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The God Within: Interrogating Queer Practices of Faith in Francesca Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread* and Akwaeke Emezi's "Who is Like God"

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Abstract
In many precolonial African societies, gender was a fluid construct that was enacted in social roles rather than exclusively prescribed by biological sex. Heteronormative gender roles and sexualities, as Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí and Maria Lugones argue in *The Invention of Women* (1997) and "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" (2010) respectively, were promoted and inscribed within law through processes of colonisation and Christianisation. These colonial legacies remain a legal and social presence in many postcolonial nations, including Nigeria, where strong anti-queer sentiments still govern public discourse. Organised religions such as Nigerian Pentecostal churches powerfully shape these debates that led, among others, to the passing of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014, which criminalises same-sex unions and, by extension, non-heteronormative identities. Drawing on a queer theology framework that centres the queer body as site of theological engagement, this paper investigates how the works of queer Nigerian (diasporic) authors complicate hegemonic practices of faith through a close reading of Francesca Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread* (2020) and Akwaeke Emezi's short story "Who Is Like God" (2017). Both stories centre queer protagonists who negotiate their intersecting identities along the axes of gender, sexuality, nationality, and race through and against their faith. By metaphorically incorporating a godly presence into the protagonists' queer bodies, the stories foreground the relationship between the individual and such divine presences and thereby subvert the construction of Christianity as opposed to and thus exclusive of queerness. In doing so, they challenge the notion of non-heteronormative performances of gender and sexuality as 'un-African' or 'un-Christian.'

Keywords: queer theology, queer embodiment, coloniality of gender, African diasporic fiction, Francesca Ekwuyasi, Akwaeke Emezi

Introduction

In many precolonial African societies, gender was a fluid construct that was enacted in social roles rather than exclusively prescribed by biological sex. As Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí contends in *The Invention of Women* (1997), in which she explores gender conceptualisation in Yorùbá society and cosmology prior to colonisation, it was the introduction of what she terms Western "bio-logic"—that is, "biology as an ideology for organizing th[e] social world" (Oyěwùmí x)—that led to the predominance of gender as a social category determined by biological difference.[1] The processes of colonisation and Christianisation went hand in hand in promoting such an "institutionalization of gender categories" (Oyěwùmí xvii). Following Oyěwùmí, "[t]he introduction of Christianity and Western education was critical to the stratification of colonial society along both class and gender lines" (128). Given the Christian missionaries' monopoly on education at that time, "Christianity and Western education were inseparable" (Oyěwùmí 128).[2]

In this, Oyěwùmí aligns with—or rather, as Cheryl Sterling has pointed out, foreshadows—Maria Lugones' notion of the coloniality of gender (Sterling 4-5). Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's framework of the coloniality of power as well as theorisations of the intersectionality of gender, race, and colonisation (including Oyěwùmí's work), Lugones similarly points to the influence of Western ideologies on the construction of gender in colonised societies. Although focussing on different geographic regions and cultural contexts, both scholars stress that heteronormative gender roles and sexualities were promoted and inscribed within law through processes of colonialisation and Christianisation. These colonial legacies remain a legal and social presence in many postcolonial nations, including Nigeria, where

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[1] Oyěwùmí specifically focuses on the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá culture in her study and emphasises the danger of generalising and homogenising African cultures when transferring findings from one specific cultural group or society to others. Her theorisation of changes in gender conceptualisations through processes of colonisation, later taken up and expanded by scholars such as Maria Lugones, nevertheless serves as a productive framework to understand the general impact and role of such processes of knowledge erasure and production.

[2] According to Oyěwùmí, seniority rather than gender functioned as an organising principle in pre-colonial Yorùbá society. While partially contesting Oyěwùmí's argument, Oyeronke Olajubu similarly argues that, in Yorùbá culture, "gender conceptions are not limited to sexual anatomy and are configured in a complex and fluid manner" (42). Research into the practice of so-called "woman-woman-marriages" among the Yorùbá (Nigeria), Nandi (Kenya) or Lovedu (South Africa), to name but a few, also highlights a separation between biological sex and social role. See, e.g., Egodi Uchendu, "Woman-Woman Marriage in Igboland" (2007) or Joseph M. Carrier and Stephen O. Murray, "Woman-Woman Marriage in Africa" (1998).

strong anti-queer sentiments still govern public discourse. Organised monotheistic religions, such as Nigerian Pentecostal churches, powerfully shape these debates that have led, among others, to the passing of the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014, which criminalises same-sex unions and, by extension, non-heteronormative identities (Ukah 75).

Francesca Ekwuyasi, the Nigerian-born author of *Butter Honey Pig Bread* (2020), points to the dilemma facing those identifying as queer within such religious contexts: "I find that queerness and faith, just with my own background, they can contradict" (Ekwuyasi in Dennis-Ben). Raised in a faith that, in her own words, "is inherently homophobic and heavy on the shame" (Ekwuyasi in Neuss), Ekwuyasi struggles to reconcile these facets of her identity. With these statements, she echoes research into the intersection of queerness and faith that points to this sense of contradiction many queer believers experience (O'Brien 181).[3] As Megan Robertson posits, "Christianity has largely been characterised as being overtly and irreconcilably anti-queer. This argument has been amplified when characterising a queer-phobic African Christianity linked to widely held conservative theologies and cultural beliefs" (139).[4] Writing in a South African context, Tracey Sibisi and Charlene van der Walt similarly stress that "queer bodies are viewed as immoral and the act of homosexuality as a sin against nature" in many African (Christian) faith communities (73). While many queer people therefore abandon the (Christian) church altogether, Ekwuyasi's novel *Butter Honey Pig Bread* and Akwaeke Emezi's short story "Who is Like God" (2017) critically interrogate and subvert this supposed contradiction through the notion of embodiment.

Emezi's "Who is Like God" was awarded the 2017 Commonwealth Short Story Prize (African Region) and predates the publication of their critically acclaimed debut novel *Freshwater* (2018). Despite the great

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[3] Jodi O'Brien, focussing on the intersection between Christian faith and queerness in a US-American context, stresses that this supposed contradiction goes both ways: on the one hand, "Christian denominations routinely denounce homosexuality" (181), on the other, there is the sentiment that "[g]ood queers are not religious" (181) precisely because of this intolerance. Robertson, however, criticises this "base assumption that religious identity and queer sexuality can be theorised and [are] experienced as inherently incongruent, binary identifications" (133) in much scholarship on the topic and instead calls for critical interrogations that centre and theorise from the lived experience of queer religious individuals.

[4] Indeed, many African (religious) leaders have framed homosexuality as a Western import and thus as 'un-African' (Ukah 87; Hoad 15; Sibisi and van der Walt 68). More recent research points to the involvement of U.S. Christian Right 'pro-family' groups in such framings and legal developments on the continent; see, e.g., Haley McEwan, *The U.S. Christian Right and Pro-Family Politics in 21st Century Africa* (2023).

popular and academic interest in Emezi's impressive range of work across media and genres, including the publication of eight novels over the course of six years, their short story has received no scholarly attention to date. While *Freshwater* only broaches the topic of Christian faith as it intersects with Igbo cosmology and spirituality as well as queerness (represented through the Ada's relationship with Yshwa/Jesus; Magawa and Makombe 34), "Who is Like God" revolves around the frictions and ambivalences that emerge in the process of negotiating one's faith with one's queerness. It tells the story of Onyedikachi, or simply Kachi, who is raised in a religious household and, as he grows from a young boy into a teenager, begins to explore and interrogate his own sexuality and gender identity, testing out normative boundaries imposed on him by both society and his devotedly Christian mother. God is an ever-present entity in his home, and he grows up believing that God is—quite literally—within him: in his blood and in his body. This notion of being host to God leads to some complex and, at times, painful questions, especially when he is confronted with his mother's disapproval of his 'deviance' from normative masculinity and male gender expression.

Francesca Ekwuyasi's debut novel, *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, similarly received much critical praise (e.g., longlisted for the 2020 Giller Prize, selected for "Canada Reads" in 2021, winner of the 2022 Dayne Ogilvie Prize, and named one of Canada's best works of fiction of 2020), yet has also received little scholarly attention so far. The novel tells the story of three women and their, at times, complicated relationship with themselves and each other: Kambirinachi, who believes she is an ọgbanje, and her twin daughters, Taiye and Kehinde, who have grown estranged over years of living apart—Kambirinachi stays in Lagos while her daughters move to the diaspora, that is, London/later Halifax, and Montreal, respectively.[5] The story is focalised through all three women, whose narratives at times overlap or even (slightly) contradict each other. In Taiye's third-person narration, her presupposed sinful gluttonous behaviour, such as her 'indulgence' in countless sexual relations without the ability to truly (emotionally) commit, is in part the reason for her growing loneliness. Indeed, her emotional isolation is often framed as a punishment. While in London, she seeks comfort in Catholic Mass and eventually starts seeing Our Lady of La Salette—an apparition of Virgin Mary first reported by two

[5] The concept of *ọgbanje* originates in Igbo cosmology and describes (spirit) children who are believed to be bound to the spirit world and thus often die in infancy, only to be born over and over again. In this, it shares many similarities with the *abiku* concept in Yorùbá culture (see, e.g., Ogunyemi; Magaqa and Makombe).

French children in 1846 and approved by the Catholic Church—who becomes her steady companion, offering motherly advice.

The notion of faith plays a distinct, yet slightly different role in the two works: whereas Kachi, the protagonist of "Who is Like God," is confronted with his mother's homophobic interpretation of Christianity, Taiye does not experience religion as necessarily exclusive—although her self-doubts and the image of herself as inherently sinful are heavily influenced by her religious education as a child. However, both protagonists' queer normative practices of faith by incorporating a spiritual entity—either the notion of a God or, in the case of Taiye, a manifestation of the Virgin Mary—into their body and mind. In doing so, they seek refuge in their idiosyncratic belief in God and thereby challenge the construction of Christianity as inevitably opposed to and thus exclusive of queerness. Drawing on a framework of queer theology, which centres the queer body and uses "what bodies are doing as the starting point for theological engagement" (Sibisi and van der Walt 88), the following discussion explores how Kachi and Taiye make use of embodied and thus individualised practices of faith to negotiate their relationship with their God as well as religious communities, thereby creating a potentially "transformative, subversive theology" (Robertson 135). Foregrounding the protagonists' internal struggles and evaluations thereof—realised as interior monologue in "Who is Like God" and interior focalisation in *Butter Honey Pig Bread*—, both narratives meditate on queer practices of faith while drawing attention to the violent homophobia of Catholicism and the Nigerian Pentecostal Church as well as the harmful consequences of such rhetoric and the concomitant exclusion from community spaces of those who aim to reconcile their queerness with their faith.

Queer(ing) Practices of Faith

In *The Queer God* (2003), Marcella Althaus-Reid stresses the connection between queer theologies and queer biographies, that is, individuals and their tactical "disruptive practices which are not necessarily to be repeated, and reflections which aim to be disconcerting" (8). Patrick Cheng, similarly, emphasises the importance of queer experience as a source for queer theology. In this context, Robertson calls for analyses of "everyday experiences in order to explore more nuanced, holistic understandings of queer experiences in different contexts" (139). In *Butter Honey Pig Bread* and "Who is Like God," the protagonists' experiences serve as an entry point for their musings about (their relationship with) God. The following thus first establishes how the protagonists develop practices of faith that are intimately linked to their queer identities and bodies, to then illustrate

how these refigurations work to critique, challenge, and interrogate Christian traditions that promote anti-queerness.

In Akwaeke Emezi's "Who is Like God," Kachi imagines his body to be host to God. His belief is in part based on Bible verses "which said that God, whether in Spirit or Son, was also in [him]" (Emezi), yet also heavily informed by his conviction that God is within his mother and thus must be within him. As a result of his belief, he takes meticulous care of his body and avoids playing rough or wild games, worrying that "if [he] bled too much, maybe some of God would bleed out also" (Emezi). Ironically, the meticulous care he takes of his body, which is initially praised by his mother, is later judged as too effeminate or unmanly when he grows into a young man and eventually becomes part of the reason for his mother's rejection.

At first, Kachi frames the union between God and his mother—and, by extension, himself—as full of tenderness and care: "I grew up thinking He was folded into her body, very gently, like when she folded sifted icing sugar into beaten egg whites, those kinds of loving corners" (Emezi). In his understanding, God is a presence lovingly incorporated into the physical human form, the two thus becoming an inseparable union, indicating a strong sense of an *embodiment* of faith. Here, the story draws interesting parallels to the Eucharist in Catholicism, where (the body of) Christ is believed to be literally present and ingested and thus incorporated into the body of the believer as a form of spiritual nourishment. Whereas in Catholicism the wafer and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus through the religious rituals of eucharistic prayer, Kachi's mother—and by extension Kachi—feels closer to God through the (individual) ritual of baking, which significantly is not bound to a religious space such as a church building. Kachi's metaphor of God being lovingly folded into his mother's body—and by extension, also into his—thus foregrounds the relationship between God and the individual, which does not necessitate approval nor can be regulated by outside forces such as organised religious communities. In this, it stands in stark contrast to the severely regulated and restricted nature of the Eucharist in Catholicism. Moreover, Kachi's notion of embodying God demonstrates a necessarily selective reading practice, marked by creatively "interpreting [scripture] positively and constructively" (Cheng 12) from a queer perspective.

At the same time, his use of culinary imagery to describe this relationship merges passion with the forbidden. To him, baking functions as a love language, heightened by the fact that his mother always sang "gospel song[s] in Igbo as if [they were] love song[s]" (Emezi) when she was in the kitchen. Throughout the story, he describes baking in sensual

terms, as something almost sacred and intimate. However, aware of the gendered expectations in his home, which functions as a microcosm of society throughout the story, he cannot openly pursue his passion. He repeatedly points out that, as a boy, he is not allowed to be in the kitchen “to see [his mother’s] hands do such tender things” (Emezi), much less to actually participate in the supposedly feminine practice of cooking or baking. As such, this allegorical framing foreshadows his budding queer passions that trouble gendered binaries.

Such a troubling extends not only to practices within the family but also the family constellation itself. Because his sister, Ure, prefers hiding in a closet with a flashlight and a book over assisting their mother—something she is expected to do as a girl—Kachi secretly gets to take his sister’s place. This ‘role reversal,’ that is, the siblings’ non-adherence to the required gendered behaviours, and the secrecy surrounding it highlight the normative character of a binary gender conceptualisation that links certain tasks to a specific biological sex. Over the years, baking becomes a ritual between mother and son, however, one that is never openly acknowledged or addressed, as Kachi states: “Mama was pleased that I was baking because it was something we had in common, but she never said it directly in case it came across as encouragement. I was still a boy, after all” (Emezi). Kachi is constantly reminded of his prescribed gender identity and the transgression of gendered norms his actions constitute in the view of his mother and others. Nevertheless, Kachi feels closer to his mother because of their shared passion and it being their “little secret” (Emezi), much like his mother revels in these transgressions as long as they remain unspoken and thus unaddressed.[6] Based on Melissa Wilcox’ understanding of the religious potential of everyday practices and rituals for the individual, Kachi’s mother’s baking can be read as a religious practice (91), where the kitchen becomes the site of prayer through gospel songs. Emulating his mother’s practice. Kachi also feels closer to God when baking. Simultaneously, by subverting—albeit secretly—prescribed heteronormative gender roles, he feels closer to a side of himself that is otherwise hidden away.

When Kachi begins to explore his sexual and gender identity as a teenager, he draws on the notion of God inside him as an encouragement. He wonders whether “[m]aybe God was looking at [him] as [he] looked at [him]self” in the mirror as he secretly applies his mother’s eyeliner to, in his words, for once “see [him]self completely” (Emezi). The painting of “the

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[6] His mother’s reluctance to put Kachi’s supposed transgression into words is emphasised by her praising “[w]hoever made this” (Emezi) rather than Kachi for the food he made, suggesting a strategic ignorance that upholds the illusion of ‘normalcy.’

thin line of wet flesh" (Emezi) thus becomes a process of stepping over an embodied line, a highly symbolic transgression that is mirrored in Kachi's language here. Because of the gendered expectations both in his home and in society, he knows he cannot openly express this side of himself and be the "son and brother they wanted" (Emezi). In his home, where his devoutly Christian mother appears to function as God's mouthpiece, there is no room for deviations from heteronormative conventions, as he stresses: "My father would kill me if he saw me now. Mama would go crazy" (Emezi).[7] Much like his baking is kept a "little secret" between himself and his mother, Kachi does not dare freely express himself in a way that would go against socially and religiously prescribed notions of masculinity.

Yet, at the same time, he draws on religious language to describe the effect of applying his mother's eyeliner when he notes that "one eye was holy" (Emezi). This eye thus represents both the 'forbidden' gender expression and the divine and symbolises a merging of seemingly contradictory discourses. This ambivalence is heightened by the juxtaposition of two possible reactions by God which Kachi ponders: "Maybe God inside [his mother] would go crazy too, I wasn't sure [...] God could even be in my eye right now, using it as a window" (Emezi). The metaphor of eyes as windows, for instance, to one's soul, adds an interesting layer here: It is through this holy window that Kachi can find a 'true' expression of himself as well as a loving or accepting God. Kachi's use of religious language in this passage thus indicates an ambivalence inherent to his experience he is never fully able to reconcile. In framing his *embodied* non-normative gender expression as a religious practice that makes him feel closer to God, Kachi reworks and hence queers (hetero)normative practices of faith.

Whereas Kachi imagines God to be within his body, Taiye, in *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, incorporates the Virgin Mary apparition into her mind. Plagued by loneliness, one day she comes across the apparition after attending mass at a church dedicated to Our Lady of La Salette in London. Our Lady, as she is called throughout the novel, then "made herself at home in Taiye's mind, stretched out on the plush sofa by the garden window of her thoughts" (Ekwuyasi 136). The apparition becomes a constant presence in Taiye's life and gives her advice or simply keeps her company. Our Lady can be read as a manifestation of Taiye's inner voice

[7] Growing up, Kachi's "mother talked about God all the time, [...] as if He was borrowing her mouth because maybe He trusted her that much or it was easier than burning bushes or He was just tired of thundering down from the skies and having no one listen to Him" (Emezi). In his view, Kachi's mother functions as a vehicle for God's words, elevating her to an almost prophet-like status.

realised through religious imagery that fills the empty space left by Taiye's mother and twin sister who both, each in their own way, abandoned her. This is underlined by the fact that, over time, Taiye and Our Lady become

> quite indistinguishable. Her ethereal embodiment merged with Taiye's reflection so that all Taiye had to do was look upon any reflective surface and there Our Lady would be: skin a deep dark brown, eyes widened and darkened, face narrowed, exactly like Taiye's. So that Taiye would never be alone. (Ekwuyasi 179)

The projection of her features, which closely resemble her twin's, onto the apparition, suggests the creation of a twin-like companion. As a child, Taiye and her twin sister Kehinde were inseparable. When Taiye was too shy to speak, for instance, Kehinde would speak for her. This close connection between the two reflects the belief in Yorùbá cosmology that twins, referred to as *ìbejì* or *èjìré*, share one soul (Ouma 197) or are "spiritually one" (Lawal 35).[8] The word *èjìré* literally translates to "the inseparable two" (Lawal 35). Their first separation in the womb is narratively framed as an "excruciating" experience, which "neither will remember [...] acutely. All that will remain is a disorienting echo of the wound that the twins would spend a lifetime attempting to locate" (Ekwuyasi 201). This sense of longing transpires in both of the twins' narratives yet becomes acute when their relationship drastically changes after Kehinde is sexually assaulted as a child in Taiye's presence. Kehinde blames her sister, who was hiding under the bed and only remembers being paralysed by fear, for not helping her and thus shuts her out. Their separation is made final when she does not join Taiye at university in the UK as they had planned and instead attends college in Canada, where she refuses to answer her sister's calls. Taiye suffers immensely under this forced separation, which heightens her sense of guilt for which she punishes herself through (emotional) isolation.[9] The fact that Our Lady, much like Kehinde, resembles Taiye so closely, can thus be read as a replacement of the twin figure, which simultaneously challenges Eurocentric representations of Mary.[10]

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[8] The Yorùbá names Taiye (also Taye or Taiwo) and Kehinde are names traditionally given to twins. While Taiye is the first-born, Kehinde is considered the older twin who sends her sibling ahead to "make sure the world was safe for their arrival" (Ekwuyasi 55).

[9] Despite the physical and emotional distance between the twins, their connection cannot be entirely severed, as exemplified by uncanny encounters with visions of their respective twin.

[10] Scholarship on Black Madonnas and, specifically, Our Lady of Guadalupe, has pointed to the subversive potential of Black and/or dark-skinned representations of the Virgin Mary, see, e.g., Edwin Greenlee, "Que(e)r(y)ing Mary: Popular Mariology as Visual Liberation Theology."

Moreover, Our Lady functions as a motherly figure for Taiye who longs for the unconditional love and support her own mother cannot give her. The image of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic theology symbolises motherhood and motherly love. As mentioned above, Taiye's mother, Kambirinachi, believes she is an ọgbanje who refuses to return to her Kin despite their incessant calls and interventions. For her, "living was a tumultuous cascade between the unbearable misery of being in this alive body indefinitely and an utter intoxication with the substance, the very matter of life" (Ekwuyasi 11). Following Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, the concept of ọgbanje "predicates a metaphysical and political discomfort with life, aggravated by the instability of coming from the otherworld to frequent this world" (664). This discomfort with life is temporarily quieted in the early years of her marriage and motherhood, yet when her husband, Banji, is killed, "[h]er Kin rushed forth to comfort her, and she let them, basking in the soothing numbness of dissociation" (Ekwuyasi 241). Throughout much of the story, Kambirinachi is represented as mentally and, especially, emotionally, unavailable to her daughters—in fact, the mother-daughter-relationship is turned upside down when Taiye moves back to Lagos to, amongst other things, take care of her mother. Our Lady, in contrast, never leaves Taiye's side, knows her every thought and gives her the motherly advice she longs for. The apparition thus fulfils the basic need of being understood and looked after, while also in part substituting the motherly figure.

It is quite ironic that Taiye, who explicitly does not identify as Catholic, has such a quintessential Catholic figure as a steady companion. Her non-identification as a Catholic is emphasised when answering a friend's question whether she is Catholic with "I go to Catholic Mass" (Ekwuyasi 145), thereby clearly distinguishing between the institutionalised religion and her individual practice of faith, that is, attending a Catholic service. Much of Taiye's self-loathing and her view that she is inherently sinful, for which she punishes herself by (emotionally) isolating herself, goes back to her religious education as a child.[11] In a discussion on the seven Cardinal Sins, the topic of lust is framed as too taboo to even address in the context of Catechism—let alone mentions of pre-marital or non-heteronormative sexual relations. Left to her own devices, Taiye looks up the term in an encyclopaedia and infers that the feelings she has for other girls must be lust, and thus a Cardinal Sin. Significantly, it is not explicitly the same-sex desire that is framed as sinful in Taiye's view, but lust in general—"a

[11] As mentioned before, her isolation can also be read as a punishment for her not helping her sister when they were younger. However, these two aspects are deeply entwined and, to some extent, reinforce each other.

passionate desire" (Ekwuyasi 55) or a "sensuous appetite" for something (Ekwuyasi 56). She concludes that "*she* was sinful" (Ekwuyasi 56, emphasis added) —that is, not only her behaviour, but her entire being.

Throughout the novel, Taiye frequently frames her pleasures as vices, be it her 'gluttonous' indulgence in food and casual sexual relations, getting high on drugs to escape her state of loneliness, or, more generally, her seemingly insatiable appetite (for life).[12] She believes her desires to be excessive and thus an expression of her sinful being. As the title *Butter Honey Pig Bread* suggests, food and its preparation play a central role both narratively, for example, as structuring device (the novel's four parts are named after one food item each), and on the level of content. Taiye's feelings and desires, for instance, are narratively expressed through metaphors related to food and consumption. She desires "to be entirely *consumed* by any and every moment that quenched the *hungry* howling loneliness that sat curled down down [sic] inside herself" (Ekwuyasi 211, emphasis added); she is concerned that—despite her ability to feed others—she has "nothing that nourishes" (Ekwuyasi 151). Such framings illustrate Taiye's extension of the concept of gluttony, that is, unrestrained or excessive consumption, from food and drink to other aspects of her life, which only heighten her sense of shame and guilt.

While Taiye takes pleasure in the sensuous practice of preparing food that nourishes her body and others, she cannot shake the feeling of its immorality. This points to the connection between (the process of making) food and religious discourses. In both the novel and Emezi's short story, food functions as a metaphor for the ambivalence inherent to Kachi and Taiye's experience of and with faith. For both protagonists, the preparation of food is an intimate, sensual, almost sacred ritual, which nevertheless is troubled by outside and religious views that construct it as sinful. In "Who is Like God," Kachi feels closer to his mother, and by extension God, through the secret ritual of baking. The fact that it must be kept a secret heightens the sense of its forbidden and supposedly transgressive nature, going against ostensibly God-ordained gender roles. Taiye, similarly, finds pleasure and solace in the preparation of satiating meals that remind her of home, nourish her body or, simply, bring joy to her and her friends and

[12] In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), Sabrina Strings points to the entanglement of religious and racialised discourses in processes of colonisation: "Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked fatness to 'greedy' Africans. And religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly" (6). Merging racist discourses with the supposed immorality of "excessive appetites" (83), Strings argues, "the vice of gluttony [...] was [thus framed as] inherent to the black African's sumptuous way of life" (82).

family. She cannot, however, fully shake the feeling that her “hedonistic hunger” (Ekwuyasi 37) is a “perversion” (Ekwuyasi 37) and thus an expression of her inherent sinfulness. This highlights how Taiye’s Catholic education substantially shaped the way she sees and understands the world and herself, even if she does not identify with the religion per se.

Despite the negative repercussions of her religious education and the constraints of institutional religion, the communal aspect of the Catholic Church also provides a sense of consolation for Taiye because of her upbringing, as she confesses to a friend: “I like going to church. I like the smell of incense at Mass” (Ekwuyasi 145). For one, this can be linked to a sense of nostalgia and homesickness, reminding her of a childhood when her father was still alive and her family intact. At the same time, attending Mass allows Taiye to feel the comfort of being part of a community, if only temporarily, without the need to speak. This strongly resembles her relationship with Kehinde both as a child and in the womb. Drawing on the Yorùbá belief that the older twin, Kehinde, sends forth the younger Taiye who “would always concede to Kehinde” because of “this thing we call love,” her birth is described as something that breaks the “blissful quiet they’d shared before before [sic]” (Ekwuyasi 201) which Taiye, from then on, always longed for. Taiye’s merging of her own image with that of Our Lady and incorporating her into Taiye’s mind to create something familiar, yet new, represents both the internalisation of religious doctrines that shame her for her sexuality and, concurrently, the sense of comfort she finds in religious practices, thereby pointing to the ambivalence inherent to her (queer) practices of faith. This incorporation, moreover, suggests a metaphoric merging of ostensible sinfulness (Taiye) with holiness (Our Lady), which challenges notions of religious purity or virtuousness as prerequisite for God’s love and acceptance.

For Kachi and especially Taiye, the incorporation of a divine presence into their body or mind facilitates a sense of companionship and acceptance which they do not find in their immediate environment. According to Robertson, one strategy of negotiating queerness and religiosity is the prioritisation “of personal experiences of faith over institutional religion and religious authority structures” (132). Both protagonists experience faith as an embodied, and thus individual, practice that does not require or necessitate the approval of others. They thereby subvert the exclusionary rhetoric and practices of Christian denominations that often condemn homosexuality and queerness.

Challenging Exclusionary Practices of Faith

The two stories also explicitly address the violence, both physical and psychological, of such exclusions, which continues to threaten the life and well-being of queer individuals. In "Who is Like God," Kachi's mother 'catches' him wearing her eyeliner and immediately suspects the workings of evil forces, claiming to see the "Demon of homosexuality" (Emezi) in his eyes. The question of responsibility for Kachi's behaviour is central in his mother's questioning and subsequent violent attack of him. While she, at first, directs her anger at "the supposed demon possessing [him]" (Emezi), she later shifts the focus onto Kachi himself, stating: "You are a man, you hear! I won't allow this kind of abomination in my house!" (Emezi). Through what Kachi experiences as religious practice, that is, wearing eyeliner, he has become the 'sinner' in his mother's view, in need of being saved. Underlying this is the assumption that his non-normative gender expression, symbolised by the eyeliner, is something that could be corrected, if necessary, by force. Her framing, moreover, directly contradicts Kachi's earlier musings that God might look at Himself in the mirror through Kachi's painted eyes. Where Kachi sees a "holy" eye, his mother only sees the devil, an "abomination" (Emezi). This juxtaposition highlights the reductive view that only those following the supposedly God-ordained rules—policed by Christian churches—can be, in fact, loved by God. Kachi's mother only sees through the notion of ostensible sin and cannot see *him* anymore, not as a person more complex than such imposed labels and prescriptions, nor as her son.

At the same time, his mother's accusation exemplifies the conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation in such religious discourses. Following Sibisi and van der Walt, systems such as heteropatriarchy, which "insists on a binary construction of gender, which aligns biological sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation" (68), are informed both by culture and religion. Kachi's mother links his deviation from heteronormative gender expression, which to her signifies homosexuality, to the fact that she had allowed him to "be in the kitchen as if [he] was a woman" (Emezi). Her words suggest that Kachi's gender and sexual identity could have been 'prevented' had she not allowed him to secretly break the gendered taboo of baking, suggesting an understanding of same-sex desires as choice or learned behaviour, hence her incessant search for a cause or culprit. As Robertson contends, such framings suggest a separation between homosexual/queer behaviour and

homosexual/queer identity that could thus be changed or "corrected" (128-29).[13]

Since Kachi, in his mother's view, is "behaving like a woman, not like the man He [God] had made [him]" (Emezi), he *must* be a "homosexual"—something that is shown to be more complex in the story. For one, he heavily disputes his mother's conclusion. While this can be linked to the stigma and negative repercussions attached to homosexuality in his context, there are no textual indicators for Kachi's same-sex desires. Secondly, Kachi's desires towards his sister, Ure, which remain ambiguous throughout the story, further undermine such simplistic ascriptions of labels. When they are children, Ure kisses Kachi to apologise for knocking him off his bike and splitting his lip; soon after he kisses her back. Significantly, both kisses happen in secret and, as Kachi stresses, must remain one. He knows his "own [first kiss] was different" from those his friends bragged about, "that if [he] said it out loud people would look at [him] somehow" (Emezi). His sense of transgression and taboo only heightens the close connection he feels towards his sister—in his view, they are "closer than even a lot of the boyfriends and girlfriends [he] knew" (Emezi)—, whose approval he desperately longs for. Yet when he kisses Ure as a teenager four years later, which, in his view, is "just an innocent loving thing" (Emezi) to demonstrate his affection for her, Ure chastises him, stating that "You don't want me. You want to *be* me" (Emezi, emphasis added). Kachi narratively disagrees with his sister's interpretation of the situation, although he himself is confused by the "heat in [his] chest whenever [he] thought about Ure" (Emezi).

While this could be interpreted as incestual desires towards his sister, the short story upholds a certain ambiguity that reflects the uncertainty or, as *The Feminist Bibliothecary* puts it, "intense confusion" Kachi himself feels on the matter. As the story unfolds, Kachi struggles with the ambiguity of his (gender) expression, desires and love, and is not yet ready or able to claim any label. This is heightened by the fact that he cannot freely explore his identity at home and lacks a supportive community that would be able to provide guidance or even simply the vocabulary to describe his feelings and desires. Throughout the story, Kachi describes Ure's looks meticulously, focussing especially on her clothes and make-up: the mascara that widened her eyes, her eyeshadow "that looked like a celebration" (Emezi), the eyeliner that "hugged intimately to the white curve of her eye, as if it had always been there" (Emezi). His narrative

[13] This falls in line with "the popular rhetoric of conservative/restrictive theology of 'love the sinner, hate the sin,' which usually frames the sinner as the queer individual and the sin as queer love" (Roberston 136).

foregrounding of such features suggests that he might indeed long for her freedom of gender expression rather than for her body. Never providing a clear answer, however, the story deliberately plays with this ambiguity and associations with notions of incest, desire, and cross-gender identification—suggesting that it might not necessarily matter in this instance—and narratively picks up on Kachi's ambivalent feelings. At the same time, it serves as an invitation to question further ascriptions, something Emezi does in their other (literary) works as well.

While "Who is Like God" graphically addresses the physical violence grounded in exclusive interpretations of Christian theology, *Butter Honey Pig Bread* foregrounds the psychological harm on queer believers. Taiye's close friend, Timi, who grows up in a Nigerian diasporic community in London that heavily centres around the Nigerian Pentecostal Church where his mother serves as a minister, is also confronted with his mother's—and by extension, God's—conditional love:

> She made it clear that neither she nor the church would protect him from the wrath of God if he didn't stop all that rubbish and behave[d] like a normal man. So he became two people. One person for God and his mother, and another for himself. (Ekwuyasi 152)

Because of the church's anti-queer sentiments, Timi experiences a split identity—he cannot freely express his femmeness and be accepted as a member at Unchained Ministries. The name is quite ironic given the church's strict and exclusive interpretation of theology that does not allow for its members' free expression of identity. Just as with Kachi, Timi has to hide part of himself in order to be accepted in his religious community in which there is "zero percent room for someone like [him] to be out" (Ekwuyasi 144). Unlike Kachi, however, Timi is able to express himself with his friends and only becomes "a watered-down version" (Ekwuyasi 148) in the religious space, suggesting a strategic, yet necessary compartmentalisation, that is, "de-emphasising one of [his] identifications depending on the context" (Robertson 130).

Timi's emotional strain culminates in a suicide attempt, triggered by being sexually abused by the choirmaster who then violently outs him to the church community against his will. The novel addresses the tragic irony of a system in which a perpetrator—engaging in a supposedly sinful sexual act, is protected by the church due to his institutionalised role and resulting position of power, while the victim is cast out and rejected because of his sexual orientation. Indeed, Timi's mother tries to "guide him away from his life of homosexual sin" (Ekwuyasi 278) instead of emotionally comforting him after his failed suicide attempt. Much like Kachi's mother, she

understands homosexuality as a choice and/or behaviour that is separate from the individual. This reasoning, Robertson argues,

> relegates people identifying as queer, to the margins of the church and in need of more 'saving' than others. This negatively characterises queer individuals as infirm and excludes them from being actively contributing members of the church or the religion. Heterosexuals are thus placed in the role of saviour and queer individuals, in the role of sinner – thus, creating a problematic hierarchical theology of the concepts of 'sin' and 'saved.' (129)

Such a separation is necessary for both mothers to protect their children from the eternal condemnation they believe awaits those who sin. Yet both narratives show the futility, even danger of such endeavours: Kachi's mother's violence turns nearly lethal, fracturing not only Kachi's believe in a (loving) God but also the relationship to his mother. Timi's mother's attempts to save him spiritually eventually lead to his decision to not only leave the church but his mother and London altogether. While leaving the church is not to be equated with a loss of faith—Timi continues to believe in something bigger—this decision *does* entail a loss of community and, potentially, family.

Both texts thus highlight the severity and violence of homophobic interpretations of Christian theology and the painful consequences this has for individuals seeking to reconcile their queerness with their faith. On the one hand, such anti-queer rhetoric imposes a sense of inner conflict on queer believers, which Nelson C.J. poignantly summarises in an opinion piece on the struggle of queer Nigerians to find a church community: "it seemed dishonest and impossible for me to reject who I am and worship God at the same time. Prayer was used against my sexuality, and my personhood" (C.J.). On the other hand, such interpretations frequently entail the exclusion of queer individuals—either by choice or force—from religious communities which often play an important role in the individual's social life.

By unsettling the boundaries between the human body and a godly presence, the protagonists of "Who is Like God" and *Butter Honey Pig Bread* challenge such exclusionary interpretations of faith. Instead of turning their back on religion altogether, they reinterpret Christian theology to create a faith that centres around an accepting and loving Godly presence rather than a punishing, "patriarchal god who, like the unchallenged parent, sets down rules that are not to be questioned" (O'Brian 197). In doing so, they employ what Cheng calls a radical love theology. "Radical love," he argues, "is a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries [...] that separate us from other people, [...] from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us

from God" (x). Indeed, Timi states that he does believe "in God, though, like in a divine goodness that loves us and wants us to love each other" (Ekwuyasi 144). Taiye, similarly, holds fast to the belief that there simply must be "something looking after me" (Ekwuyasi 144)—just like the motherly figure Our Lady.

Questioning God-Ordained Authority

Both Emezi's short story and Ekwuyasi's novel interrogate the authority of the Church and, by extension, religious individuals, to interpret and thereby determine God's will and what is morally acceptable or good. In "Who is Like God," this is done in two distinct ways. On the one hand, Kachi uses religious language to challenge his mother's view that he is sinful or immoral because of his non-normative gender expression. He confronts her, asking: "Why is it always some kind of devil or demon with you, ehn? Why can't it be something else? Like maybe God is speaking to me, for instance" (Emezi). Jodi O'Brien argues that "[q]ueer Christian theologies resituate and redefine the parameters for discussions of sexuality and morality" (196) by employing "'unconditional love' as a discursive strategy for accepting and affirming a homosexual presence" (197). On the other hand, Kachi uses his notion of a God within to point out the paradox of supposedly God-ordained violence against those deviating from church-ordained heteronormativity: "If God was in me, did He feel this pain I was feeling, both inside and out? Was His blood mixing with mine? If God was in Mama, was He beating me too? Did that mean He was also beating a part of Himself?" (Emezi). This echoes the ambivalence Kachi feels towards his religious experiences described above. Rather than answering the question, the story ends sombrely with him feeling God leaving his body altogether with the blood drawn from his mother's beating until "it was just [him] lying there alone on the carpet" (Emezi).[14] His mother's violent attempt to save him from the "demon of homosexuality" (Emezi) ultimately robs him of his faith—both in God and his mother's love for him. The story thereby graphically illustrates the limitations of attempts to negotiate queerness with faith in environments that hold fast to the belief of anti-queer sentiments as ostensibly ordained by God.

[14] Emezi also takes up the notion of an abandoning Christian god in their novel *Freshwater*, where the protagonist, Ada, turns to Yshwa (Jesus) in search of comfort when her mother leaves. She repeatedly prays to him, asking him to manifest for her and to hold her, yet he simply continues to watch her and her suffering from a distance. Interestingly, however, Yshwa is not expulsed entirely. Rather, as Oluwadunni Talabi notes, "Yshwa is incorporated into the storyline and some syncretism between Christianity and Igbo cosmology is established by the narrators" (339). Reading Emezi's short story against and with *Freshwater* points to the limitations of exclusionary practices of faith.

The story's questioning of authority and religious tradition is also taken up in its title, which functions as both commentary and critique. Read as a question, it interrogates and criticises the assumption that religious individuals or organisations can or should function as gatekeepers of faith and morality. At the same time, it can be read as simply stating the protagonist's name: The Igbo name Onyedikachi literally translates to "who is like God" (or also: "who is comparable to God") that, as a gender-neutral name, does not confine its holder to a binary system. The title read as Kachi's name thus underlines the notion of him being created by and in the image of God, therefore he *is* loved and accepted by God the way he is.

Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread*, similarly, reinterprets and appropriates Christian theology in order to subvert teachings that frame sexuality outside of heteronormative marital bonds as sinful, particularly via its use of Mary. Following Edwin Greenlee, the image of Mary "has often been used to reinforce gender bias, submission to authority, and rejection of sexuality" (82). Indeed, Mary is stylised as a *virgin* and thus a symbol for purity and chastity "removed from the day-to-day world of human sexuality" (Greenlee 92). Taiye is burdened with a heavy sense of shame because of her sexuality, her inability to commit emotionally to her lovers and, most importantly, for not helping her sister when she was sexually abused as a child. Throughout much of the novel, she is "very much at odds with her own self, a pendulum striking extreme and opposite points; [which] made for an abundance of emotional self-flagellation" (Ekwuyasi 139). The choice of words links her extreme self-criticism to religious discipline. Yet the notion of the pendulum also implies the existence of a spectrum between such binary oppositions as sinful/saved or human/divine, suggesting the potential for self-acceptance in the spaces in-between and the necessity to question "the boundaries relating to Christian theology itself" (Cheng 18). Even though Taiye does not question her sexual orientation or view her existence as a queer woman as condemnable, she *does* struggle with her embodied sexuality, which also manifests in her sexual relationships. She cannot, for instance, voice her own desires to her partners and, because of her inability to emotionally commit, views herself as damaging to them.

Our Lady, however, never judges Taiye; her words are "never mocking or cruel but always honest" (Ekwuyasi 179). She relativises what Taiye believes to be her bad or immoral actions and, instead, is full of forgiveness, which Taiye cannot give herself—after all, as Our Lady states, "[w]*e all have our bullshit, baby*" (Ekwuyasi 206, italics in original). Rather, she encourages her to form deeper connections with others and to allow

herself to be loved. The fact that Our Lady, who represents the Virgin Mary, and thus the Mother of God as well as of the Church in Roman Catholicism, accepts and embraces Taiye, can be read as a symbolic act of inclusion, directly challenging the condemnation of homosexuality and queerness.

At the same time, the novel juxtaposes different belief systems and practices of faith, thereby complicating notions of a singular path to spirituality and/or God. This is realised, for instance, through the multi-voiced narration that plays with the ambiguity of multiple perspectives. In both Taiye's and Kehinde's narratives, Kambirinachi is either described as unwell or even "insane" with occasional "moments of vibrant lucidity" (Ekwuyasi 186). In her own narrative, in contrast, her understanding of herself as an ọgbanje is never questioned. Indeed, her narrative is told in third person by her Kin who, because of their intimate connection to her, have access to her thoughts. This is emphasised by the prologue, which states that "'I' is only a temporary and necessary aberration" (Ekwuyasi 7), as well as the opening line of her first chapter: "If you ask Kambirinachi, this is how she'll tell it: . . ." (Ekwuyasi 11). Only towards the end of the novel does her first-person narration interrupt that of her Kin, claiming her place and voice in her own story: "*Stop, I want to speak* – [...] *We–I–will tell*– [...] *I will tell my own story now. / I am not insane*" (Ekwuyasi 269). The italic font visibly distinguishes Kambirinachi's narrative voice from that of her Kin (rendered in regular font), which repeatedly interrupts her, indicated by the dashes and ellipses in the quote. The style of narration thus takes up and creatively plays with the ọgbanje concept.

Similarly, Taiye's narration is also rendered in third person, which stands in contrast to Kehinde's first-person narration. Much like only her mother can hear and is thus aware of her Kin, Our Lady can only be seen by Taiye who, despite the occasional questioning of her own sanity, embraces the apparition as part of herself. In a sense, Our Lady is quite similar to—albeit more life-affirming than—Kambirinachi's Kin. Both characters embrace and thus become host to a spiritual being, thereby blurring the lines between the human and the divine. These parallels are further heightened by the characterisation of both women as rather quiet and often lost in their own thoughts (or worlds) and thus detached from the physical realm, and, more generally, very alike. In juxtaposing these two characters and their respective spiritualities, the novel challenges notions of religious exclusivity and, instead, demonstrates the possibility of coexistence of different cosmologies even within the same individual and the important functions of faith for them.

As a narrative framework, moreover, the concept of "ogbanje embodies the plurality and multiplicity of ontology, identity, and sexuality" (Magaqa and Makombe 27). In the context of the novel, this plurality is realised in the narrative structure as well as thematically, for instance through the coexistence and interconnectedness of multiple cosmologies in the story world. The novel draws on Yorùbá and Igbo concepts and beliefs simultaneously—Kambirinachi is Igbo, Banji Yorùbá—, which coexist (and never clash) within the text nor with the characters' belief in a Christian God. Indeed, Kambirinachi regularly attends church and does not see this as contradictory to her identity as an ọgbanje. Rather, these belief systems interact and at times merge in individual practices that point to the potential lying within a non-exclusive approach to faith and spirituality. The notion of ọgbanje in itself queers Western binary conceptualisations and categorisations by blurring and challenging boundaries: "these irreverent beings test how far they can go beyond set boundaries" (Ogunyemi 665).[15] It is "a transgressive and disruptive spirit that embodies the essence of liminal existence and the shiftiness of identity" (Magaqa and Makombe 27), thus interrogating static and essentialist understandings.

Following Cheng, "queer theology argues that the discourse of classical Christian theology ultimately requires the erasing of boundaries of essentialist categories of not only sexuality and gender identity, but also more fundamental boundaries such as life vs. death, and divine vs. human" (10). Both Emezi's "Who is Like God" and Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread* disrupt such boundaries. They interrogate theology that frames queerness as sinful or 'deviant' and thus contradictory to Christian faith and, instead, centre protagonists who create their own queer practices of faith. For Kachi, this manifests, for instance, in taking meticulous care of his body so as to not 'loose' God. For Taiye, in contrast, it is the incorporation of a Marian apparition. Both protagonists thus individualise their faith and thereby subvert the authority of the Church and its self-declared gatekeepers. In this context, Sibisi and van der Walt point to the disruptive potential of queer (religious) bodies:

> While exposing the fear of anxious masculinities, queer bodies have been powerful in revealing the instability of enforced gender binaries that find expression in a fixed and stable normative construction of masculinity and femininity. By destabilizing what is regarded to be fixed, queer individuals blur the lines informed by culture and religion. Through their gender performativity and sexual interactions, queer Christian bodies trouble the norm as "outsiders,"

[15] Unlike Emezi's *Freshwater*, *Butter Honey Pig Bread* does not employ the concept of ọgbanje to queer Western understandings of gender and sexuality but rather focuses on the dissolution of boundaries between the human and the spirit world.

> questioning systems that have labelled them as uncultured and unbiblical, which reveals an instability imposed by the Bible, mainly within Christianity. (74)

By situating a godly presence within the protagonists' queer bodies, the stories blur the lines between the human and the divine and foreground the relationship between the individual and such godly presences. In doing so, they forgo prescribed practices of faith within institutionalised religion and religious spaces.

The subject of queerness and same-sex desires has been increasingly taken up in Nigerian (diasporic) literature over the course of the past decade. In fact, the passing of the Same-Sex (Prohibition) Act in 2014, ironically, led to a rise in literature and writing, both in print and online, that tell "queer stories about everyday life and love and the intersecting struggles queer African subjects must face" (Green-Simms, "Emergent Queer" 139) and thereby change monolithic and/or derogatory representations. In early 2024, Cassava Republic published an anthology titled *Love Offers No Safety: Nigeria's Queer Men Speak*, edited by Olumide Makanjuola and Jude Dibia, whose novel *Walking with Shadows* (2006) was ground-breaking in that it was the first West African novel to feature a gay protagonist (Green-Simms, "Walking with Shadows" 101) and has since been adapted into a film. The anthology features first-person accounts of queer Nigerian men who voice their experience in a country still heavily governed by religious and legal discourses that condemn and criminalise queerness. Both Emezi's short story and Ekwuyasi's novel contribute to the ongoing discourse on queerness in Nigerian (diasporic) fiction. In centring queer subjectivities and paying attention to the intersecting identities along the lines of gender, sexuality, religion, and race, they complicate the supposed "angel of contradiction," to use O'Brian's words, and instead point to ways in which faith and queerness can be negotiated and, at least partially, reconciled, through the individualisation and embodiment of faith.

Given that in African contexts, "queer subjectivities continue to be constrained by Abrahamic religions, statutory laws and reconstruction of African centered-beliefs and histories that are intent on distancing non-heteronormative identities from African identity" (Talabi 330), creative interventions such as Francesca Ekwuyasi's *Butter Honey Pig Bread* and Akwaeke Emezi's "Who is Like God" are all the more crucial in interrogating the colonial legacies and (religious) power structures that continue to impact queer African individuals. This is especially pertinent in light of recent developments in Ghana where Human Rights Watch recorded a rise in anti-queer attacks and rhetoric in reaction to the introduction of the "Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and

Ghanaian Family Values Bill" in 2021, whose passing into law would further criminalise queer individuals and their allies (Kojoué). This trend towards ever more restrictive policies, often deeply entangled with religious discourses, highlights the potential, if not necessity, of merging queer and postcolonial frameworks to disrupt narratives that frame queerness as 'un-African' and 'un-Christian.'[16]

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