



## African Art: Traditional

by Frederick Lamp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Many forms of ambiguous sexuality can be found throughout the traditional arts of Africa, including images of androgyny, hermaphroditism, and transvestism; and much of erotic sculpture and theater can also be seen as homoerotic.

Traditional African art is distinguished here from contemporary African art, but it should be noted that tradition and the contemporary are not mutually exclusive in Africa. If "tradition," is recognized to mean "handed down," then most of what is known as the traditional African arts almost always blends the traditional with the transitional, or the "handed across," to varying degrees. The same can be said of homosexual traditions.

African arts are a holistic form traditionally, consisting of the integration of sculpture, costuming, sound, movement, oral narrative, and theater, which sometimes are indistinguishable. This concept of holism applies not only to the arts, but pervades all of traditional African thinking about the nature of things and of human behavior. Holism does not divide, as in Western compartmentalization and categorization.

### Polarities

Polarities, in Africa, such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual," may function as complementary oppositions generally do, expressing the extremes of human behavior, as the passive and the aggressive, the benevolent and the malevolent, the feminine and the masculine, or the spiritual and the physical.

There are many examples of dual, antithetical masks. Among the Baga of Guinea, for example, the masquerade of D'mba is the epitome of beauty and good comportment, while her antithesis, D'mba-da-Tshol, is the epitome of ugliness and erratic behavior. Among the Dan of Liberia, sleek and gentle female masks are opposed to grotesque and violent male masks.

In social structure, dual entities exist, such as masculine and feminine sides of the village among the Baga, each containing men and women, each side complementing the other in complex alignments of paired oppositions.

Together, these pairings, in masking and in social structure, suggest the human condition and the need to balance complementary oppositions such as aggression and passivity, order and chaos, care and neglect, the hot and the cool, and masculine and feminine qualities in both men and women. In much of African culture, the extremes, which are found in all of us, are considered useful and should be channeled situationally.

### Homosexual Behavior in African Cultures

Apparently, many cultures in Africa include the range of sexuality in these useful dualities. Quite a few studies have shown that homosexual behavior is accepted in many traditional African societies, even if, like much of African thought, it is not to be discussed openly. Homosexual behavior has its accepted niche, for



This 19th Century  
Ejagham Janus Mask  
from the Guinea Coast of  
Nigeria delineates the  
physical and the spiritual,  
the female and male.  
The Baltimore Museum  
of Art

example, among the Temne of Sierra Leone, where it is associated with the "left hand," as opposed to the "right," the hidden and private as opposed to the open and public.

Public display is governed in Africa differently from the West. Same-sex physical affection, such as holding hands, hugging, kissing, and sleeping together is simply the African norm, displayed openly, although not associated with homosexuality. Public display of affection between men and women, however, is considered offensive.

Sexual play and intercourse between men, especially, and, to some extent, between women, has been documented widely in traditional Africa, and in some cases it is practiced openly. Frequently scholars have attributed these activities to economic need of the powerless, sexual voracity of the powerful, or the social prohibition of heterosexual activity before marriage. Sexual preference, however, might also be considered a factor in some cases.

In the ritual arts, some homosexuality seems to have taken place, although this is extremely difficult to document, given the severe secrecy governing most of African ritual. Because of its special status, homosexuality is often accommodated in ritual situations, such as the priesthood, where the special facility of gender mediation suggests special spiritual powers. Ritual contexts have also provided for the acceptance of homosexuality as a stable category, and for some rare cases of homosexual marriage within traditional African societies.

Many forms of ambiguous sexuality can be found throughout the African traditional arts, including images of androgyny, hermaphroditism, and transvestism. Arguably, much of erotic sculpture and theater can also be explained as homoerotic, although the goals of eroticism may differ greatly in the African context from that of the Western context, having more to do with increase and the veneration of ancestral power than with sexual pleasure. Furthermore, African art is so symbolic and iconic that if homosexual implications do exist, they may be difficult for the outsider to read.

### **Homosexual Coupling in Art and Ritual**

In the material form of the arts, the clear depiction of homosexuality of any type is almost non-existent. There are, however, two exceptions worth noting.

One ancient Egyptian wall relief from Dynasty V south of Saqqara shows the close embrace of two powerful male court officials, Nyankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, both bearing the title of "king's manicurist." Face to face, with noses touching, one holds the other's wrist, while the other, slightly behind, holds the shoulder of the first.

Although their shared tomb depicts their respective wives and children as well, which is common imagery, this precise embrace is a pose reserved in Egyptian art for spouses, or in representing the king being received by a god, and the embrace of two men is never otherwise seen. The two men have been called brothers, or twins, by scholars, but no written evidence from the tomb supports this.

South of the Sahara, one ivory carving dating to the early twentieth century from the Vili of Congo (Kinshasha), in a private collection in Antwerp, seems to show several homosexual scenes: two men with their hands on the genitals of adjacent men, two men holding a phallic staff, and one man holding his own erection.

Sexuality is clearly an element in some prehistoric South African rock painting, where groups of men are shown with erections, but they are generally hunting scenes, and the intent of this imagery is elusive. Wrestling scenes in Egyptian art, such as those at Beni Hassan, may seem homoerotic to Westerners, but they function in the context of war and Egyptian assertions of power.

To the casual observer, the appearance of homosexuality in African art is often the result of a misunderstanding of complex symbolic codes. Conversely, the seeming absence of clear imagery throughout African art may be due to our inability to interpret more abstract conventions, or due to the inherent "left-handedness" or secrecy of homosexual acts.

Homosexual coupling, both male and female, however, clearly exists in other forms of art, such as theatrical ritual, where it can easily be read because of the direct use of the human body. In the proceedings of male and female initiation into adulthood, the context of some of the most magnificent African art and essentially a theater of symbolic performance ritual, homosexual practices are often reported.

Man-boy sex, or at least the representation of it, is most common. Among the Temne of Sierra Leone, for example, the last boy to be initiated is given the name, Tithkabethi ("vagina initiate"). Boys in initiation often wear women's clothes, as documented among the Temne and among the Nandi of Kenya.

Among the Ndembu of Congo (Kinshasa), the chief instructor of the boys' initiation is called the "husband of the novices" and the novices themselves are called *mwadi*, senior wives, and are said to be "married by" the chief instructor. The novices are said to play with the sexual organs of male visitors to the initiation lodge, a practice considered helpful in the healing of their circumcisions. In a particular ritual, an elder man lies on the ground, exposing his penis, and each of the novices mimes copulation with him.

One must keep in mind that initiation procedure is performance, not real life. Nevertheless, that these practices overlie real man-boy sex within the initiation is not so hard to imagine, as the practice has been documented so thoroughly throughout Africa in daily life apart from ritual. In Sierra Leone, for example, it is rather common for a "big man," who otherwise leads a heterosexual life, to have sex with an adolescent boy, to whom he gives gifts, as he would to any lover. Enough suggestions have been given of homosexual insertion as a part of African male initiation to give the practice some credibility.

Throughout the male initiation ceremony, the masculinity of the young boy is challenged, whether through beatings by the older men, the ritual mutilation of his penis, or through sexual receptivity. It has been suggested that since initiation procedures are sexually exclusive, and each sex remains independent from the other for a given period of time, heterosexual intercourse itself is rejected in favor of homosexual intercourse.

Nowhere in Africa is man-boy sex explained, as it is in New Guinea, as a means of increasing the sexual potency of the young boy. Rather, it seems to function as a demonstration of power relations, and, to some extent, as sex education as well as gender formation. It is in the rituals of male and female initiation principally that the social construction of gender is negotiated and reinforced.

Among women in initiation proceedings, for example in the Bondo association of Sierra Leone, it is said that the very tight bonds that are developed between the initiates of the same age group often include homosexuality, in the context of an extremely close and lengthy confinement away from the rest of society, and that these relationships often continue into adulthood and heterosexual marriage.

Among the Kaguru of Tanzania, some men claim that women demonstrate sexual intercourse to the girls in initiation, the leaders together, and with the initiates, taking the roles of both men and women, although this has not been confirmed.

### **Homosexuality in the Artist/Ritual Leader**

While homosexuality may not often be the subject of African art, homosexual persons may be more inclined than others to become practitioners of the arts and rituals. In the Sudan, the healing ritual system known as *zaar*, practiced mainly by women, is also joined by men, some of whom become ritual leaders. These

men are assumed to be homosexual by the community, and some are overtly homosexual. In Mombasa, Kenya, receptive homosexual men called *mashoga*, dressed in wigs and women's clothes, are active as performers at weddings, playing the *pembe* (a female musical instrument), and doing *chagkacha* (a seductive female dance).

Male ritual leaders called *mugawe* among the Meru of Kenya dress as women routinely and sometimes even marry other men. Coptic monks in the sixth or seventh century, whose work included the painting of sacred manuscripts, apparently were known for their homosexuality, judging by a man's wedding vow on papyrus that promises "never to take another wife, never to fornicate, nor to consort with wandering monks."

Among the Dagara of Burkina Faso, the homosexual man is said to be well integrated into the community, occupying a performance role of intermediacy between this world and the otherworld, as a sort of "gatekeeper." As Somé reports, a Dagara man has testified that such a person "experiences a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher, and far different from the one the normal person would experience. . . . So when you arrive here, you begin to vibrate in a way that Elders can detect as meaning that you are connected with a gateway somewhere. . . . You decide that you will be a gatekeeper before you are born."

Diviners, who manipulate materials to find a spiritual solution to clients' problems, in several areas of Africa have been known to be homosexuals, for example among the Zulu of South Africa and among the Nyoro of Kenya, where they would demonstrate spiritual possession by "becoming a woman."

Carlos Estermann found that among the Ambo of Angola a special order of diviner, called *omasenge*, dressed as women, did women's work, and contracted marriage with other men who might also be married to women. "An *esenge* [sing. of *omasenge*] is essentially a man who has been possessed since childhood by a spirit of female sex, which has been drawing out of him, little by little, the taste for everything that is masculine and virile."

In the case of the Zande of the Central African Republic, sex between a man and a boy was said to benefit the diviner, and would take place before the consultation of oracles, when sex with women would be taboo. But, as Evans-Prichard reported, the Zande went on to allow that the reason was not simply ritual prohibition, but also "just because they like them."

### **Homoeroticism in Art**

Perhaps the most common use of eroticism in African art is the depiction of the phallus. Well-known examples of singular phallic sculpture include columnar earthen shrines, documented among many groups in the Sahel, for example, the Dogon, Batammaliba, and Lobi. The sexual realism of these columns is heightened by the pouring of white meal over the rounded top.

Large, vertical, stone pillars, called *akwanshi*, found along the Cross River in Nigeria, and traced to before the colonial period, are carved quite realistically as an erect penis, with a distinct head and shaft. Generally the height of an adult person, they seem also to represent a truncated human figure.

Male initiates among the Zulu of South Africa carry wooden clubs with a knob on the end resembling the head of a penis. With sometimes several dozen young men initiated at one time, the sea of upraised phalluses is a powerful sight.

The Baga of Guinea revere a great male founding spirit who is manifested by an enormous, vertical shaft of fiber, perhaps twenty meters tall, topped by a wooden bird head, and carried inside by as many as twenty men. The powerful male image is frightening to the community, as it shivers and throbs. Alternatively, a heavy, wooden, vertical shaft in the form of a huge serpent may represent the founding male spirit, and is balanced on top of the dancer's head.

The exaggeration of the phallus as a part of a male figure is almost universal throughout Africa. The Yoruba god, Eshu, the god of confusion, the crossroads, chance, and sex, is depicted with a wooden phallus sprouting from the top of his head. Wooden figures of ancestral chiefs among the Ndengese of Congo (Kinshasa), are carved with enormous phalluses to emphasize the fertile power of the ancestors. The Egyptian god, Amun-Min, he who awoke the sexual potency of the god Osiris, is depicted as a mummy with an erection.

Among the Yaka of Congo (Kinshasa), during the initiation called *nkanda*, young male officials perform with erotic masks known as *kholuka* in the coming-out ceremonies. The masks, constructed by the young men, often are surmounted by human figures in heterosexual intercourse but also frequently by the single male figure with an enormous erection, very realistically formed, and sometimes shown in masturbation. During the dance, including pelvic thrusts, the dancer also carries a wooden phallus, and sometimes sheds his clothing to reveal his own erect sexual organ. During this performance, the men disparage the women and ridicule the women's sexual organs, while extolling their own.

All these phallic representations are made by, made for, and used by, men exclusively. What is one to make of the stimulus for this? If men are the ones who venerate, worship, and manipulate the representation of the male organ, and are energized by it, it cannot be seen as other than same-sex attraction of a sort, and perhaps symbolic mutual masturbation, even as the stated intention is to honor the ancestors, to encourage fertility and increase, or to enliven the dead.

In female homosexuality, the creation of an artificial penis has been documented among the Ovimbundu. Wilfred Hambley mentioned, in 1937, that "A woman has been known to make an artificial penis for use with another woman."

In Zanzibar, the artificial penis was said by M. Haberlandt, in 1899, to have been made by black and Indian craftsmen. "It is a stick of ebony in the shape of a male member of considerable size, . . . sold secretly. Sometimes it is also made from ivory. There exist two different forms. The first has below the end a nick where a cord is fastened, which one of the women ties around her middle in order to imitate the male act with the other. The stick is pierced most of the way and it then pours out warm water in imitation of ejaculation. With the other form, the stick is sculpted with penis heads at both ends so that it can be inserted by both women into their vaginas, for which they assume a sitting position. This kind of stick is also pierced. The sticks are greased for use."

### **Cross-dressing in Art**

African art history is full of references to cross-dressing, both male-to-female and female-to-male. Throughout Africa, masked dance is almost exclusively performed by men, even when the character represented is female. There are just a few examples of women's costuming, even fewer examples of any type of women's masking, and only one example where a woman exclusively wears a wooden mask representing a woman. So the opportunities for women to represent men are far fewer than the opportunities for men to represent women.

Still, numerous examples have been given of women costumed as men, without masks, in a performance of ridicule and perhaps defiance. Women of the Bondo association in Sierra Leone are seen in the final ceremonies of the girls' initiation dressed as men, frequently with two giant gourds under their pants meant to ridicule herniated men. The women sometimes approach men and imitate active sexual penetration, in a reversal of the norm.

Throughout Africa, it is common to see ceremonies in which some men dress as women, and this has been explained variously as ritual of inversion, ritual of rebellion, and as a means of "making special" or setting apart the event from the routine.

In a particular Bondo ceremony called *e-lukne* ("the transplanting"), men often dress as women in a ritual of total upheaval where the townspeople race around the town carrying rubbish, tree limbs, and old furnishings. Here the meaning seems to be one of overturning the social order, with no reference directly to homosexuality, and ultimately serving as a trope for the discombobulating transfer of the young woman from her clan of birth to the clan of her husband.

Among the Baga of Guinea, almost any masked dance occasions the appearance of one or two men without masks but in women's gowns and jewelry, a phenomenon completely unexplained except to say, "Because they like to."

But an exceptional event is the Baga dance for their great female spirit, *a-Bol*, in which all the participating men dress as women and imitate their movements erotically, undulating the hips, and sometimes suggesting sexual intercourse with men on the sidelines. The musical instruments used during the dance are those normally reserved exclusively for women: the cittern, *wa-sakumba*, and the small *të-ndëf* drum.

It has been suggested that because the female spirit is the patron of the lower-ranking clans, associated with "the younger," who are, in turn, associated with homosexuality (common before marriage), the men representing her are placed ritually in this class and its sexual reference.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, priests of the god Shango, the god of thunder and lightning, are usually female, but male priests are common and they always dress as women, with braided hair. They operate in the ritual context in which the god is said to "mount" the priest in spirit possession, as a male animal mounts a female in intercourse. Some studies have indicated specifically that the male priests do not practice homosexuality, while others have disputed this.

There are hundreds of examples throughout West and Central Africa in which men represent women with masks, sometimes with false breasts and false pregnant bellies, for example, among the Dogon of Mali, the Yoruba of Nigeria, and the Chokwe of Zambia. It is the men, not the women, who represent the spiritual world, in general, and who are authorized to perform masked, with the exceptions noted above.

Explanations for this phenomenon may vary from group to group, but commonly it is simply a function of the male control of the spiritual. Women are often associated with the physical world, the village, and the home, whereas men are often associated with the spiritual world, the world outside the secure domicile.

Men also use masks to control, to honor, to placate, and sometimes, to rebuke women. In the Yoruba *Gelede* dances, for example, men assume the likeness of "the mothers" in order to control their extraordinary powers, which they fear, and which are symbolized, in part, by the woman's unique ability to nurture.

### **Gender Transformation**

There are some examples of permanent gender transformation, which goes beyond occasional cross-dressing, in which men "become" women and women "become" men in African ritual. Among the Gabra of Ethiopia and Kenya, symbolic gender inversion takes place as a function of the gender-specificity of space, as older men are assigned to the inside of the camps, a feminine space, whereas masculinity is constructed among the younger men by assignment to the outside. Whereas the initiation of boys turns them into men, the second initiation, *jilla galaani* ("rites of the return home"), turns the men into women socially, though not sexually.

In Sierra Leone, men are theoretically unable to join the women's Bondo association, but one case has been mentioned in which a man who had violated Bondo secrecy was initiated as a Bondo official and was

henceforth regarded as a woman. Likewise, women in Sierra Leone are prohibited from joining the men's Poro association, but every local chapter of Poro is likely to have a few women in official positions who, likewise, are said to have violated Poro law, and are required to live their lives as men.

No one has studied this phenomenon in depth enough to determine exactly what this means sexually. One wonders how "coerced" the transformations are, when every potential violator, even from childhood, knows well the consequences of such a violation.

The accession to leadership sometimes seems to require gender transformation. Two pharaohs of ancient Egypt, Hatshepsut and Smenkhare, who are believed to have been women (the latter being Nefertiti in her later years), are consistently shown wearing false beards and men's clothing, just as the male pharaohs. This is probably not because they functioned as men sexually, but because a male identity was needed to function as a pharaoh. Accompanying texts refer to them exclusively as men.

Women elsewhere in Africa today who take the role of monarchs may be regarded as women sexually but as men socially, and are called not queens, but kings and chiefs, as among the Mende of Sierra Leone, the Chokwe of Zambia, or the Mbundu of Angola. One might argue that this is a convenient mechanism to avoid enfranchising women as a class.

### **Sexual Duality**

Many representations exist showing the human being as Janus, of dual sex. Janus masks of the Ejagham in Nigeria, for example, have one face dark and one light, delineating the oppositions of physical and spiritual, female and male. Human figures of the Lobi of Burkina Faso, the Dogon of Mali, and the Luba of Congo (Kinshasha), among many African ethnic groups, are carved with a male face on one side and a female face on the other. This depiction can represent the bisexual ancestors or other spiritual beings who are both male and female or have attributes of both. It can also represent the ability to work in both the physical and the spiritual worlds, themselves frequently aligned with such dyads as the interior and exterior, the village and the wilderness, and the feminine and the masculine.

### **Conclusion**

Although homosexual activity is widely documented in the history of Africa, and homosexual status is known as a tradition in various areas, the depiction of the homosexual is almost unknown in sculpture and painting for traditional ritual. However, it is well-known in ritual performance. The problem for research is how to interpret this phenomenon, and even more basically, how to decipher it within an artistic system based upon metaphor and hidden meaning.

While there is little evidence of the homosexuality of artists, per se, there is widespread documentation of the homosexuality or gender transformation of the leaders of ritual performance, who function as intermediaries between worlds because of their gender fluidity. In the world of African art and ritual dominated by men, the enormous corpus of phallic objects seems to suggest, if not homosexual preference, then homosexual fascination, celebration, reverence, or titillation. In the exhibition of homosexual activity, gender transformation, cross-dressing, androgyny, and sexual duality, many possibilities of interpretation exist, and the student of African art and communication, which are always highly metaphoric, is cautioned to avoid assuming the obvious.

### **Bibliography**

Beidelman, Thomas O. *The Cool Knife: Imagery of Gender, Sexuality, and Moral Education in Kaguru Initiation Ritual*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1997.

Bourgeois, Arthur P. "Yaka Masks and Sexual Imagery." *African Arts* 15.2 (1982): 47-50, 87.

Drewal, Henry J., and Margaret T. Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

Dundes, Alan. "A Psychoanalytic Study of the Bullroarer." *Man* n.s. 11.2 (1976): 220-238.

Evans-Prichard, Edward E. "Sexual Inversion among the Azande." *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970): 1428-1434.

Haberlandt, Michael. "Conträre Sexual-Erscheinungen bei der Neger-Bevölkerung Zanzibars." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 31.6 (1899): 668-670.

Hambley, Wilfred D. *Sourcebook for African Anthropology*. Chicago: Field Museum, 1937.

Hollis, Alfred C. *The Nandi*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909.

Lamp, Frederick "Frogs into Princes: the Temne Rabai Initiation." *African Arts* 11.2 (1978): 34-49, 94.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention*. New York: Museum for African Art, and Munich: Prestel, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art*. Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, and Munich: Prestel, 2004.

Matory, J. Lorand. *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Murray, Stephen O., & Will Roscoe, eds. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.

Pierpont Morgan Library. Coptic papyrus, M662 B12 (wedding contract for a cleric), 6th-7th centuries.

Smith, W. Stevenson, and William K. Simpson. *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.

Somé, Malidoma Patrice. "Gays As Spiritual Gate Keepers." *White Crane Newsletter* 4.9 (1993): 1, 6, 8.

Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967.

Talbot, P. Amaury. *Some Nigerian Fertility Cults*. London: Oxford University Press, 1927.

Wood, John Colman. *When Men Are Women: Manhood among Gabra Nomads of East Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

### **About the Author**

**Frederick Lamp** is Curator of African Art at the Yale University Art Gallery. He is the author of *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention* and *La Guinée et ses Héritages Culturels*, as well as numerous articles.