Katmé knows how to navigate it while protecting her gay friend. She has been able to stand back from various erroneous beliefs, starting with the one that views homosexuals as perverts who «spoil children» (p. 210). She opens the doors of her home and her life to Samuel. He will also be godfather to her two daughters, which implies that he poses no threat to her or her family. The second mistaken belief is that homosexuality is «contagious»: after more than ten years of friendship with Samuel, Katmé has not become homosexual, nor has her husband.

In other words, the *homoinclusio africanus* is an enlightened individual who knows how to stand back from homophobic myths. Finally, although Katmé says she fights neither for decriminalization nor for homosexuals, the narrative closes on a note of hope, as evidenced by the exipit: «I ran to unlock the door» (p. 297). Here, the author suggests an opening: as long as African LGBTQI+ people are oppressed, Africa will not be free.

So, with the creation and awarding of the Pan-African Grand Prize for Literature to Osvalde Lewat, it is this «door» that the African Union is opening towards a brighter future for all Africans - homosexuals included.

The homosexual condition in Africa today: the urgent need for debate

In considering the relevance of Lewat's novel to pan-Africanism and current social policies in Africa, nothing seems more urgent than deciphering ideological positions on the thorny issue of homosexuality, and more specifically that of violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender. The plight of LGBTQI+ people in Africa is first and foremost a consequence of the repressive legal framework. On this subject, Christine Nadège Ada (2015) identifies three types of country: 1) those that recognize it, notably South Africa through its constitution; 2) those that don't penalize it, but which nevertheless don't repress the abuses suffered by these people, these being Cape Verde, which decriminalized homosexuality in 2004, Madagascar, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and a few others. In these countries, homosexuals are for the most part, sheltered from institutional «hunting», but suffer social discrimination; and 3) the «radical» countries that condemn homosexuality in various ways of which there are almost thirty. Ada shows that in these countries, homosexuality remains a crime: any homoerotic act between consenting adults is

jurisdictionally condemnable. For example, in Mauritania, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia and, more recently, Uganda, such acts are punishable by death. In Tanzania, Southern Sudan, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Sierra Leone, penalties range from ten years' imprisonment to the death penalty.

In 2023, the condition of African homosexuals remains deplorable and fraught with danger. As Alice Nkom (2021), a Cameroonian lawyer and founder of the Association for the Defense of Homosexuals (Adefho), puts it: «To be homosexual in Africa today is to live in terror and violence. «Beyond the negative impact of these discordant legislations, they constitute a real obstacle to the emergence of an Africa united and ideologically united in its diversities; which is not only one of the major axes of the AU's integration project illustrated in its Agenda 2063, but also an objective of the pan-African project. Indeed, the various homophobic campaigns have shown that these legal regimes fertilize the strong political instrumentalization of homosexuality. They contribute to the crystallization of the «monolithic image of a homophobic Africa» (Awondo et al., 2013, p. 6). It's as if the new Africanness had as its leitmotif: «Africans the world over, unite against homosexual reality». An analysis of African politics shows that this is the new rallying cry of the new, self-proclaimed champions of pan-Africanism in the digital age¹⁰. The latter don't hesitate to integrate their homophobia into the pan-African project, today positing the pernicious equation that being (pan) African equals being anti-homosexual, and being in favor of the liberalization or decriminalization of homosexuality equals being anti-(pan)African.

Paul Ella-Menyé, Osvalde Lewat's compatriot and president of the African Revival movement, which defines itself as an «essentially pan-African organization working tirelessly to promote the Continent¹¹», is a good example of this rhetoric. In a program broadcast¹² on YouTube on July 5, 2022 by Panafricanistes TV, Ella-Menyé gives his opinion on Africans fighting for the rights of homosexuals, within the framework of non-governmental organizations operating on African soil:

These people are the shame of Africa. They are wretches [...] for the simple reason that, as soon as you sell your soul for personal gain, to the detriment of the public interest, to the detriment of your people, then you are a wretch. These people are [...] the marketers of the horrifying LGBT and other unnatural practices. These are not people to be considered Africans, because as a certain Steve Biko said, and Malcolm X too, just because you have black skin doesn't mean you're African. You just have to see, analyze and conclude from your actions [...] that you're not pleading for Africa and that you're working for foreign powers. That's exactly the case with these people, who in fact [...] place themselves in the camp of the enemies of Africa, the enemies of humanity in short, and that's just not acceptable [...] We have to fight them to the last ounce of energy to preserve Africa's freedom and dignity.

This is at the heart of the «caricature» (Mbembe, 2008) that a number of popular opinion leaders are making of Pan-Africanism today. With their fixation on African (homo)sexualities, they not only reduce Pan-Africanism to a movement for heterosexuals, but also proceed to demonize it, which is the act of «denouncing

¹⁰ <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1718621/panafricanisme-numerique-afrique-franc-cfa-mwazulu>

¹¹ This quote can be found on the home page of the movement's website: <https://african-revival.org/>

¹² « Homosexualité : Les USA en mode LGBT en Côte d'Ivoire. Que peut l'Église catholique ? » https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEao_Q73BqC

and condemning an individual or group as an incarnation of evil. And, therefore, to create an absolute enemy, absolutely formidable and hateful, against whom everything is permitted [and which must] be fought» (Taguieff, 2014).

In Ella-Menyé's view, homosexuals are shameful, detestable, unnatural, foreign to Africa and, above all, the great enemy of Africa and the human race. He therefore calls for their exclusion, using a discourse that could be described as genocidal against a section of the population he declares to be the enemy of the superior African race, which is necessarily heterosexual. Paul Ella-Menyé, positioned as the Hitler of the tropics, becomes the champion of a discourse of domination of one group over another, which paradoxically has its origins in the racial ideology of the white supremacists. This ideology has led black African peoples to slavery, colonization and genocide, the most recent of which is that of the Tutsis in Rwanda (Diop, 2021). Such a position once again vindicates Aimé Césaire who pointed out that we are inclined to think that Hitler is not dead, when we observe and tolerate the atrocities committed against certain social groups. Worse still, it suggests that genocides in Africa may yet have a bright future ahead of them because we don't know how to learn from history.

Paul Ella-Menyé assigns the role of purifier of homosexuals to «true» Africans who, in his eyes, are all those who fight them vigorously, «to the last ounce of energy». The fight against homosexuals is suggested as a moral question of life and death since it's not just Africanness that's under attack but humanity itself. Such an invitation to remove gay people from the social space in Africa is nothing new; it's reminiscent of the «Kill the Gays» of the 2010s. The paradox is that it is made against the backdrop of the tired discursive paradigm of the supposed superiority of whiteness: the factory of slavery, colonization and genocide has always been built on this model. The idea was, and apparently still is, to eliminate everything that is not of the extreme right, and on the extreme right (i.e. heterosexual) from their racist ideology based on this white domination. The Africanist proponents of such hate speech believe themselves to be original in that they strive to blacken this white racial posture of domination, of which they are the proud torchbearers with tropicalizing discourses on homosexuality that would not be African. Whether they are aware of it or not, the followers of these diatribes position themselves as an extension of the white sense of superiority, through their homophobic stance in favor of a pure, unblemished Africa: the beautiful, primitive, purified Africa that has never known homosexual «corruption» (Gueboguo, 2006), or any other form of «defilement» from the West.

The idea is comparable to that of the orientalist of the Middle East (Saïd, 2005), in that it is a racist discourse imbued with paternalistic superiority. They give themselves the power to speak for and in the name of a group, with the claim to master it better, to identify its defects, to have the right of life or death. In this way, these homosexual purifiers echo the Napoleonic Code noir which reduced Blacks to the status of chattel or Hitler's Aryanism which claimed a superior race. In other words, the ideology of homophobia they claim is an import from the West to Africa through its colonial laws and its representations of Abrahamic religions, all under the guise of the idea of white superiority over other non-white groups (Altman, 2001). Thus, Ella-Menyé's call for a total purge including anyone rendering important services to members of the LGBTIQ+ community brings us back to what Alice Nkom deplored, namely that to be homosexual in Africa is to live in terror and violence. This terror is also premonitory. It presages

a «great day», when «real» Africans and pan-Africanists will systematically cleanse LGBTQI+ people and their allies, continuing the horrifying work of white supremacists. This possibility remains topical, and many of the continent's writers feel challenged by this debate which no doubt, explains Lewat's choice to write a novel that transposes the reality of homophobia in Africa while advocating a different treatment of homosexualities.

His novel is a means of raising awareness. In an interview with the newspaper *Jeune Afrique* on January 25, 2022 in relation to *Les Aquatiques*, Lewat asserts that she wanted to «build a country with common realities: homophobia, the weight of the group on the individual, injunctions made to women, the ball of appearances». The writer therefore denounces these acts of violence as the last great barbarities from which the continent should free itself as soon as possible at the risk of once again being the scene of a tragic purge of these LGBTQI+ communities. Worse still, Lewat tells us this purge will be carried out by young Africans transformed into despotic oppressors by today's Ella-Menyé-style homophobic discourse under the complicit and complacent gaze of adults.

Conclusion

Whatever criticism may be leveled at His Excellency Félix Tshisekedi, history will remember that it was under his impetus and efforts that the Pan-African Grand Prix for Literature was created, choosing for its inaugural prize, a work that speaks out against homophobia in Africa. This is the moment to return to the meaning of this text which is basically a cry of pain, a tribute to the memory of all the African homosexuals who have lost their lives on their continent. In this tribute, Osvalde Lewat begins by reminding us that Samy cannot be reduced to «a homosexual», for he was above all, a son cherished by his mother, a brother, a faithful friend, a godfather, an uncle, a college professor and an artist. In the Aquatic neighborhood, he was a leader. Samy was also the one who used his art to make the Zambuenta leaders aware of the miserable condition of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Finally, Samy was simply the man who wanted to embellish the lives of others. Embellish the lives of young people by teaching them trades. Embellish the neighborhood by planting flowers. Embellish Africa by giving it back shape, color, visibility and life. But with his death, it's the Africa in the making that is assassinated. Coming from the highest pan-African political body, this first Pan-African Grand Prix for Literature invites Africans to (re)imagine a new model of society, taking into account the rights of LGBTQI+ people. Will they live up to this call? And above all, what will become of this prize that has crystallized so many hopes at a time when H.E. Félix Tshisekedi has been replaced at the head of the AU, first by H.E. Macky Sall and now by H.E. Azali Assoumani? Will the current president of the AU be able to work to consolidate the role and place of this new prize as a reference in (pan)African literature for the renaissance of the continent? Only posterity will tell.

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