Article:
van Klinken, A orcid.org/0000-0003-2011-5537 (2023) The Colonial Christian Kernel of African Anti-LGBT+ Politics and Queer Humanitarianism: Conversation with Kwame E. Otu. Political Theology, 24 (8). pp. 793-801. ISSN 1462-317X

https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2023.2229205

Accepted for publication in *Political Theology*

The Colonial Christian Kernel of African Anti-LGBT+ Politics and Queer Humanitarianism: Conversation with Kwame E. Otu

By Adriaan van Klinken
School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds (UK) and Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape (South Africa)

Kwame Edwin Otu is currently Associate Professor of African Anthropology at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. A leading scholar in the field of African Queer Studies, and a critical commentator on LGBT+ issues in contemporary Africa, the occasion of this interview is the publication of his book *Amphibious Subjects: Sasso and the Contested Politics of Queer Self-Making in Neoliberal Ghana*, by the University of California Press in 2022. The interview took place on 12 April 2023, just a few weeks after the Ugandan Parliament passed a new Anti-Homosexuality Bill, while in Otu's home country, Ghana, a similarly harsh anti-LGBT+ bill was under discussion in parliament.

Adriaan van Klinken
It is wonderful to have this opportunity to talk about your book, *Amphibious Subjects*. First and foremost, congratulations on the publication of this timely and important book. Would you mind sharing how it came about – what was its journey?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Oh, thank you for having me. The book's journey has been very long and winding. Before it became "Amphibious Subjects," it was called "Reluctantly Queer." Before that, it was called "Becoming Queer." It started in 2009 at Syracuse University; I took a class called Culture and AIDS, taught by a medical anthropologist. The class provided a global perspective on the HIV pandemic. Throughout every part of the world–Asia, Latin America, North America–it was acknowledged that HIV was partly spread through same-sex relationships. However, when we finally got to Africa, it was a completely different narrative. There was no mention of the fact that HIV and AIDS affected people other than heterosexuals. It perpetuated this idea that HIV in Africa was a heterosexual disease. Given the fact that, well, I am a gay person who had grown up in Ghana (even though I was not out yet at that time), I found that very interesting. I did not understand why, when we come to Africa, HIV suddenly is heterosexualised.
As a queer African myself, I asked: why have queer Africans been omitted from this epidemiological narrative? I wrote a paper on that question, trying to understand the historical context that produced this narrative that overlooked the figure of the effeminate man, the man-woman, I knew from Ghana. How could it happen that the public health outreach in Africa fundamentally excluded queer men? So, these early moments of 2009 are the womb where what became *Amphibious Subjects* was conceived.

Adriaan van Klinken
Thanks for sharing that. Clearly, your book demonstrates the ignorance underlying such a framing.

You do so by centring a community which you call *sasso*. Can you tell us something about who or what *sasso* are?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Sasso is a constellation of so many things. Etymologically, *sasso* means coequal. It is the Ga word for co-equality, and it has the same meaning in the Akan language. In Ghana, life converges around and is regulated by categories such as age, class, gender, educational status, ethnic group and geographical background. These variables factor into how one determines their relationship to others. *Sasso* is intended to be a signifier that amplifies sameness in terms of where one is in relation to others and with whom one shares this kind of communion within the social hierarchy.
I find it intellectually very captivating that the men I studied managed to capitalize on this term to describe themselves and the community of which they are apart.
They use *sasso* to mean so many things. For example, we are all *sasso* because we share effeminate characteristics; that is what binds us; that is what makes us coequal. But, *sasso* could also mean engaging in homoerotic encounters. In that usage, one is considered part of the *sasso* community not because of exhibiting effeminate characteristics, but because of engaging in homoeroticism. So, there are men who are very–to use Western parlance–straight looking, but they engage in homoerotic encounters; thus, they would be referred to as *sasso*. These multiple meanings is what makes *sasso* a constellation. My book argues that this constellation sometimes gets flattened by LGBT+ human right interventions and by the deployment of LGBT+ plus vernacular in Ghana.

Adriaan van Klinken
Can you elaborate on your argument–how does the terminology of *sasso* relate to Western LGBT+ terminology? What does *sasso* afford queer subjects in Ghana what LGBT+ terminology does not afford them, but also, perhaps what kind of possibilities does *sasso* foreclose?

Kwame Edwin Otu
In many ways, both terminologies open opportunities and possibilities, while also foreclosing others. *Sasso* is very provincial; it is a Ghanaian term. But it has many connections and overlaps with queer, LGBT+ terminology. In a world that is becoming very globalized, the LGBT+ train rides on the rails of globalization. Because the LGBT+ train is on that rail, there is a desire for *sasso* to embark on this global train, precisely because of the very complicated neoliberal and neocolonial context in which they live. Yet jumping on this train also means that they have to let go of certain things that *sasso* affords. For instance, some straight-looking men who engage in same-sex activity would never say they are gay. Most self-identified effeminate men jump on this global train; however, the men who are masculine looking and straight acting do not, because they are still within this cultural threshold that marks them as men. They might be *sasso*, but will not identify as LGBT+.

Adriaan van Klinken
Would those straight acting men, would they identify themselves as *sasso*, or is that a term that others would use in reference to them?

Kwame Edwin Otu
It is a very erratic universe. Others would use *sasso* to reference them, and sometimes they would use it themselves. So, *sasso* will tell me, “You see that man, acting like that, he is *sasso* because they have *sasso* with me.” In that context, *sasso* is not only an identity that men come to embody, but also the practice they engage in, which is homoerotic activity. Yet, as much as they engage in such

activity, they cannot be reduced to that activity. But for other *sasso*, their identity revolves around their effeminacy.

Adriaan van Klinken
I was struck by the epigraph to the introduction chapter, where one of your participants states: "We have always been here, but immediately after we became gay and homosexual, the homophobia begun" (p. 1). This relates to what you are talking about just now, right, about what LGBT+ terminology does and what its effects are. Can you elaborate on that statement?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Absolutely. This respondent saying, "We've always been here," could mean so many things. But let me highlight what I think this claim meant here. In the book, I deliberate on the idea that in African contexts, sexuality and intimacy all occur in a lattice work of secrecy. We all know who is getting fucked by who, who is doing the fucking, and who is taking the fucking, but it is a public secret. This public secrecy governs this idea that we have always been here. We all know you are here. We just do not want to know. We really do not care about the entrails of what you do. But there is something about the LGBT+ nomenclature that transitions this public secrecy into public knowledge. To subscribe to LGBT+ iconography is to act it out, to reveal, to expose that slice of knowledge that everyone knew as a secret. In that light, when Africans say that homosexuality is un-African, this could be seen as a code. That is what I want us to sit with, that such allusions should not be completely dismissed as representing African ignorance. In fact, such allusions are made to preserve what I refer to here as the public secret.

Adriaan van Klinken
Interesting! So, in that case, the politics that comes with modern Western notions of LGBT+ identity is un-African, so to say, because it conflicts with those cultures of secrecy. So much of the argument in your book centers around how *sasso* subjectivity raises critical questions about Western neoliberal international LGBT+ interventions. If Western LGBT+ organizations would ask you for advice about their role, their responsibility, their interventions in Africa with regard to sexual minority rights, what kind of advice would you give them?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Thank you for that question, because I am trying to point out that they think they can make an intervention in and of itself. I argue you should sit with that assumption. Why do you think you can make an intervention? Such assumptions are deeply rooted and entrenched in colonial biases, that somehow, Africa is still in need of development. Nowadays a country's status of development is measured by its ability to tolerate or accept queerness. In the past, the question how Christian a nation was defined how modern it was. Today, queerness has become a currency, an index of development.
My point is that we need to think about how coloniality informs the desire to participate in what I call the "politics of rescue." Because the politics of rescue is a perpetuation of the very oppressive system that created the conditions in which the men I study live in in the first place.

Adriaan van Klinken
Thank you for reminding me of the colonial and neo-colonial problems of the white and Western saviour complex. Yet–and I am speaking here with the voice of one of these western LGBT+ organizations–last year we have seen a new anti-LGBT+ bill being proposed in the Ghanaian Parliament. Just a few weeks ago, we have seen the passing of a new anti-LGBT+ bill in Uganda. In

Kenya, a similar bill has just been proposed. So, with respect for the caution around the idea of intervention–what is the alternative? Or should Western organizations, movements, governments, activists, etc. simply not get involved?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Since I am in the US, I think I can say that there is no alternative within coloniality. The assumption that you can go there to stop the Ugandan government from passing the bill is predicated on this longue durée of colonial fracas that has produced the bill. I do think that we focus so much on the queer issues at the expense of other issues that also confront queer subjects in these postcolonial contexts. Some of these queer subjects are made vulnerable by projects of neoliberal provocations or neoliberal sources that rob from them their access to a good life. Of course, I know that their quality life is affected by homophobia, but my point is that we need to think of the context in which these things are happening. These are scarred, traumatized contexts.
There really is a lack of critical intersectionality in how we think about the queer problem in Africa. We only focus on queerness, and in doing so, elide the fact that the problem of homophobia is also a problem of knowledge, a problem of impoverishment, a problem of poverty, a problem of ethnic divisions, a problem of neoliberal and neo-colonial collusion. We fail to take all these factors into account as we tailor responses to these emergences, if you will, of African countries now seriously considering passing anti-LGBT+ laws.
Another to consider is that the US itself is very queerphobic. Trans people die almost every week in America. They are shooting us down. So, for those interveners trying to rescue queer Africans, have they been willing or able to contend with the issues in their own backyard? Until we can adequately resolve the ongoing trans deaths, the homophobia that still animates us, America is clearly not a citadel for queer people, especially not queer people of colour.

Adriaan van Klinken
I guess what you are saying is that the whole Western narrative around African homophobia is another way for the West to reimagine itself as being liberal and progressive. If I hear you correctly, your point is that we should analyse homophobia or queerphobia in Africa as a product of neocolonial and neoliberal capitalism.

Kwame Edwin Otu
Exactly. Building on Johannes Fabian, although he does not put it exactly this way, I would say that we should engage in critical coevalness. By critical coevalness I mean that while the West is focusing on anti-LGBT+ bills in Uganda or whatever African country, it should also address the phobias affecting trans and queer communities, especially trans and queer communities of colour that are constantly being bedevilled by transphobia, queerphobia, racism and other injustices. We should not look at these things separately but as interlinked. This is what I call critical coevalness. What links these situations, what disconnects them, and what can we learn from both spaces?

Adriaan van Klinken
Thanks, these are important questions that Western actors should be asking themselves, before jumping on the bandwagon of humanitarian intervention.
A question about the title of your book, *Amphibious Subjects*. Can you explain – where does it come from, and how do you use it to conceptualize queer lives?

Kwame Edwin Otu
When you are in grad school, you want to be cool and smart. So, I went through a Deleuze and

Guattari stage. I really was obsessed, Adriaan, with these white men. The initial title for this project was "Becoming Queer," as an homage to Deleuze and Guattari because they do a lot of work on becoming. Then, I got a fellowship in an African American and African Studies Department, at the University of Virginia, which afforded us the opportunity to bring in one specialist every year on the topic we were writing about. In my first year, I invited Xavier Livermon. I shared a chapter with him, and Xavier came in asking, "Why are you using these white men? Are there no African thinkers whose work you can engage with? Using white theory to argue with Africans who believe that homosexuality is un-African will surely not convince them."

And I was like, Oh my God! Right after that workshop, I embarked aggressively on reading African philosophy. Boo, it was amazing! I then remembered the work of Kwame Gyeke, the Ghanaian philosopher whose intervention really inspired amphibious subjectivity. I had read him before, but going back to him was illuminating. I discovered that he was struggling with the question how Africans have been conceived in Western imaginary as communalistic communities. There is this representation of the African person as completely overwhelmed by community, right? Gyeke's point is that as important as community is, there are moments and spaces for agency. This is how the adinkra symbol ended up on the back of the book–it is the symbol of the Siamese crocodile, which has two heads and one stomach. The two heads signify individuality. The conjoined belly signifies community. The two heads struggle over food that goes into that one belly. So, community needs this kind of friction. We are community because of difference, not because of sameness. That template was useful to think about the ways in which *sasso* position themselves within and against their communities, especially with the arrival of LGBT+ human rights interventions.

So, I was trying to imagine *sasso* as navigating these new treacherous, unpredictable contexts, a context made treacherous and unpredictable because of the arrival of neoliberal LGBT+ human rights interventions. My point being that they were navigating these contexts amphibiously. On the one hand, they retained their *sasso* identity, which preserved or kept their homoeroticism as secret. Whereby on the other hand, they had to participate in this neoliberal intervention as a way of being part of this global queer community, even though such participation risks their lives by exposing them to homophobia. This amphibious moving back and forth between LGBT+ human rights organizations and their own communities, is just like the two heads; it is like the amphibian moving back and forth between land and water. That is what compelled me to theorize *sasso* existence as amphibious.

Adriaan van Klinken

Your engagement with an Akan philosophical concept to indigenize queer theory is such an important contribution. It reminds me of one of the comments you make in the book, how *sasso* present a theoretical challenge to hegemonic queer theory in the West. What is your take on African philosophy broadly defined, and the contribution it could make to indigenizing or Africanizing or decolonizing–whatever word you want to use–queer theory and queer studies?

Kwame Edwin Otu

Let us begin by stating that African philosophy was not meant to be. Because of the history of knowledge production, the very idea of Africa is antithetical to philosophy. After all, Africa is construed in the Western imaginary as depleted, not replete, with philosophy. As a result, African philosophy in and of itself becomes a very queer philosophy, because it is not mainstream. It is lingering in the margins. African philosophy is in many ways a critique of Western philosophy. African philosophy was thought of, in the West, as ethno-philosophy, which is a very racist way of thinking about philosophies of the non-Western world.

Unfortunately, because of the very history of Africans in the world, African philosophy did become quite hegemonically patriarchal and nationalistic, and thus heteronationalist. Yet these bottlenecks do not mean that African philosophy cannot be also providential in how it offers us ways of thinking about queerness in Africa. I believe that African philosophy, precisely because of its own queer location in the margins of knowledge production, lends itself as a queer project that offers us critical insights. In doing so, it also extracts critical insights from queer African lives to transform itself.

Adriaan van Klinken
Thanks for that thoughtful response: the queerness of African philosophy resonating with the experience of queer life as marginal and counterhegemonic knowledges.
In the book, you observe how fraught the boundaries and how inconsistent the definitions of sexual citizenship in Ghana are. Could you elaborate on that, especially in the light of recent developments such as the anti-LGBT+ bill?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Absolutely. I make that point precisely through my reading of the Ghanaian Penal Code. It somehow criminalizes unnatural carnal knowledge, and unnatural carnal knowledge is criminalized because the focus is really on anal sex. Now, apart from the fact that lesbians exist too, anal sex is not something that only homosexuals do, and not all homosexuals do it for that matter. Thus, an ideal of sexual citizenship masks the complexities; sexual citizenship does not follow people into their bedrooms to see whether they are really respectable sexual subjects or not. Someone can actually be consistently sexual in the public, but inconsistently sexual in their bedroom.
This idea of a uniform, settled, consistent citizenship is a myth. Citizenship is such an inconsistent term. There is no such thing as a good citizen: sometimes you forget you pay your taxes, sometimes you do not stop at the traffic lights. If you actually put the microscope on peoples' everyday lives, we would all be inconsistent citizens. I mean, even in Ghana, there are plenty of straight people who have their side chicks and everything, and yet they live in a culture that is supposed to preserve the heterosexual monogamous family.

Adriaan van Klinken
Would you say that the queer subject has become a kind of a scapegoat to divert attention away, and to allow people to keep up the pretension of being good citizens?

Kwame Edwin Otu
I am trying to think about it conversely. I would rather say that the presence of queer bodies scapegoats the structure. What if we turn the tables by scapegoating the structure that claims us to be the scapegoats because our lives reveal the fraudulence of this structure?
I think that queer presence reveals the fiction; we scapegoat society because society is hypocritical. Society is full of inconsistencies, and being queer is to really sit with this inconsistency and contradiction.

Adriaan van Klinken
I like how you queer that argument and turn it around. Brilliant! In the epigraph to Chapter 5, one of your interlocutors states: "I have never for the love of God, understood why Ghanaian Christians are terrified by LGBTQ+ issues" (p. 123). The subsequent chapter addresses and explores how Christianity in Ghana has become so invested in anti-LGBT+ politics. What are the key factors driving this?

Kwame Edwin Otu
This project made me think about the ways in which Christian theology is understood in the African context, and especially in the context suffused with anxieties around sexuality. These anxieties are actually not recent, and themselves are products of historical anxieties. What we are calling Christianity in Ghana is also a part or even a result of that. Theology is this archive. It reveals in many ways how society is adapting to it and how it is also adapting to society. I would like to think about this core shaping that is happening. So, I am intrigued by the ways in which Christian discourse at the turn of the century sometimes gets mobilized to discipline African subjects into modern subjects, through the theological claim that inhabiting this religion is going to propel you into modernity. I try to unpack the ways in which that lie has been translated and mistranslated and has become a kind of truth.
In the mid-60s, to become Ghanaian meant to become Christian; to participate in this post-independent modernity, one had to actually abdicate any connection to, for example, polygamy. That was what indexed you as a citizen. A lot of people believe being Christian is what makes them modern.
Interestingly, I think that queer humanitarianism operates on a somewhat similar logic. I would not call it theology, but we should think of queer humanitarianism as a theological project. Theology, in my understanding, is really about how we can live with each other in the world, coexist peacefully, subscribing, if you will to, dictates that reside in the realm of the religious. And queer humanitarianism comes from that tradition, too. Humanitarianism is not secular. It is theological. It suffers from a messianic complex. At the very root of everything is Christianity.

Adriaan van Klinken
So, there is this longstanding project of Euro-colonial Christianity in Ghana that imposes a particular form of sexual politics. But what about the changes in Ghanaian Christianity in recent decades, with the emergence of new Christian evangelical, charismatic, Pentecostal movements?

Kwame Edwin Otu
We need to be very critical of how we talk about change. Christianity has changed to take on African forms, imbued with certain African traditional religious styles, but the kernel is still there. The kernel is the Bible, but also that historical basis. Many queer people may think, oh, we are no longer Christian. But then the kernel is still there, the kernel of this messianic rescue. It promotes the idea that you are the savior. We have to look at the kernel, which amplifies the unimagined connections between the Christian moderns and the queer moderns. African Christians say, “We are no longer like the Western Christians.” Then, the queer humanitarians are like, “Oh, we are not like the Christians.” They are both making the same claims. Ironically, they make these claims while following a deeply Christian logic, which is what binds them.

Adriaan van Klinken
It is interesting though, that many of the *sasso* featured in your book themselves identify as Christian, go to church, read the Bible, belief in God, etcetera. Which raises the question that you know I am interested in, how Christianity is or can be part of queer self-making in Ghana, and in Africa more generally. Do you think there is potential for that?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Absolutely. Christianity is part of African self-making. In that respect, I can see that also happening for queer Christians. If Africans at the turn of the century were very adamant and recalcitrant

towards Christianity, but then through time became amenable to it, I can see that also happening for queer African subjects. They can find a home within Christianity; they inhabit Christian faith to make a connection to the world, to the Christian world in which they live. But for me, that is also a little fraught, because there is the risk that those queer Christians join other African Christians to be against, say, queer African Muslims. This is what I call the shapeshifting of our oppression. What are we folding ourselves into? Especially given that Christianity is still a colonial project. What are we willing to fold ourselves into? As much as I do get it, we can queer Christianity, I also think, we have not even queered queerness, and Africanness. So, it is a very complex thing.

Adriaan van Klinken
One could say that Christianity is part of this amphibious self-making which is complex and complicated and can be used for different political purposes. From your ethnographic reading of queer Ghanaian spirituality, can you see any contours of a queer African political theology or spirituality emerging?

Kwame Edwin Otu
My question is, what is African right now? How are we using "African" and how are we using "queer"? Of course, on an ideological level I can see a queer African theology. But in practice, once we are knee deep in the textures of African lives, we would always see streams of non-Africanisms. So yes, on an ideological level, I can see the potential for a liberatory queer African theology, one that somehow seeks to marry or harness the queerness in Africa and the Africanness of queerness. Maybe that is the site of theological possibility; this kind of seeing in each other–in the African and in the queer–those familial connections and using these as the horizons of queer African theological possibilities. Christianity could be an ingredient, because it is a part of who we are.

Adriaan van Klinken
Last question. You write in your book that the process of doing this ethnographic research, "is freeing not just for the bodies and voices that animates this book, but also for me as a queer Ghanaian man" (p. 4). I would love to hear a bit more about this. How has doing this research affected and shaped yourself as a queer Ghanaian scholar?

Kwame Edwin Otu
Oh my God. Thank you, this is such a delicious question. I mean, all the questions have been very delicious, but this one is so personal, Adriaan. I feel that doing this project lent me with this opportunity to come to terms with myself. There is something about–I hate to use the term coming out, but let me use it–, there is something about coming out to yourself that releases this weight. In terms of my own scholarly becoming, I have become a better intellectual because I reconciled with my identity. I no longer have to look over my shoulders to see if someone is watching. I want to speak truth to power because I have spoken truth, I hope, to myself. To speak truth to power, you should first and foremost speak truth to yourself. And it was so affirming to see these other men, these *sasso* men, do it. They live in Ghana as effeminate men, in a context that they know would indict them for acting to feminine.

Adriaan van Klinken
You know what, Kwame? It shows in your book, there is that level of, let us call it, intimacy. I can sense you when reading it, I can feel you while reading it. There is that level of intimacy that you share with the community you write about. It makes your writing really moving and the book so rich–it reflects your search for self.

Kwame Edwin Otu
Yes, it is an iteration of amphibiousness on my part. It is part of my process of self-making, moving back and forth between and out of the *sasso* community. I am finding myself because I am interacting with them. This finding of the self is amphibious because I go back and forth between their community and myself. I am reflecting my being, my personhood, based on how I interact with them.

Adriaan van Klinken
Beautiful. It has been wonderful. Such a rich conversation, honestly. Thank you.

Kwame Edwin Otu
Thank you. Thank you, hun. This has been such a delight.