

**Research Article**

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# An Exploratory Journey of Cultural Visual Literacy of “Non-Conforming” Gender Representations from Pre-Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Abstract:** This article is an exploratory journey of cultural visual literacy of “non-conforming” gender representations from pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa. It provides select research-based visual evidence of “non-conforming” genders and sexual orientations in traditional cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa as represented in its popular press, scholarly literature, and government and United Nations publications, amongst other sources. These have been selectively described in the context of key cultural themes that include (alphabetically listed): art, folklore, gender behavior, language, marriage, religion, and, sexual activity. The article provides a glimpse of data that were collected during a collaborative project selected by the University of Tennessee’s Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy to partner in the U.S. Department of State’s Diplomacy Lab program of engaged scholarship involving two information science graduate students and a faculty member. A few insights from the exploratory journey of the cultural visual literacy of “non-conforming” gender representations are also reported.

**Keywords:** “non-conforming” gender representations, pre-colonial, Sub-Saharan Africa.

## 1 Introduction

Public perceptions, press coverage, scholarly literature, and vested interests have drawn close associative relationships between “non-conforming” gender identities, behaviors, and physical markers, on the one hand, and minority sexual orientations (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.), on the other (Watson and Johnson, 2013). Some of these conflated meanings have shaped misunderstandings and mis-readings of genders and sexual orientations that have indeed been problematic in motivating and mobilizing enactment of several harsh laws across the world (Mehra, forthcoming). Subsequently, we continue to see human rights denial, hate crimes, discrimination and abuse, violence, ridicule, and prejudices against individuals, groups, organizations, and others, that do not fall within a limited and strict binary “male-female” construct, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people (Mehra, 2016;

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Sweet, 2009). Underlying perceptions surrounding blurring intersections in “non-conforming” genders and sexual orientations have been unacceptable in many parts around the globe for they challenge patriarchy, heterosexual dominance, heteronormative behaviors, male privilege, toxic masculinity, chauvinism, regimented gender roles, and abuse of women, children, and individuals “non-conforming” within dictums of cultural values and conservative mores (Mehra and Hernandez, 2017).

In the context of the African continent (amongst other areas), many nations under past colonial rule have a high record of homophobia, discrimination and hate-crimes against sexual minorities, and a denial of human rights of people with “non-conforming” genders and LGBTI individuals (Aldrich, 2002; Bonham, 2014; Mehra and Gray, 2014). In 2013, Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe publicly stated: “Let Europe keep their homosexual nonsense there and live with it. We will never have it here. The act [of homosexuality] is not humane...Any diplomat who talks about homosexuality will be kicked out. There is no excuse and we won’t listen to them” (Roberts, 2013). As a result of such political persecution, contemporary scholars, foreign policy makers, and human rights activists have encountered extreme difficulties over the years while conducting social justice work on behalf of these populations (Epprecht, 2013a; Mehra and Hernandez, 2016). A common argument against support of “non-conforming” genders and LGBTI people in these geographic areas (including Sub-Saharan Africa) is that gender “variants” and homosexuality are western constructs that go against their historical and cultural traditions (Badru and Sackey, 2013). This is often contrary to occurrences of “non-conforming” genders and LGBTI-related references, examples, symbolism, imagery, and people in the culture and history of these countries (Zabus, 2013).

This article explores research-based visual evidence of “non-conforming” genders and sexual orientations in traditional cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa as represented in its popular press, scholarly literature, and government and United Nations publications, amongst other sources. Additionally, select visualizations of narrative discourse/content analysis of folktales and myths, fiction and non-fiction, song and theatre, and other oral histories are included that identify “non-conforming” examples of Africans who have challenged “traditional” cultural lifestyles and behaviors. In this context, the analysis provides an exploratory journey of cultural visual literacy of “non-conforming” gender representations from pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa. The article provides a glimpse of data that were collected during a collaborative project selected by the University of Tennessee’s Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy to partner in the U.S. Department of State’s Diplomacy Lab program that harnesses the “knowledge of students and faculty at universities across the country to study issues of worldwide importance” (Mehra et al., 2018a). The project involved two information science graduate students and faculty collaboration with government officials who together learnt applied research in the process of developing geographic information systems (GIS) for “non-conforming” genders and LGBTI advocacy (Mehra et al., 2018b).

## 2 Definitions and Terms

Readers can find a listing and an extended discussion of definitions and interdisciplinary connections to gender and sexual orientation in an information context in other sources (e.g., Greenblatt, 2011; Mehra, forthcoming). Emerging terms and acronyms are representing new ways of conceptualizing, identifying, and understanding of these varieties in scholarly literature and popular culture (e.g., LGBTI, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA, etc.). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these and their intersections, nuances, and shades of overlapping meanings (e.g., similarities or differences between questioning, queer, and/or intersex). Here only a few words regarding broader constructs of gender variance or gender nonconformity are noted. These two terms and related vocabularies refer to physical and/or psychological attributes of behavior, expression, appearance, attitude, identity, and other aspects related to an individual that do not conform with socially constructed and culturally-rooted notions, norms, values, and understanding of the genders, whether stuck in the binaries of masculinity-femininity, and/or more (Lev, 2004; Yuracko, 2016). *Gender variant, gender non-conforming, gender diverse, gender atypical or genderqueer* individuals maybe transgender (before, during, or after transitioning), and/or identify as intersex, otherwise variant from social-cultural expectations perceived by self and/or others (Cromwell, 1999; Naz, 2014; Nestle, 2002). In this

article, all these and other terms with overlapping shades of meaning and attributes (such as transvestites, crossdressers, etc.) are referenced as documented based on their occurrence in the authoritative sources cited in the narrative.

The United Nations Statistics Division geographically identifies Sub-Saharan Africa to consist of fifty-one countries that are fully or partially located south of the Sahara Desert of a total of fifty-seven independent states in the continent of Africa (2018).

### 3 Theoretical Connections

From Facebook to YouTube to avatars to video games, Lisa Nakamura (2008) demonstrates the Internet's visual culture, and its implications including the embodied representations of the gendered and racialized self and its relationship to others (Silver and Massanari, 2006). Scholars in feminist and critical cultural studies have long recognized the simplified analysis of gendered visualizations in cyberspace and its technological “reading of body” (Balsamo, 1995, p. 17) as problematic, especially in their tenacious intersections with race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, sexual orientation, and other self-and-social identity markers of marginalized difference (Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop, 2004; Wilson, 2011). In a digitized cultural environment that is intensely visual, highly commercialized, and extremely politicized, sensationalized gender-race renderings have emerged in practices associated with recent unhealthy phenomena such as “fake news”, violence in social media, and digital scambaiting, to name a few (Cooke, 2017; Nakamura, 2014). Deeper psychological urges underlying (and shaping) gendered (and/or racialized) visualizations (e.g., sexualized avatars) have led to essentialism, objectification, sexism/racism, abuse and violence, and other vices of human nature (Fox, Ralston, Cooper, and Jones, 2015).

Limited and biased visualized analysis of gender and non-gender portrayals from Africa, Asia, Middle East, and other non-Western geographic regions, too, have been similarly simplified and misrepresented, providing equally troubling assessments (Johnston, Gregory, and Pratt, 2000). The prejudiced concept of “orientalism” is a problematized and politicized construct since its associated attributes and visualizations reflect a fetishization of the non-European world within three actions of homogenization, feminization, and/or essentialization (Lockman, 2009; Macfie, 2001; Said, 1978). Contemporary examples include the caricatured and overtly stereotypical representations visualized in Disney films (e.g., *Mulan*, *Jungle Book*, *Aladdin*, etc.), graphic novels (e.g., *Tintin*, Cousin Chin-Kee in Yang's *American Born Chinese*, etc.), and varied forms of popular visual culture (Schieble, 2014), that continue the “othering” of non-Western/non-White cultures, including pre-Colonial non-Western populations (Giovanni, 2014). The roots of these colonial/imperialist visualizations and biases of White rulers are long and deep, perpetuated since the nineteenth century in past anthropology and psychology research of the “primitives” stigmatized from Africa/Asia and other regions (Durkheim and Mauss, trans. 1967, originally 1903). It is not surprising that the creator of the raciest *Jungle Book* visualizations (e.g., depictions of Mowgli as the mixed-race Indian boy cub raised by a wolf-pack, racial coding in the monkey depictions as black characters) and the writer of the “White Man's Burden”, a poem first published in 1899 to civilize, educate, or convert “primitive” cultures in Asia, Africa, and the Americas via highlighting their perceived moral, intellectual and cultural weaknesses compared to the European masters, are the same person, the English poet Rudyard Kipling (Jordan, 1974; Kunczik, 1996).

The works of Michel Foucault, the Frankfurt School, and other postmodernists have extensively discussed the imposition of the “othering” on “non-conforming” genders/sexual orientations and their cultural marginalization (Weeks, 2005; 2002). Cues of perceived attributes of these “non-conforming” elements and their visualized representations have been manipulated, stigmatized, and “othered” in all forms of digital and print mass media, advertising, films, news messages, cable television, social media, the Internet, amongst other channels, to perpetuate a hegemonic message dictating what is the norm and what is not (Wagaman, Obejero, and Gregory, 2018). The norm in these “othered” processes determine the “non-conformed” genders/sexual orientations as the peripheral and marginal to the constructed, only-acceptable heterosexual reality (Pryor, 2018). Devastating impacts of these signal (and determine)

standards of cultural mores (e.g., if same-sex love/marriage is acceptable or taboo), religious beliefs (e.g., a gay person will go to hell), physicality (e.g., same-sex copulation is a crime), appearances (e.g., cross-dressing), behavior (e.g., same-sex kissing or hand-holding), and practices (e.g., hate crime and violence against LGBTI people), plus more (Stanciu, 2014; Steck and Perry, 2016). At what point do the visual cues or identity “markers” of the “non-conforming” attribute of genders/sexual orientations become acceptable or not? The answer varies based on an internalized and/or external situational cultural context shaped by environmental factors and social conditioning of the individual (Hanna, 2017). The role of the cultural and socialized setting (at the macro and micro levels and their intersections) shapes an individual’s knowledge, awareness, and experience, of and towards, the “non-conforming” genders/sexual orientations attributes that determines a person’s attitudes about (and toward) them (Kuhar, 2013; Paramo, 2017): for example, whether a person would reject versus accept or respect and even revere the “non-conforming” aspects of genders/sexual orientations (Eliason and Chinn, 2017). The importance of the information professional in influencing visual literacy and the “meaning-making” during these potentially attitude-shaping/altering encounters in life cannot be overstated (Houde, 2018; Winkelstein, 2012).

## 4 Research Methods

This article discusses select examples of visualizations of “non-conforming” gender representations from pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa that formed part of the larger collection gathered for the project during spring 2016 in the Diplomacy Lab Program entitled “Mapping “LGBTI” Cultural Representations of Difference in Historical Sub-Saharan Africa [*Project 20: LGBTI Issues: Analysis of Historic Participation of LGBTI Persons in African Culture*]. The project product “Development of the LGBTI Integrated Cartographic Information System 2 (LGBTI-ICIS2)” is available at URL: <http://tiny.utk.edu/LGBTI-ICIS2-Sp2016>. This dynamic web-based report (literature review, metadata descriptions, online records, and interactive visualized database) was delivered via GIS-based tool Google Tour Builder to map locations, events, places, and time related to “nonconforming” gender representations in historical Sub-Saharan Africa. The LGBTI-ICIS2 visualizes a structural categorization mode of analysis of the “non-conforming” gender representations in terms of Country-Tribe-Theme (with cultural sub-categories) on each page/tile in the system. Users navigate through these list of “pages” (similar to a “table of contents”) on the left-side margin of the system. Information on each page is represented in a manner reminiscent of an interactive online record.

The conceptual organization of the information presented in the LGBTI-ICIS2 involved a categorization according to seven key cultural themes with some intersecting sub-categories. The following section selectively describes these cultural themes that included (alphabetically listed): art, folklore, gender behavior, language, marriage, religion, and sexual activity. LGBTI-ICIS2 users can navigate by either selecting a particular page for appropriate information based on Country-Tribe-Theme or exploring the map in the right system frame to find specified information related to the cultural themes identified by demarcated visual icons. The authoritative data sources that provided relevant information and visual examples of “non-conforming” gender representations related to these themes included a list of references that is available in the project report at URL <http://tiny.utk.edu/LGBTI-ICIS2-Sp2016-R>. Textual commentary in these narratives and other sources was used in this article to indicate a viewer’s labelling of the image as reflecting “non-conforming” markers of genders/sexual orientations.

The research team created the sub-categories identified in the seven cultural themes represented in the LGBTI-ICIS2 to place the information found in the various authoritative sources based on the actual textual evidence found and to ease legibility and use of the GIS application. These cultural domains and emerging themes, however, were more intersecting in the exactness of their boundaries (Mehra, Haley, and Lane, 2015). For example, nonconforming gender behavior can be connected to nonconforming sexual activity that might also be related to folklore and/or marriage rituals. Across several cultural themes such information was often intertwined and overlapping. It is presented in this article in reference to a cultural theme, based on its predominant occurrence in relation to that topic with the understanding that the information can be associated with other cultural themes as well.

The secondary sources of information for this research were wide-ranging. These included reports and materials made available by international agencies (e.g., United Nations Organization and its affiliated organizations or departments/offices); government publications; news channels (e.g., Aljazeera); monographs on related subjects (e.g., colonialism and homosexuality); conference proceedings (e.g., International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions General Conference and Council); accounts of anthropologists and missionaries (e.g., Simon Messing, Melville J. Herkovits); publications distributed by non-profit advocacy organizations (e.g., Sexual Minorities Uganda); resources developed by cultural memory institutions (e.g., Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library); websites and social media tools (e.g., blogs) developed by concerned individuals (e.g., Trip Down Memory Lane); to name a few. Compilation of such sources and visualized information related to under-represented topics and concerns of marginalized populations, and, collection development and evaluation of resources misrepresented in current conservative political climates around the world (Mehra and Elder, 2018) is an urgent possible extended role of a humanistic and progressive librarian and information professional (Mehra, 2018).

Readers are referred to Mehra et al. (2018a, 2018b) that provides a detailed analysis related to the development of the LGBTI-ICIS2. Creative librarians and other information professionals will find great potential to make information visual via the use of the GIS tool of the Google Tour Builder that was used to build the LGBTI-ICIS2. As a Google Earth beta experiment, the application provides user-friendly strategies for people to publicly “preserve their stories and memories” and share via mapping locations, places, and experiences while integrating photos, text, and video (Goggle, 2018).

Since the preliminary completion of the LGBTI-ICIS2 at the end of spring 2016, the project has been disbanded as a result of hacking of the system the authors assume probably owing to the perceived taboo nature of the topic, amongst other reasons. The research team is planning to utilize the tool and similar GIS-based technologies with new integrated security measures to represent the needs, information, and experiences of other marginalized populations (e.g., rural librarians).

## 5 Select Visualization of “Non-Conforming” Gender Representations

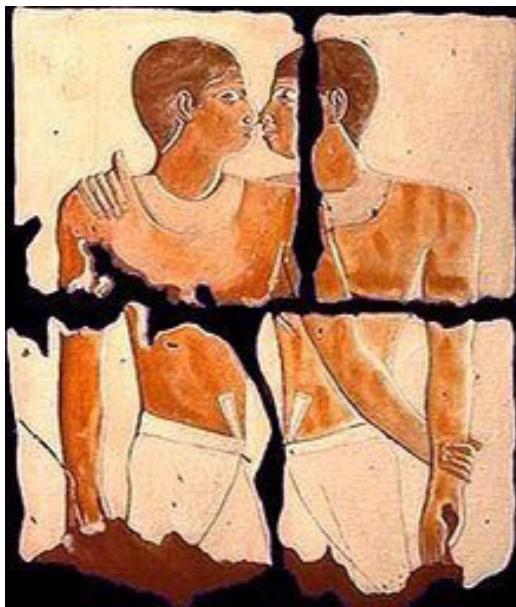
A range of indicative evidence selectively demonstrated “non-conforming” gender representations illustrated in the following different cultural themes from pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa.

*Art:* African history is replete with examples of both erotic and non-erotic same-sex relationships (Tamale, 2014). For example, the ancient cave paintings of the San people near Guruve in Zimbabwe depict two men engaged in some form of “ritual sex” (Obamwonyi, 2016). Figure 1 shows an image of one archaeological cave finding from the region depicting half-naked men kissing as evidence suggesting same-sex sexual relations during to the time of the Bushmen “dating from at least two thousand years ago” (Toomey, 2016).

*Folklore:* At least twenty-one cultural forms of same-sex relationships evidenced from traditional African societies were included in a report developed to dismiss the passing of Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2014 (Erasing 76 Crimes, 2017) (which has since been overturned) (Sexual Minorities Uganda, 2014). The list included reference to homosexual intercourse known as *bian nkuma*—a medicine for wealth which was transmitted through sexual activity between men—amongst Bantu-speaking Pouhain farmers (Bene, Bulu, Fang, Jaunde, Mokuk, Mwele, Ntum and Pangwe) in present-day Gabon and Cameroon (Kofi, 2015; Steward, 2014, para. 12).

*Gender Behavior:* There is much evidence of “non-conforming” gender behavior and gender variance found represented in subthemes of gender role blurring, crossdressing, gender-affirmative practices, etc. In the late 1640s, a Dutch military attaché documented Nzinga, a warrior woman in the historical Ndongo kingdom of the Mbundu (located in modern-day Angola), who ruled as “king” rather than “queen”, dressed as a man and surrounded herself with a harem of young men who dressed as women and who were her “wives” (Stewart, 2014, para. 9). Figure 2 shows Ann Zingha (1800 - 1899), queen of Matamba (François

Villain, litographer), found at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library.



**Figure 1:** Cave paintings of the San people near Guruve in Zimbabwe of evidence suggesting same sex sexual relations dating back to the time of Bushmen. [Source: Diura, T. (2017). 13 Reasons why homosexuality is not un-African. *African Curators: History*, November 2. Retrieved September 18, 2019, from <http://africancurators.com/2017/11/02/13-reasons-why-homosexuality-is-not-un-african/>].



**Figure 2:** Ann Zingha, queen of Matamba, François Villain (lithographer). [Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. (1800 - 1899). Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-f32a-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>].

During the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in the historical region of Luanda in modern-day Angola, there is evidence to show cultural acceptance of the third-gender natives, the *chibados* “extremely great fetishers...[who] went around dressed as women and they...by great offence called themselves men; they had husbands like the other women, and in the sin of sodomy they are just like devils” (Viegas, 1930). In another account, Jesuit Joao dos Santos wrote in 1625 that the *chibados* of southwestern Africa “attyred (sic!) like women, and behave themselves womanly, ashamed to be called men; are also married to men, and esteeme that unnatural damnation an honor” (Wilhelm, 2008, p. 227). In 1681, a Portuguese soldier, wrote about the *quimbandas* of Angola: “There is among the Angolan pagan much sodomy, sharing one with the other their dirtiness and filth, dressing as women. And they call them by the name of the land, *quimbandas*...And some of these are fine fetishers...And all of the pagans respect them and they are not offended by them and these sodomites happen to live together in bands, meeting most often to provide burial services” (António de Oliveira Cadornega, 1940, p. 259). Figure 3 provides a watercolor painting of an Angolan *quimbanda* drawn by the seventeenth-century Capuchin missionary, Cavazzi.

Scholarly evidence of another visualized “non-conforming” example is found from modern-day Ethiopia, reflecting a gender-blurring subtheme. Anthropologist Simon Messing found male transvestites among the Amhara tribes. They were known as *wandarwarad* (male-female) who would live by themselves and acted as brothers to the women of the tribe sharing a close friendship. Similarly, there was evidence of “mannish women” among the tribe known as *wandawande* (Wilhelm, 2008 p. 234). For some of the male-to-female gender change, gender transitions, and the transvestite role was institutionalized; in others probably not. “But even where it was not, the transformation of gender seems to have been pretty much taken at face value. The Amhara have difficulty understanding why a man would give up male privileges, but tolerate

those who do so” (Greenberg, 1988, p. 61). In the Maale tribe from 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia, crossdressing was not uncommon and to see men embracing feminine roles. These men were called “Ashtime” and they in women’s clothes, performed tasks usually reserved for females, and occasionally had sexual relations with other men (Murray, 1998). In the southern Bantu societies from modern-day Gabon and Cameroon, a reversal of traditional gender roles was noted in “[F]emale husbands [who] may also be political leaders... regarded as social males” (Oboler, 1980, p. 71). Ethnohistorian Eva Meyerowitz during the 1920-1940s among the Ashanti and Akan tribes (1958) notes in the Western Sahel historical region in modern-day Ghana and Ivory Coast that “men who dressed as women and engaged in homosexual relations with other men were not stigmatized, but accepted” (Wilhelm, 2008, p. 225). Wilhelm (2008) further notes that this might have changed in later years thanks to missionary activity and even today transgender Ghanaians are sometimes referred to as *kojobesia* (“man-woman”).



**Figure 3:** A seventeenth-century image of a *quimbandos*. Image from the *Manoscritti Araldi di Padre Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi*. Reproduced with the kind permission of Sr. M. Araldi. [Source: Sweet, J. H. (2009). Mutual Misunderstandings: Gesture, Gender and Healing in the African Portuguese World. *Past & Present*, 203, Issue suppl\_4, 1 January 2009, Pages 128–143. <https://shokti.blog>]

During the 1600s in the kingdom of Motapa in southern Africa (sometimes labeled “Monomotapa”) located around modern-day South Africa, Christian missionaries in 1606 provided evidence of gender-blurring amongst the Chibadi tribe in their encounters with cross-dressing men known as *chibadi* (Stewart,

2014, para. 17). Figure 4 shows a map of the Kingdom of Monomotapa region where such evidence was documented.



**Figure 4:** Map of the Kingdom of Monomotapa in the 1600s where Christian missionaries encountered cross-dressing men known as *chibadi* [Source: Stewart, C. (2014, January 30). 21 varieties of traditional African homosexuality. Retrieved January 19, 2016, from <http://76crimes.com/2014/01/30/21-varieties-of-traditional-african-homosexuality/>].

Nwando Achebe's (2011) *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria*, winner of the 2012 Gita Chaudhuri Prize (The Western Association of Women Historians), 2012 Barbara "Penny" Kanner Prize (Western Association of Women Historians), and the 2013 Aidoo-Snyder Book Award (African Studies Association Women's Caucus), provides a fascinating historical account of an Igbo woman, Ahebi Ugbabe (born late 19<sup>th</sup> century, d. 1948), who became king in colonial Nigeria. Figure 5 provides a picture of the book cover. Ugbabe mastered the performance of masculinity in the office and responsibilities of a traditionally male role (Falola, 2016). She challenged all the stereotypes with regard to a lower cultural position of women in society and the existing limited African norms of women and their weak relationship to power: "Particularly troubling to the traditional political elite were Ahebi Ugbabe's autocratic methods in which she committed unthinkable taboos against society, like refusing to consult with elders, utilizing forced labor to build her Ahebi Ugbabe Road, receiving bribes, and forcibly taking away men's wives" (Achebe, 2003, p. 61). Ugbabe became female husband and married several women who were abused by their husbands and came to stay in her palace (Dahlstrom, 2016). King Ahebi Ugbabe's life provides a historical pre-colonial glimpse of the flexible sex/gender system in traditional Africa where gendered social status was intimately linked more to ritual performance than to biological bodies; yet, ultimately her actions of appropriation of power were not considered proper based on her biological gender, and cultural intolerance of her subjugation of men and society and fight for female ambition (Epprecht 2013b). Amongst the Azande Tribe in the historical Zandeland region located in modern day South Sudan, Central African Republic, and Democratic Republic of the Congo, there was observed a blurring of gender roles in boys serving bachelors similar to a wife's performance of smaller services daily for her husband (Dlamini, 2006). In the historical region around

Lake Kariba located in modern-day Zambia, amongst the Tonga, gender role switching was observed “occasionally (when) women dress up as men on other occasions as a joke to entertain” (Colson, 1958, p. 139-140).

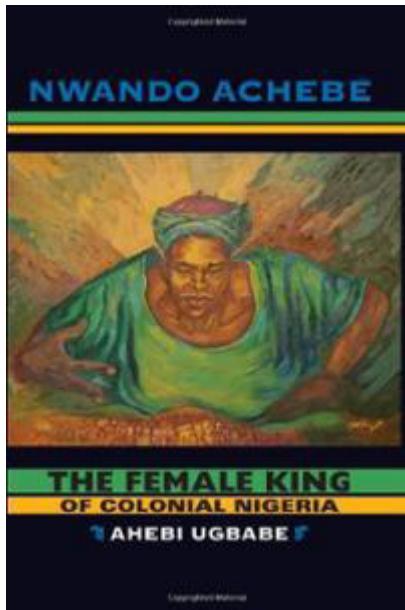


Figure 5: Book cover of Nwando Achebe's (2011) *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria* [Source: Dahlstrom, M. (2016). Ahebi Ugbabe (d. 1948, Nigeria). *Gender in African Biography: How Gender Matters in African History*, May 9. Retrieved September 22, 2018, from <https://genderinafricanbiography.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/ahebi-ugbabe-d-1948-nigeria/>].

**Language:** Tribe-specific vocabulary amongst the Konso tribe from today's Ethiopia had two words each for penis, vagina, and sexual intercourse, but no less than four for “effeminate man.” For example, one popular term is *sagoda* which can mean men who never marry, weakened or sickly men, and men who cross dress. (Murray, 2008, p. 4). The Hausa people from modern-day Nigeria had terms in their language that are still used to describe homosexuals. Two terms are common, *yan dauda* which is usually translated as “homosexual” or “transvestite” and *dan dauda* which translates as a homosexual “wife” (Bidstrup, 2015). Figure 6 shows a *yan dauda*, Ameer, a man wearing woman's headscarf with braided hair of the sort worn by women throughout Nigeria. Ameer also uses the female version of his name, Ameera, preceding it with Hajiya, the honorific for women who have completed the Muslim hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

**Marriage:** From modern-day South Africa, “Krige argues that the husband role in Lovedu society may be either male or female...relationships created by a marital union other than those of husband and wife may be of paramount importance...according to Krige, it is the intrinsic right of a woman (the mother of the “female husband”) to the services of a daughter-in-law that is the basis of Lovedu woman marriage” (Oboler, 1980, p.69). In the early 17th century in present-day Angola, Portuguese priests Gaspar Azereveduc and Antonius Sequerius encountered men who spoke, sat and dressed like women, and who entered into marriage with men in the kingdom of Ndongo. Such marriages were “honored and even prized” (Stewart, 2014, para. 17). In modern-day Benin, from the kingdom of Dahomey, women could be soldiers and older women would sometimes marry younger women, according to anthropologist Melville Herkovits (Stewart, 2014, para. 13). Figure 7 shows women soldiers from the former kingdom of Dahomey, who could marry younger women.



**Figure 6:** Yan daudu “homosexual” man Ameer wearing woman’s headscarf with braided hair and headscarf of the sort worn by women throughout Nigeria. [Source: Mark, M. (2013). “Nigeria’s yan daudu face persecution in religious revival,” *The Guardian*, June 10. Retrieved September 20, from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/10/nigeria-yan-daudu-persecution>].



**Figure 7:** Women warriors from the former kingdom of Dahomey who could marry younger women, according to the anthropologist Melville Herkovits. [Source: Erasing 76 Crimes. (2014). 21 varieties of traditional African homosexuality, January 30. Retrieved January 19, 2016, from <http://76crimes.com/2014/01/30/21-varieties-of-traditional-african-homosexuality/>].

In the Lobedu kingdom located in modern-day South Africa the rain queen Modjadji is reported to have taken as many as 15 wives. It was considered an honor for the queen to choose your daughter as a wife, so many families sent their daughters to her for the promise of favorable tribal standing and rank (Paulat, 2014). Figure 8 is of Modjadji V, The Rain Queen.



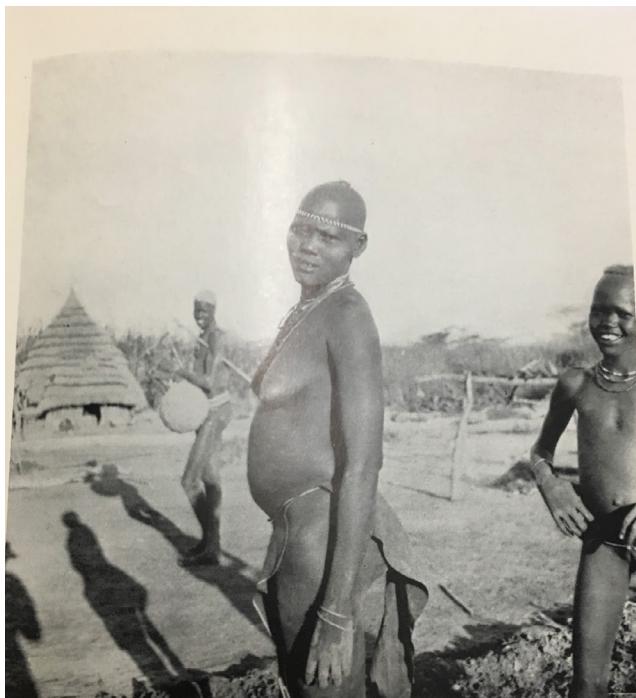
**Figure 8:** Modjadji V, The Rain Queen. [Source: Rain Queens of Africa. March 11, 2011. Retrieved September 20, 2018, from <http://rainqueensofafrica.com/2011/03/modjadji-v-rain-queen/>].

In the Nuer tribe that resisted the arrival of the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its people formed one of the largest ethnic groups located in Nuerland around modern-day South Sudan and southwestern Ethiopia, earlier researchers noted same-sex marriage instances of “female husbands” and “woman marriage” as a “mere curiosity” (Eskridge, 1993, p. 1460) until it became a matter of attention in the 1930s noted first by anthropologists Eileen Jensen Krige (1937) and Melville Herskovits (1937). Evans-Pritchard (1951) observes the occurrence of woman marriage: “What seems to us, but not at all to Nuer, a somewhat strange union is that in which a woman marries another woman and counts as the pater [father] of the children born of the wife. Such marriages are by no means uncommon in Nuerland, and they must be regarded as a form of simple legal marriage, for the woman-husband marries her wife in exactly the same way as a man marries a woman.... We may perhaps refer to this kind of union as woman-marriage” (pp. 108-109). Figure 9 shows a Nuer married woman from Evans-Pritchard’s travels among the Nuer of South Sudan.

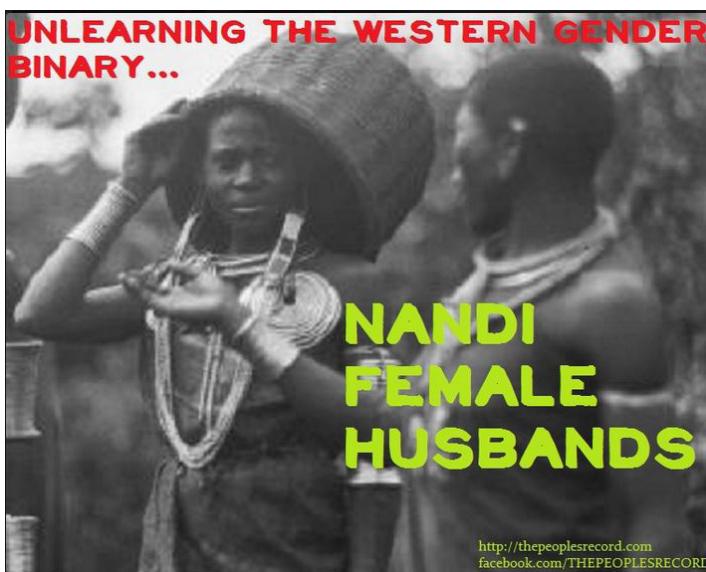
In the Nandi tribe from the historical region of the Nandi Hills in the Great Rift Valley around modern-day Kenya, same-sex marriage traditions are observed from precolonial times to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Boakye, 2018): “A woman who has taken a wife is said to become a man. It is said that she has been promoted to male status (*kagotogosta komostab murenik*)” (Oboler, 1980, p. 74). Figure 10 shows Nandi female husbands.

**Sexual Activity:** Bidstrup (2015) reports that amongst the Pangwe tribe from modern-day Cameron, in early 17<sup>th</sup> century, homosexual behaviors among pre-marriage adolescents was common and was not even considered to be sex, since it did not involve procreative potential. Homosexual acts as late as age 17 were considered innocent, not being “true” sexual relations. Such youth considered themselves virgins at marriage, even though they might have had considerable homosexual experience in both roles. There are many stories among the Pangwe of Camaroon of men who hated women and preferred the company of men even when offered a large bride price, of men who courted other men, etc. That these behaviors existed within this tribe prior to European contact is evidenced by the richness and number of these stories” (Bidstrup, 2015, para. 6).

The attributed cause leading to the execution of a group of 23 Anglican and 22 Catholic pages who converted to Christianity between January 31, 1885, and January 27, 1887, on orders of Mwanga II, the *Kabaka* (king) of the historical kingdom of Buganda located as part of modern-day Uganda, during a time of three-way religious struggle, is believed to be partly motivated by the converts’ rejection of the king’s sexual advances (Hoad, 2007; Marion, 1964). The occurrence is known as the Namugongo Holocaust or the Ugandan Martyrs and Figure 11 visualizes its aftermath.



**Figure 9:** Nuer married woman from Evans-Pritchard's travels among the Nuer of South Sudan. [Source: Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1951). *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press].



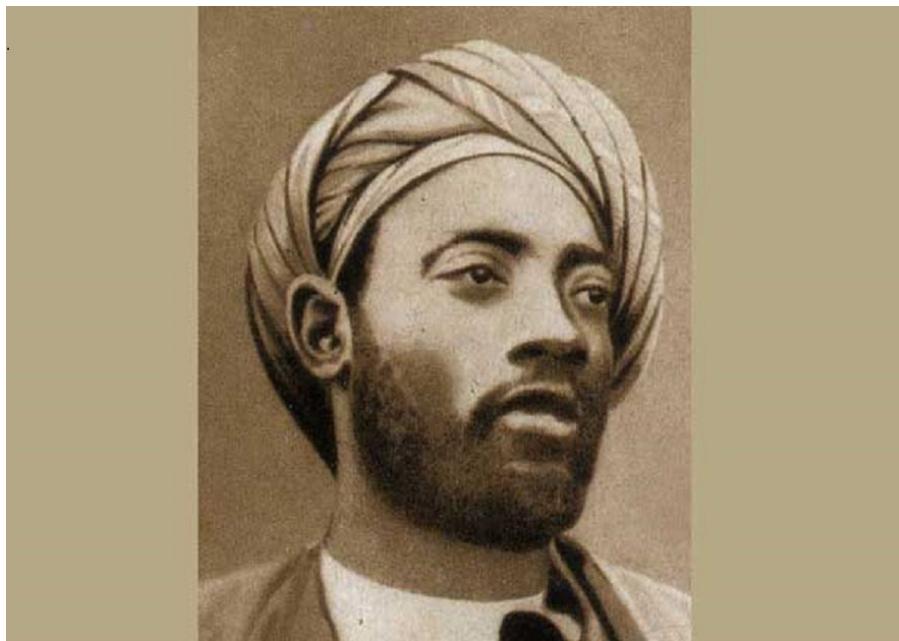
**Figure 10:** Nandi female husbands. [Source: Nandi Female Husbands. *The Untitled Mag*. Retrieved September 20, 2018, from <http://theuntitledmag.tumblr.com/post/47903861443/mocosyamores-qbits-thepeoplesrecord-going>].

The historical visibility accorded to this event highlights the publically marking of age-structured and gender-based homosexuality traditions in the royal courts prior to the advent of British rule in Buganda (Osterhammel, 2015). The public recording of the reason behind Mwanga II's anger and persecution have been attributed to the refusal of page Mwafu, his favorite, and others to submit to his sexual advances and anal penetration (Behrend, 2011). A defense of traditional values in the 1880s including homosexual

relations that went against Christian moralistic values motivating their opposition of same-sex relationships provides a different, non-biased and non-Christian interpretation of Mwanga II's violent campaign (Taylor, 2014). In many circles, the Kabaka's extreme action is regarded as a savior of traditional legacy of Bugandan same-sex sexual practices from getting wiped out of history (Low, 2009). Figure 12 shows the 31st Kabaka of Buganda, Basammula Ekkere Mwanga II (1868-1903).

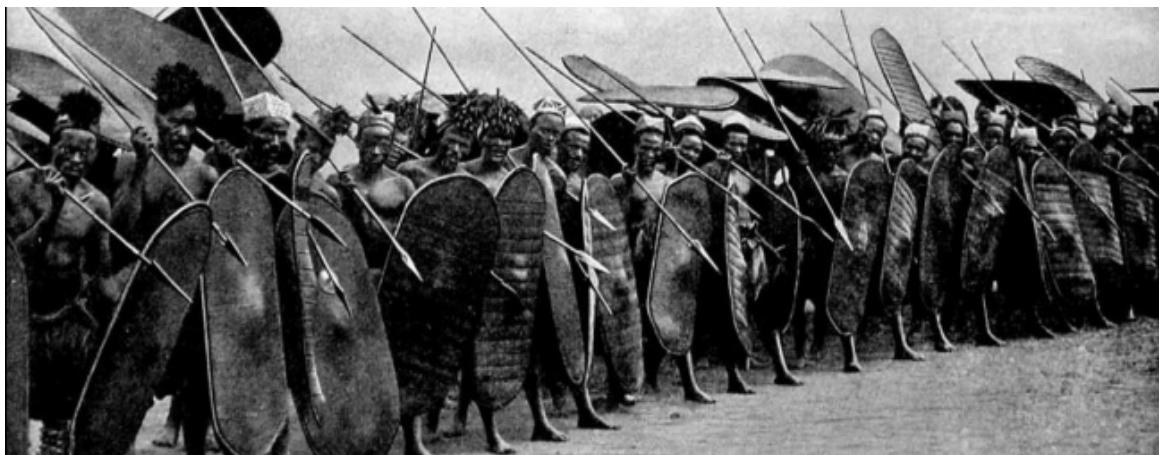


**Figure 11:** The Aftermath of the Namugongo Holocaust [Source: Uganda's Martyrs' Shrine, Namugongo. (2017). *History of Martyrdom*. Retrieved September 20, 2018, from <http://www.ugandamartyrsshrine.org.ug/history-of-martyrdom/>.



**Figure 12:** The 31st Kabaka of Buganda, Basammula Ekkere Mwanga II (king from 1884-1888 and 1889-1897 before British rule) [Source: Boakye, B. (2018). “King Mwanga II of Buganda, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ugandan king who was gay,” *Face2Face Africa*, April 12. Retrieved September 20, 2018, from <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/king-mwanga-ii-of-buganda-the-19th-century-ugandan-king-who-was-gay>].

The Azande tribe in the historical region of Zandeland located around modern-day South Sudan, Central African Republic, and Democratic Republic of the Congo practiced same-sex sexual relationships that were common in past pre-colonial times: “Between males it was approved of in the bachelor military companies. Between females it is said to have been a frequent, though highly disapproved of, practice in polygamous homes...lesbian practices between women [called] as *adandara* (Dlamini, 2006; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; 1974, p. 123). Figure 13 shows bachelor military companies of the Azande warriors.



**Figure 13:** Between males sexual relationships were approved of in the bachelor military companies of the Azande warriors. [Source: OckyDub. (2011). Homosexual History in Africa - Zande Warriors. *cypher avenue*, September 14). Retrieved February 14, 2016, from <http://cypheravenue.com/homosexual-history-in-africa-zande-warriors/>.]

**Religion:** In the tribes across the historical region of Northern Rhodesia in modern-day Zambia, religious deities had androgynous characteristics and intersecting transgender attributes. For example, the deity Leza appears with some name variations across eastern and southern Africa (Munday, 1940). The name's origin comes from the verb “to cherish” as a mother does her children or as a chief to his community (Parrinder, Closs, Fox, and Strehlow 1971; Saidi, 2010). Generally regarded as male, a father, but a myth depicts Leza appeared as “the mother of all beasts” (Parrinder, 1980, p. 129). In the historical region of Ndongo located around modern-day Angola and Namibia, a caste of male diviners—known as “*zvibanda*,” “*chibados*,” “*quimbanda*,” *gangas*” and “*kibambaa*”—were believed to carry powerful female spirits that they would pass on to fellow men through sexual activity (Tamale, 2014, para. 11). It is believed that the role and behaviors of spiritual leaders among the Kwayama [Kwanyama] tribe, an ethnic group of planters and herders from Angola, involved wearing women’s clothing, engaging in women’s work, and becoming secondary spouses to men whose other wives were biologically female (Sweet, 1996). Figure 14 shows stamps from South West Africa (now Namibia) with traditional headdress worn by spiritual leaders and others in the Herero, Himba, Ngandjera and Kwanyama tribes.

The Bafia tribe from the early 1900s from around modern-day Cameroon believed that there was no afterlife and at death, everything “is over.” They did not recognize a God, and thus, no moral evil was known to them with no sin or punishment attached to sexual relations between the men and/or women (Tessmann, 1921). Christian missionary Jean Baptiste Labat documented connections between spirituality and cross-dressing among the 18<sup>th</sup> century Giagues tribe from the kingdom of Congo around the modern-day location of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in his observations and objections of their Ganga-Ya-Chibanda or presiding priest, who routinely cross-dressed and was referred to as “grandmother” (Murray and Roscoe, 1998, p. 10; Stewart, 2014, para. 9).

The Fanti tribe from the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century kingdom of Mankessim around the location of modern-day Ghana believed in the spiritual notion of *sunsum* that “appears to be a desultory, volatile essence of the soul, and may also be loosely described as the “personality” of a person. A man with a “heavy” or strong *sunsum* is said to be aggressive, while a “light” or weak *sunsum* is ascribed to the introvert. A “light” *sunsum*

is characteristic of a woman, while an extroverted female, or one with homosexual tendencies, thus having a “heavy” *sunsum*, is referred to as an *obaa banyin* (female man). Her masculine tendencies may also be indicated by adding *banyin* (male) to her day name, such as ‘Ama *banyin*.’” (Christensen, 1954, p.92-93; Sarbah, 2018).



**Figure 14:** Stamps from South West Africa (now Namibia) with traditional headdress worn by spiritual leaders and others in the Herero, Himba, Ngandjera and Kwanyama tribes.

## 6 Conclusions

Visualization of “non-conforming” gender representations from pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa in the LGBTI-ICIS2 provided a dynamic and interactive prototype mode of informing viewers of ways to further inclusion of a taboo topic area that might inspire others towards finding creative solutions to integrate diversity in gender research (Mehra and Tidwell, 2014). A few insights from the exploratory journey of the cultural visual literacy of “non-conforming” gender representations reported in this article are worth sharing. It is when we view the many traditions that establish their origins to pre-colonial times in the Sub-Saharan Africa that we see a pattern emerge of “non-conforming” gender-related themes, select few of which have been presented in this article. Some of these instances are so widely understood they were considered non-regional and/or non-tribe specific. The intersecting nature of the cultural themes was also a salient “non-conforming” feature representative of a phenomenological “lived experience” as compared to categorizing that culture and life into themes and categories via words and their intellectually problematized distinct meanings that cannot authentically and accurately represent the entirety of the holistic experience (Norberg-Schultz, 1991).

The authors do not at any level consider themselves “expert” researchers on the sub-continent and its cultures and people. Hence, the team relied completely on collecting information that could serve as

evidence from authoritative sources, including published materials and those available on the Internet from other sources that traced strong ties to the region. Our role as information researchers involved searching and locating such information, especially where visualized representations were available, and evaluating if such information could be considered “authoritative.” The research team had to censure and remove certain language (e.g., “anal”) associated with non-conforming gender descriptions that were documented in the secondary sources as they were considered too explicit owing to the collaboration with the U. S. Department of State and their sensitivity to foreign relations. In the limited scope of data collection, data analysis, meaning making, and interpretation development in this research project, the authors could not assess any non-conforming patterns associated with (and based on) sex differentials (e.g., female-to-female versus male-to-male). This does not mean that they did not exist. The authors assume that with the perceptions surrounding power imbalances between women and men in the context of a hegemonic patriarchal society and culture all around the world, these differences must have been there even in pre-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa (Bannerji, 2002; Gibson, 2018; Lerner, 1987). Exploration of these differences and similarities is a worthy concern for future initiatives.

One thread in our explorations led to a realization that indeed, the history of homosexuality has been a “consistent and logical feature of African societies and belief systems”, including occurrence of “non-conforming” gender representations (Iaccino, 2014). We tried to be careful in not imposing gender and/or sexual orientation identity markers and labels (e.g., gay, lesbian, etc.) in categorizing and making sense of the information that was found. Instead, relying on descriptions included in our authoritative sources was a strategy that helped us make sense of the information and its meanings via use of exact terminologies and vocabularies to represent the intersecting aspects of the topics as related to the region. As we gathered the evidence and presented these “facts” in a meaningful context, we hope to persuade and inform others using visual tools such as the LGBTI-ICIS2 mapping system to demonstrate the occurrence of non-conforming gender-related references and their importance in the varied cultures.

The evidence located and presented to further social justice in Sub-Saharan Africa regarding “non-conforming” gender representations is only partial owing to limitations of the research team’s time, efforts, and existing knowledge and space restrictions. Over the years, from the accounts of European missionaries and anthropologists in the 1600s to more recent local assessments and indigenous narratives of history, Sub-Saharan Africa is replete with several LGBTI instances from their acknowledgment to tolerance to regular involvement in everyday traditional social and cultural life (van Klinken and Chitando, 2016). Further research needs to examine these and other examples of “non-conforming” gender and sexuality representations from Sub-Saharan Africa, stretching from its western coastline across the continent to the eastern belt in countries like Kenya and Tanzania as well as further south. In its cross-dressing members of royalty to same-sex marriages and fluid gender ambiguities, LGBTI people were revered and sometimes played a powerful political role in society, as chieftains and shamans or spiritual leaders, at other places as regular members in a socialized environment (Luirink and Maurick, 2016). The existence of descriptive and symbolic language and metaphors are indicative of their significance and their deep-rooted cultural integration (Wong, 2016). The progressive and skilled information professional needs to sharpen her/his competences of search and analysis to shed light on these instances that validate LGBTI ties in communities across Sub-Saharan Africa.

In cases, where the evidence is partial or missing in early missionary accounts of “non-conforming” genders, it is not because demonstrated cultural markers of the LGBTI identities and behavior were absent. Most likely, such absences were owing to a focus of their missions elsewhere (Chitando and van Klinken, 2016). Contemporary letters and studies reveal celebrations of “non-conforming” genders in varied cultural and social traditions of Sub-Saharan Africa. Empowerment of Central African transvestites and marriage between older women soldiers in the kingdom of Dahomey (modern Benin) are just two examples. There were many more. These have been immortalized in African society and not purely a western construct. They provide strong evidence of LGBTI belonging in Sub-Saharan Africa during its long pre-colonial history and call for support and judicious advocacy on behalf of the LGBTI community owing to their intrinsic part-and-parcel of the African experience (Wanjiru, 2014).

Few additional cautions and suppositions considering research documented in this article warrant

attention. Interpretations and analysis based on preconceived impressions and prejudiced beliefs should be avoided regarding gender, sexuality, Africa, and culture, amongst other controversial or debated topics at hand (Mehra, 2016). Readers want to be critically conscious and careful of the troublesome “gaze” of a Western perspective or a “White mindset” and ideology about the people and cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa (Gabay, 2019). Equally, the biased point of view in a lens of analysis constructed and developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can provide misleading and false understanding of a bygone era if the information is “de-contextualized” from the specifics of a given temporal and social-cultural moment during history (Heschel and Ryad, 2018). For example, we have to recognize the limitations of using words like “gender non-conforming” or even “LGBTI” as externally-imposed colonist constructs (e.g., Nigerian gender traditions are not “non-conforming” if they are examined within their cultural context). Hence, the use of quotations (“...”) in this article around the word “non-conforming” to recognize and mark this understanding. Historical evidence is accurate information only if it is grounded in the reality of the culture, society, politics, economy, and behaviors of its people in a given time (Henige, 2006). So were the authoritative sources of the varied “non-conforming” gender evidence collected during this research in their responses shaped by (and of) a particular culture in the specifics of its socio-cultural and socio-political actualities (e.g., colonialism and imperialism, Christianization, etc.) (Weissenberger and Duane, 2011). If progressive and competent information professionals seek to make an accurate and authentic reading of the presented evidence, they need to consider the broader contextual factors in developing their evaluations and analysis (Pew Research Center, 2010). For example, biases and stereotyping by armchair anthropologists and missionaries regarding “primitive” regions of Africa and Asia, amongst other parts of the world, have long been recognized as problematic (Brown, 2012). Only in a reflective and self-awareness mode regarding the information found can a conscious professional learn from such visual explorations in an accurate and authentic manner. The symbolism and meaning-making in a cultural visual literacy process for information from a distance, time, and place should be recognized in their socially constructed emergence and understanding (Facos, 2009). Anything else will be misplaced, uninformed, and in poor judgement to be careful of avoiding in this politically charged climate of fake news business and misinformation stereotyping, emerging even from the highest office in the United States, and perpetuated by irresponsible news media and entertainment political gurus of the day (Mehra, 2017).

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