“Blame Colonialism? or “Blame the Government?”: Identity Construction and Ideological Framing in Homosexuality Narratives on Nigerian Twitter[1]

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Abstract

Despite recorded attempts variously made to censor public engagement of the topics, sex and sexuality have always held an allure in human societies. Contemporarily however, digital technologies and social media platforms have ruptured these conservative tendencies and enabled Africans much broader and open discourses on language and identity issues. In this contribution, we explore the linguistic representations of ‘government’ and other discourse actors/agents in Nigerian society today in negotiating identities and ideologies on homosexuality in Nigeria. The data for the study is a 114,000 word-corpus collected from ‘Nigerian’ Twitter and this was subsequently processed with Anthony’s (2019) AntConc software. The quantitative corpus-linguistic analyses of hybrid new language practices were complemented by the application of the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis since this avails the contextualisation of the analysis. The analysed narratives reveal that the government bears the brunt of ideological blame-game as it is at the receiving end of both positive and negative attributions. We identify two strains in the narratives: anti-homosexuality vs. pro-homosexuality. In the anti-homosexuality tweets, the government is charged with the necessity of toughening the stance against the queer community through requisite legislation and implementation. Conversely however, the pro-homosexuality tweets upbraid the government for failing to uphold the global standards of human rights and protect marginalised communities. One thing however is obvious: social media continue to be platforms for marginalised communities to actively make their voices heard and this allows linguists to analyse new hybrid and controversial language practices that reflect the new hybrid and controversial identity constructions in Nigeria today. Language issues do not only reflect knowledge and attitudes, but hybrid languages are used to construct knowledge, e.g. on sexual identities, and contextualise it either in colonial or current political contexts in Africa. Thus both ideologies can be constructed as decolonising the mind.

Keywords: Linguistic Twitter Practices; Ideology; Identity Construction; Homosexuality; Colonialism; Government

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1. Introduction

Mobile telephone services – alongside it, the Internet – kicked off around 1999/2000 in Nigeria, as one of the dividends of the return to democratic governance. Since then, the subscriber base in terms of Internet access has continued to soar, and despite Internet use still being a luxurious activity in Nigeria with just 13% active on social networks[2], Nigerians are some of the most noticeable online demographics globally[3]. This access has encouraged citizen engagement especially for religious and political purposes, while also deepening social connectivity and interactions (Schmied 2016, 2018). Prior to the widespread use of social media platforms in Nigeria however, sex and topics around sexuality were often avoided in the public. This is reflective of the perspective to sex by many of Nigeria's densely multicultural societies. Even more hushed is any discussion on homosexuality or other forms of non-heterosexuality, since these are perceived as immoral and foreign, thus unacceptable. Linking up to the affordances of the digital space, especially in its breaking of hitherto inhibitive physical borders, however, is the opportunity for users to connect with other people in different locations and societies. The resultant effect of this outshoot of globalisation is a diffusion of values and viewpoints. This has percolated into the context of homosexuality in Nigeria. It is necessary to document that the prevailing perspective to homosexuality in Nigeria is significantly homophobic. While recent studies have drawn attention to the presence of sexual fluidity and tacit acceptance of homosexuality in traditional/pre-colonial Nigerian – nay African – societies, the subsisting attitudes are outcrops of British colonial legal and administrative bequeathment (Onanuga, 2020). The presence and use of digital networking platforms by Nigerians have, however, gradually started contesting the discriminatory practices to homosexuality. Central to the arguments are the necessity for the recognition of the human rights of people of non-heterosexual orientations as well as decrying the colonial influences that have emboldened the surge in homophobia. Such engagements constitute the focus of the current study and we examine the negotiation of these viewpoints in purposively extracted discourses on Nigerian Twitter. We contend that a sociolinguistic enquiry will yield useful insight into these online discursive practices on homosexuality and assert that there are representative data showing conscious attempts at decolonizing the knowledge on homosexuality. We further opine that these language practices represent and reflect controversial identity and ideological constructions on the perception of homosexuality in Nigeria today. These interventions are particularly timely as they reveal an irony: that current homophobic attitudes are colonial relics and legacies which have now become so entrenched and ingrained that they are used to construct and assert the unAfrican-ness of queer sexualities (Goodman, 2001; Hayes, 2016).

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[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/282846/regular-social-networking-usage-penetration-worldwide-by-country/ (last accessed 07/05/2020)

[3] https://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm (last accessed 07/05/2020)

2. Sociolinguistics and Sexuality

Labov's (1972: 183) definition of sociolinguistics as 'a set of inter-related fields which do emphasise the study of language in social contexts' emphasises the societal and contextual import of linguistic variation. This may be realised through documented observation of language change or in group or idiolectal differences in language use. Labov's viewpoint has been further expanded by Bloome and Green (2002: 396), who opine that '[a] sociolinguistic perspective requires exploring how language is used to establish a social context while simultaneously exploring how the social context influences language use and the communication of meaning.' While there are two main perspectives to sociolinguistic analysis – interactional and variational, in this work, we are concerned with the interactional approach. This is because we are interested in observing and analysing how users wield and manipulate language in speech situations. As Thurlow and Brown (2003) has identified, digital discourse appropriates features of face-to-face communication and is simulatory of real-life conversational engagement. Flowerdew (2012) validates this with the submission that the interactional approach to sociolinguistics is more qualitative and ethnographic since it views language as an unfolding dynamic entity that is co-constructed in the process of interaction. In examining this in linguistic data, attention is paid to the identification of linguistic features and the discussion of their social significance. Even more specifically, sociolinguistics draws attention to the differences between individual users of language and language varieties. To realise this, it engages the influences of social factors (like age, gender, social class and ethnicity) and situational categories (like the degree of formality of the speech situation, the social networks of the speaker, dialects, multilingualism, language policy, standardization) on the language of individuals or groups (Andersen 2010: 547). Applied to the current study, the considerations extend from an evaluation of the linguistic practices among Nigerians on a specific topic – homosexuality – within a specific domain – Twitter.

3. Decolonisation and (Alternative) Sexuality

Colonisation has had far-reaching consequences on colonised territories, with its ramifications extending beyond the physical occupation of territories. Instead, colonisation also encompassed a mental and psychological subjugation of the colonised people and reinforced supremacist and hegemonic tendencies from the colonisers. This resonates with what Fanon (2008/1952: 14) metaphorises in his acclaimed book, *Black Skin, White Masks* where he adduces that decolonisation 'is meant to liberate the black man from the arsenal of complexes that germinated in the colonial situation'. According to Mamdani (1996), relics of colonialism are sustained in labels like developed vs. developing vs. under-developed; 1st world vs. 3rd world – terms which are applied to the concretisation of the bifurcation resultant from the colonial experience. Although decolonisation is also an on-going social and academic engagement in Latin America and Asia, the current discussion focuses on the African realities. Within this perspective, we however borrow Grosfoguel's (2007: 3) perception of decolonisation as a 'critique of eurocentrism from subalternized and

silenced knowledges'. In line with this, Chitonge (2018: 21) interrogates decolonisation from the angle of its effects on knowledge production and submits that the 'dominant modes of thinking and production of knowledge across Africa are defined and dominated by a Western world view'. He further, through illustration using land and economy, expresses the conviction that the attempts at decolonising the African space have not been effective enough, particularly in view of subsisting existential challenges. Ngugi (1986), in recognition of the limitation and constraints that western world view portends for Africans, had also earlier advocated a radical reorientation – one which extends from language to naming and ultimately to decolonising the African mind from the self-alienation which colonial devaluation has caused.

While decolonisation as a movement reverberates across the African continent currently, it is not a recent ideological phenomenon. The wave which has spurred the current attempts to decolonise African lived realities kicked in fully in the 1950s. This found expression and culminated in the agitations for independence and self-rule by many nationalist African leaders. However, despite the achievement of independence and formation of governments for self-rule, many African nations were unable to keep on with the optimism which provoked their initial drive. Some of the hindrances were in the inherited colonial structures and 'invisible' puppet strings which ensured that the colonial powers were actually still in control of their former colonies. These militating factors have ensured that many African countries continue to struggle with development challenges; and for many of their citizens, there are identity issues. The colonial influences also manifest in language use, educational system, geographical divisions (national borders are still largely maintaining the colonial boundaries), and political structures. Efforts are however continually being made to decolonise these spaces. Nyamnjoh (2016) for instance draws attention to campaigns in South Africa to decolonise higher education curriculum through student movements like #Rhodes Must Fall and #Fees Must Fall. These campaigns, according to Nyamnjoh (2012: 136) are attempts at contesting the 'widespread and stubborn misrepresentation of African cultures as static, bounded and primitive, and Africa as needing the benevolence and enlightenment of colonialism and Cartesian rationalism or their residue to come alive'.

There are expectedly oppositional views to attempts at decolonisation with Gilley (2017), for instance, arguing that colonialism was a legitimate project as at the time it was undertaken and was also beneficial to the colonised peoples while it lasted. Despite this viewpoint, manifestations of the aftermath of the colonial project continue to resurface. One of such is the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter protests across the world following police complicity in the death of an African-America man, George Floyd, in the United States which has led to attempts to decolonise public spaces via the destruction as well as relocation of statues of personalities tied to slavery and colonial brutalities. The protests have also opened up debates on inter-racial relations alongside how the African continent will react to the narratives which frame its image. It is believed that public engagements and advocacies like these are targeted at raising societal and national consciousness to the need to reinvent the knowledge base in Africa as well as to spur an appreciation of African identities.

While decolonisation has been largely perceived from the academic, philosophical and inter-racial interactions – all of which are perceived as more 'serious' social

manifestations – we opine that there is need to also decolonise the framing and perception of homosexuality in Africa, using Nigeria as focus of study. This is because the normativity of heterosexuality and its hierarchization as the only 'normal' sexuality was significantly constructed by Eurocentric moralisations during the missionary stage of European disruption in many African societies. Lugones (2007), leaning on Quijano's dual terminologies of coloniality of power and modernity, has extensively interrogated the multiplicities of power negotiation that have been infused in the performance of sexuality. She argues that in many subaltern communities, the dichotomy of superiority and inferiority of gender are 'colonial introduction' (Lugones, 2007: 186). This is why, for instance, the contemporary advocacy for the normalisation of sexual identity and its diverse spectrum of categorisations, for instance, therefore continue to be largely framed as synonymous with Western 'modernisation'. Such movements are represented as, according to Segal (2008: 392), an 'acknowledgment of the injustice and suffering of others'. These viewpoints seek to reaffirm the reality that gender fluidity in social roles was a regular occurrence while people of alternative sexualities were indeed acknowledged and accommodated, even if not promoted, in many African contexts. Baisley (2015) examines the discursive frames that manifest in narratives on homosexuality in Ghana. Hinged on the exploration of the constructs of decolonisation in the expression of pro- and anti-homosexuality viewpoints, she identifies an oscillation between 'corruption' – homosexuality is foreign and immoral – and 'preservation' – sexuality in Africa was diverse and fluid in pre-colonial times – frames. She concludes however that the preservation frame has not been very successful, leading therefore to the appropriation of human rights dimension in the propagation of pro-homosexuality viewpoints. Currier (2012) further examines how gender and sexuality movements operate as decolonization movements within the African context, paying attention to data from Namibia. What is evident is that there is the need for sustained enquiry of the linguistic practices around the intersection of decolonisation and homosexuality within African contexts.

4. Methodological Background

This study is part of a larger research on Nigerian homosexual narratives on Twitter. The data for the study is currently a 114,000 word-corpus collected from 'Nigerian' Twitter and this was subsequently processed with Anthony's (2019) AntConc software. Specifically, keyword searches (Nigeria + Gay + Homosexuality + LGBTQ) were used for the data collection process. This was done between May 2019 and February 2020. These search terms helped to restrict the tweets in terms of topic and location (Nigeria). Identified tweets and threads were manually culled and saved in .txt files. This was to make the documents accessible and analysable using Anthony's AntConc (2019) software. While the software analysis affords the quantitative corpus-linguistic analyses of hybrid new language practices as set out in the aim, this was complemented by a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective. The CDA dimension allows an examination of the contributions of language to identity and ideological formations as identifiable within the context of homosexuality. Thus while Corpus Linguistics has 'come to embody methodologies for linguistic

description in which quantification … is part of the research activity' (Kennedy 1998: 7), CDA enables the identification of the ways in which language is used to construct or represent the world especially in relation to ideologies, attitudes or power relations (Baker, 2010). More essentially, we focus on how lexical choices, as topoi (strategies used to construct an argument), are used in providing sociolinguistic insight into the perception of homosexuality and what 'new' linguistic practices frame the discussions of the decolonisation of homosexuality in Nigerian digital space. Such findings are of course related to the wider socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts within which the text occurs in order to explain their manifestations.

5. "Blame Colonialism": Intersecting Homosexuality, Multilingualism and Historicisation

In what follows, we pay attention to peculiar (socio)linguistic features of homosexuality narratives by Nigerian users on Twitter. We explore how language and multilingualism are used as codes and indices of identity formation in the rendition of opinions on homosexuality. In addition, we examine namecalling and linguistic equivalence as well as the incorporation of history in remarking homosexual realities. These linguistic features are used as tools for challenging perceived neo-colonial influences which persist in framing the public perception of homosexuality in Nigeria.

5.1. Abnaturality and Homosexual Narratives

The abnaturality feature of language refers to the manipulation of language as code. Within this function, language is used for the discursive and ideological function of inclusion and/or exclusion. Alongside the obvious dominance of English language as the language for online interactions, the language is also privileged in its functions in Nigeria. It is the language of education, formal interactions, science, business and international engagements. This is reflected in the suffusion of the language in the collected tweets. However, there are identifications of non-English tweets in the data too, even if English is the matrix language. Part of the reasons for the entrenchment of the English language into Nigerian life is the fact that the country is very heterogeneous linguistically and culturally. Thus, to neutralise and assuage fears of ethnic domination, the English language, as a relic of colonialism and an exoglossic language, has been elevated to perform the hitherto identified functions. In the data, Hausa represents the most realisations of non-English language. Exemplifications with their English translations in brackets are presented and discussed.

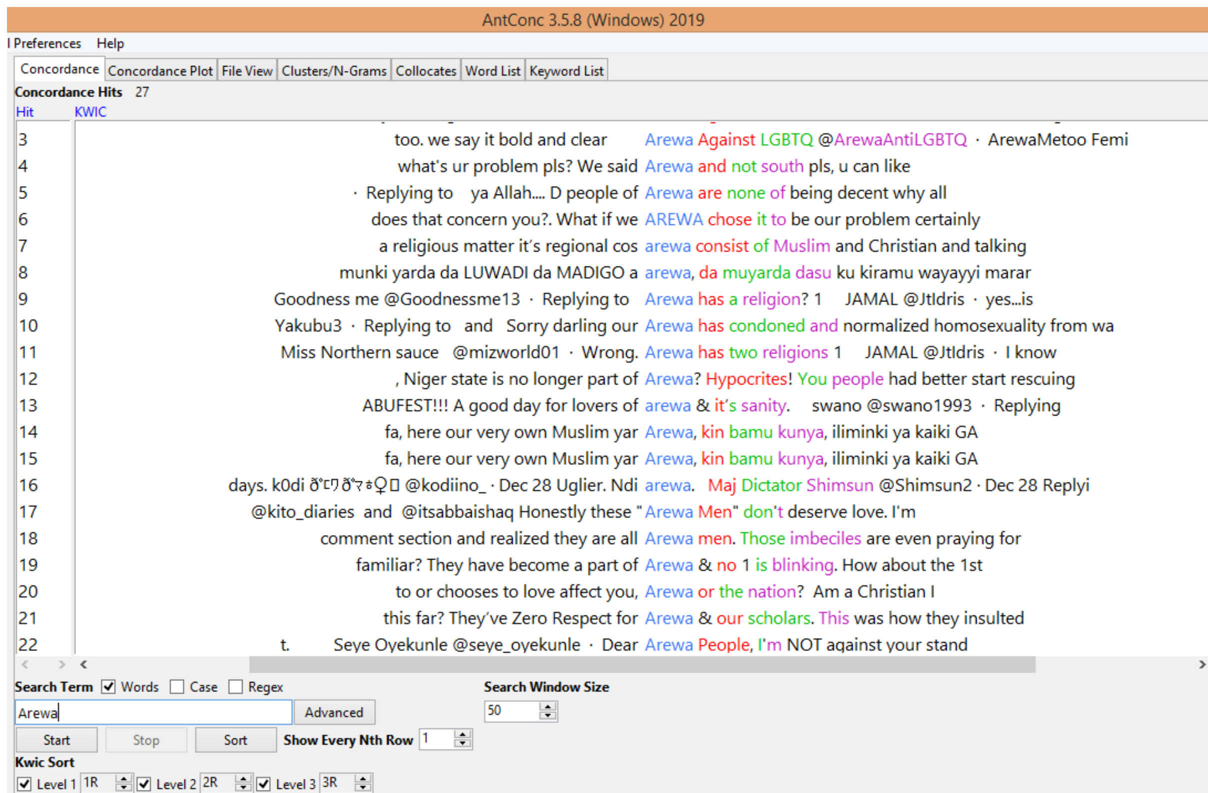

Figure 1: 'Arewa' in the data

In these realisations, one recognises identity negotiation based on language politics. Many of these exemplifications were realised during the #ArewaAgainstLGBT trend on Twitter. During this period which lasted between July 20 and July 26, 2019, Nigerian Northerners expressed their displeasure with and rejection of homosexuality in Nigeria. Relying on an oppositional ideological framing hinged on religion, culture and region, there is the assertion of the belief that the South (which is mainly Christian and liberal Muslim) is more embracing of perceived Western influences and this has reflected in its tolerance of homosexual practices. The Arewa nomenclature, as represented in Figure 1, thus becomes an identity frame from which this ideological stance is negotiated. By identifying themselves as an Other, they advocate for insularity from perceived moral degeneration, which homosexuality is assumed to foster. Hit 7 from Figure 1 indeed asserts that the opposition to homosexuality transcends religious leanings since Arewa represents the entire region, including Christians and Muslims. Thus Arewa is adjudged as being 'decent' (Hit 5), while homosexuality is regarded as a 'problem' (Hit 6). Alongside the regional peculiarity, which the designation 'Arewa' represents, language is also used to assert an in-group orientation, as exemplified below:

1. "Wuta bal ball Sakar will surely be your destination" (Hell fire will be your destination)
2. "Ga sako na musamma ga Musulumai yayin da suka gan ana sabawa Allaah. Masu ganin cewa 'yancin mutum ne a bar shi yayi luwadi LGBTQ" (A message for Muslims at the period they disobey God, who are saying doing dirty(Gay) is part of human rights. LGBTQ)
3. "Yarima kabarsu kawai. Yaran dujjal ne dukansu. Dik acikin alamomin tashin kiyama ne. Bazasu ji harga lokachin da hazabar Allah zai kai gare su" (Yarima just leave them they are sons/daughters of Satan, it is also part and signs of end of time and they will suffer from God punishment)

4. "Allaah yashiryeki... Allaah ya fahimtar dake addini. Allaah yaganar dake illar wannan al'amarin da kikeyi. Amin Yaa Allaah.." (May God forgive you for the sins you been committing)
5. "Please ki dawo Nigeria and do gay rights, in ba ki kwana kirikiri ba !" (Please come back to Nigeria and do dirty (Gay) right! You will sleep in kirikiri)

The use of Hausa language to render these perceptions serves as a means of exclusion since the discursive exchange occurred within the context of Northern vs. Southern Nigeria. It is used to establish a sense of moral, cultural and linguistic homogeneity in Northern Nigeria. Seeking to deepen the narrative of maintenance of purity and curtailing of undue external infiltration, Tweets 1 to 5 are expressions of the perceptions of homosexuality in Nigeria. Tweets 1 to 4 frame homosexuality from the religious perspective – *God, end of time, sin, punishment*, *Satan* – thus rendering its performance as a sinful disobedience to God which will be punished with 'Hell fire'. This viewpoint is sustained with opinions like: 'Homosexuality is bad. God destroyed soddom and Gomorrah cos of it'. Tweet 5 however performs its opposition from the legal angle and recommends jail time for whoever is caught doing 'gay'. 'Kirikiri' is one of the most notorious prisons in Nigeria and is usually reserved for hardened criminals. Therefore, putting a homosexual in such a prison on the basis of their sexuality is represented as a worthy punishment. The commenter also vaunts the legal criminalisation of homosexuality and uses it as a threat against the homosexual community in Nigeria.

In addition, it is necessary to point out that the linguistic realisations and the overt opposition to the acceptance of homosexuality is couched within a narrative that attempts decolonisation. Through sentential realisations like: 'Worthless journalist paid to do trash job in Nigeria by the western media' and 'We true Africans are not homosexual. The undiluted and real Africans are not homosexual' for instance, homosexuality is presented as a foreign or western export which Western countries seem to be forcing on non-Western countries (Thoreson, 2008). The concern of coercion is not unfounded though: there were widespread outcries in 2013 over claims that the UK and the US had made the legalisation of homosexuality a prerequisite for accessing foreign aid for many African countries. Thus, by maintaining their antagonistic stance, the commenters as a demographic stipulate the need to preserve their identity as Africans and Muslims. This stance tallies with Baisley's (2015) identification of 'corruption' ideology in Ghanaian narratives on homosexuality, where homosexuality is challenged and rebuffed as a (post)colonial introduction into the African society. This is also reinforced by old western literature, for instance the 1987 British film *White Mischief,* which documents the hedonism and debauchery of British aristocracy in Kenya during colonial times and portrays Kenyans, and by extension, represents African societies as pure and untainted. By putting up resistance, anti-homosexuality advocates challenge homosexual practices as being absent in pre-colonial Africa and further uphold their viewpoint by referencing the tenets of hitherto European/Arab religious codes which have been appropriated in the Nigerian society. It is therefore ironical however that the ideological framing of homosexuality as foreign is premised on a wrong perception. Studies have shown that homosexuality and its practices were indeed part of the social fabrics of many African societies, including within the Hausa/Fulani-dominated Northern Nigeria. The existence of the

Yan Dauda, a group of homosexual and transvestite men who were fully integrated in the Hausa/Fulani society and who still thrive reasonably, is testament of this reality (Gaudio, 2009). According to Oyeniyi and Olubowale (2014), the Yan Daudu are men who act like women, and who have peacefully existed for centuries within what now makes up Northern Nigeria. The identified displacement of historical realities further foreground the necessity of interrogating the past in order to clarify the diverse perceptions of same-sex relations in pre-colonial Nigerian societies. Amadiume (1997) also exemplifies the presence of the possibilities of same-sex relations in pre-colonial Igboland, Nigeria, using the village of Nnobi and the practice of female husbands (women marrying other women). She however clarifies that while women may indeed 'marry' other women, it is not exactly for sexual relations but for lineage preservation as the younger woman is expected to bring forth children in the name of the older woman. The younger woman is also expected to provide companionship. Exploring the varied conceptualisations and practices of same-sex relations in pre-colonial Nigerian societies form part of the decolonisation process being advocated within the domain of sexuality. As Baisley (2015) observes, the preservation ideology acknowledges and upholds the diversity of sexuality in several traditional African societies. Thoreson (2008: 688) also asserts this stance and perceives the decolonisation of African sexuality to be focused on the criticism of 'colonial taboos' and the celebration of 'sexual diversity as inherently African'.

5.2. Namecalling and Linguistic Equivalence

Namecalling and other forms of deprecative appellations constitute parts of the digital ecology (Van Hee *et al*, 2015; Schmidt and Wiegand, 2017; Wulczyn, *et al*, 2017). Such discriminatory expressions have been referred to as flaming and constitute, oftentimes, ways through which linguistic terrorism is enacted. Linguistic terrorism, to Christoffersen (2019), is a biased use of language to discriminate against or censure a group of people. Unsurprisingly and reflective of how rife homophobic verbal abuse is globally (Epstein, 1994; Fontaine, 1997; Thurlow, 2001), the Nigerian homosexual community is subjected to online diatribes and namecalling. Some of these offensive expressions are reflective of expletives that are globally recognised with gay culture. Some exemplifications of the deprecation refer to the personality of the person being abused (or to sexual behaviour): homo, fag, gay, etc. while some others reflect attitudinal perception of homosexuality: sick, mad, dirty, stinking, wrong, indecent, etc. Baére, Zanello and Romero (2015) recognise these linguistic choices as insulting and reflective of heteronomative values. They also reinforce the stigma attached to homosexuality and help in excluding and rejecting non-heteronormative sexualities. Some more reinforcement of the attitudinal perceptions of same-sex relations in Nigeria are realisations such as 'no homo' and 'Gabriel'. While 'no homo' is used as a form of clarification when a language user suspects that their expression might be construed as betraying a possibility of their being gay, 'Gabriel' is a pun on the word 'gay' as identifiable in the first syllable. 'Gabriel' is covertly used to mock and abuse a suspected male homosexual.

Extending the narrative beyond namecalling, there are also realisations of what we have tagged 'linguistic equivalence'. This is an applied linguistic term which,

according to Panou (2013), indicates sameness between a source text/language and target text. Although in this context, the equivalence has not occurred through translation, the identified lexical items refer to indigenous expressions for homosexuality. Apart from ‘Yan Dauda’ which does not exactly have a negative connotation, ‘Liwadi’, ‘adodi’, and ‘adofuro’, which were also realised in the data, are all suggestive of perceptions which focus on private sexual practices. ‘Liwadi’ is Hausa for homosexual while ‘adodi’ and ‘adofuro’ are Yoruba. However, they all draw attention to anal penetration, which has been central to the sexualisation of homosexuality. In all of these realisations, studies have of course shown that homophobic language has negative effects on the mental health, esteem and wellbeing of marginalised communities. It is also reflective of digital bullying and its prevalence. Sadly, this might also be contributory to the rise in homophobic violence (Merrill and Wolfe, 2000) since homosexuals are consistently denigrated and dehumanised verbally. Despite this however, the realisations of these expressions also remark the fact that homosexual practices have been in existence in these societies. It is commonplace for linguistic expressions, particularly those which do not betray any form of linguistic borrowing, to be regarded as expressive of indigenous experiences and realities.

5.3. Historicisation and Remarking Homosexual Realities

According to Beiser (2016: 43-44), "‘to historicize’ means showing how something is the product of history". Therefore while previous discussions (in the preceding headings) have mostly focused on the use of language to establish identity and to foreclose the possibilities of legalising homosexuality in Nigeria, historicisation in the data is used dyadically in the narratives: to establish and validate a pro-homosexuality stance, and to substantiate the origins of homophobia within the Nigerian social establishment.

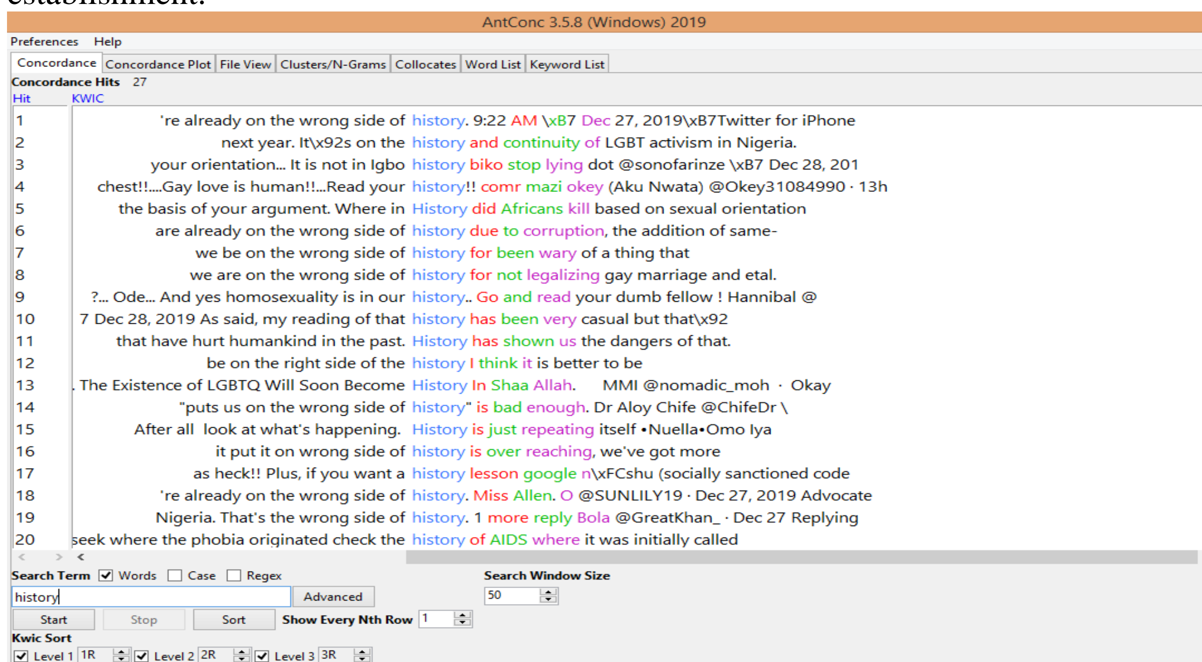

Figure 2: ‘History’ in the Data

‘History’ as identifiable in Figure 2 reveals the multiple perceptions towards homosexuality. Hits 4, 5, and 9 for instance testify to the existence of homosexuality in pre-colonial Nigerian history with Hit 5 stating that there are no records of Africans attacking or killing people because of their orientations. However while the foregoing hinge their pro-homosexuality argument on pre-colonial history, Hits 1 and 8 historicise human rights advocacy and aver that Nigeria is ‘on the wrong side of history for not legalising gay marriage’. From the anti-homosexuality front however, Hit 11 regards homosexuality as harmful to humanity while Hit 13 is prognostic in hoping that homosexuality will become history at a particular point in time.

A striking historical reference in the data refers to the Yan Dauda. The Yan Dauda, as earlier presented, are a group of usually transvestite but often homosexual men who thrived (and still thrive) in many Hausa/Fulani societies. They were overtly effeminate in their daily lives and mostly resort to performing duties and roles that were societally allocated to women. However, there have been documented cases of members of the Yan Dauda community who have heterosexual families while still maintaining their transvestite bisexuality. Realisations of references to the Yan Dauda in the corpus are:

6. “Sorry darling our Arewa has condoned and normalized homosexuality from way way back." YANDAUDU " sounds familiar? They have become a part of Arewa & no 1 is blinking. How about the 1st gay marriage in Kano 2013? Did anything change . Sis homosexuality lives here "unfortunately".”
7. “The biggest problem of Northern Nigeria is Denial. I knew about "Yan Daudu" before I knew what gays or homosexuals meant in English. The first step towards solving a problem is accepting that the problem exist in the first place. May Allah guide us all.”
8. “Yan daudu in Kano arrested on suspicion of performing same sex acts and forced to perform Muslim religious acts by morality police. Another sad and violent incursion into the lives of consenting adults. If only the morality police could check the thieving Governor.”

In the excerpts, there are references to rebut the presentation of sexual homogeneity which certain sections of the Nigerian society seek to promote as being normative. Tweet 6 not only testifies that Northern Nigeria ‘condoned and normalized homosexuality’; it also informs that the first publicised gay marriage held in Kano, a metropolitan hub in the North of Nigeria. Quoting the word ‘unfortunately’ in quotation marks also remarks the mock which is attributed to the discriminatory practices that have been visited on homosexuals in Nigeria. By drawing attention to the historical antecedents of homosexuality, they deconstruct the narrative of foreign-ness and invisibility, which have been the dominant frames of homosexuality in many Nigerian societies. Tweet 7 builds further on the notion of the historical reality of same-sex relations in Nigeria by testifying that: ‘I knew about "Yan Daudu" before I knew what gays or homosexuals meant in English’. In validating this reality, the commenter challenges the society to stop the denial. This should however not be perceived as a support of homosexuality especially as the tweep regards homosexuality as a problem. The tweep instead advocates an acknowledgement of the presence of homosexuals as this, it is believed, would assist in successfully attending to the ‘challenges’ which the practice of homosexuality poses. In Tweet 8, the reference to Yan Dauda is located within the present discrimination, stigmatization and societal moralisation against homosexuality.

There are also identifications of references to the Yoruba society and its religious practices and how these are tied to perceptions of homosexuality. In contextualising some of such realisations in the data, it is necessary to foreground scholarly explorations of same-sex relations in the Yoruba society. Drewal (1992) documents the presence and performance of gender fluidity among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, especially within ritual practices where adherents often expressed transvestitism. While asserting that there were indeed homosexual relations among the people, she submits however that 'homosexuality as a way of life is absent in Yorubaland'. She premises this conclusion on the primal value placed on procreation because 'to have no children is regarded as a great human tragedy' (Drewal, 1992: 186). This viewpoint is corroborated by Lanre-Abass (2012), who further argues that homosexuality is morally unacceptable and damaging to Yoruba, nay African, values. However this has been contested by Ajibade (2013) and Dasaolu (2019), who aver that homosexuality was never foreign to the Yoruba society. Relying on documentations from traditional oral literary sources, both authors assert that there are no documented evidence of discrimination and stigmatization of homosexuals. Rather, their existence was acknowledged, although not altogether promoted. References to history as forms of validation and argumentation were also realised in the data. Some examples of validation are:

9. "I'm intrigued at the handling of Alafin Orompoto's accession to the throne. I believe he was double gendered. Even the name supports this! Now, I must say this is mere speculation, based on a casual reading of the events surrounding his ascension to the throne."
10. "Is Jesus and Christianity part of your culture?... Ode... And yes homosexuality is in our history.. Go and read your dumb fellow !"

Tweet 9 relies on a historical allusion to royalty in the traditional Yoruba society. While Yoruba and gender scholars like Olajubu (2003) and Oyewumi (2015) identify Orompoto as a female Alaafin who performed remarkably as a warrior in the Yoruba Empire of Oyo, Matory (2005) observed that oral traditions stated that she miraculously turned to a man before ascension to the throne. This of course might be explained as a patriarchal construct, an effort at masculinizing female achievements. This could also have been performative gender fluidity which is practiced in many African societies. For instance, Amadiume (1987: 7) denies lesbian practices among the Igbo and was also vocal in her denunciation of the 'prejudiced interpretations of African situations to justify their choices of sexual alternatives'. She explains the facets of same-sex relations and marriages among Igbo women and affirms that such relationships were not sexual in practice. Instead, they were merely to perpetuate a family line or to provide company for the concerned women. Thus while historical records might be ambivalent in the recording of Orompoto, some even suggesting a transgender orientation[4], the commenter uses the reference as a way to exemplifying the presence of same-sex activities in pre-colonial Nigerian societies. Through this, there is an advocacy for the acknowledgement and acceptance of such sexual orientations in the contemporary society. This allusion to history is also sustained in Tweet 10 which juxtaposes Christianity with traditional religious and cultural

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[4] https://face2faceafrica.com/article/the-little-known-story-of-the-first-transgender-royal-of-this-nigerian-empire-who-ruled-in-1540 (last accessed 09/05/2020)

practices. By this comparison, the pervasive homophobia in Nigeria is blamed on religious and cultural infiltration. By recommending recourse to pre-colonial history and religio-cultural practices, the tweep suggests that there will be better appreciation of the presence and integration of people of alternative sexualities in traditional Nigerian societies.

There are however even more contentious references to history; and these are argued, negotiated and clarified by the interactants. An exemplification is recorded with reference to the word 'Lakiriboto' in Yoruba viz:

11. "Yoruba has a whole word for lesbians "lakiriboto". Igbos had too."

In Tweet 11, the commenter attempts to domesticate lesbianism as a practical realisation in Yorubaland, and by extension Nigeria, through recourse to a Yoruba lexical item. The tweep claims that 'lakiriboto' is equivalent to 'lesbians' and suggests that this realisation remarks the existence and practice of same-sex relations in Nigeria. However, this assertion is contested by other commenters:

12. "I am a Yoruba and lakiriboto doesn't mean lesbians."
13. "even the Lakriboto in yoruba is usually used to refer to impotency in either male or Female, but if it makes her feel good, ignorance is allowed"
14. "Even the Yoruba word is wrong . She is confused af !"

'Lakiriboto' actually means a woman with no vaginal opening, thus she is unable to have or enjoy sexual intercourse. Applied to the man, it means impotence. However, through these online discursive engagements, the interactants are not only able to clear the lexical and semantic conundrums; they are also able to educate themselves on linguistic, cultural and historical realities of same-sex relations in Nigeria. Through these varied references to history in contextualising homosexuality in Nigeria, Nigerians interact on a contemporary issue of national relevance. By engaging the intricacies of the past to understand the present, they seek to chart a path to the future. For some of the interactants, opposition to same-sex relations has been hinged on the moral codes provided by Christianity and Islam as well as perceived cultural codes. Conversations online thus become platforms where they learn to deconstruct oftentimes ingrained perceptions.

6. "Blame the Government": Intersecting Homosexuality, Decolonisation and the Nigerian Government

In the arguments for the entrenchment of the decolonisation ideology within the African context, the role of the government in nurturing and sustaining the tides is often underscored. This is because it has the powers and the agents to propagate and chart society's course. It is therefore not surprising to find that a recurring undercurrent in the digital narratives examined is how the government in drawn into the pro- and anti-homosexuality discourses. Each side of the divide represents the government as not doing enough to take charge and put action to their opinions.

6.1. Attribution of Pro- and Anti-Government Narratives

The concordance in Figure 3 shows that *government* receives many hits and usually refers to Federal Government, only in few cases to *local* (hit 67) or even *US*

government (hit 81). The possessive pronouns (*my* vs. *your*) are revealing, as usual, indicative of ideological stance and subjective distancing to the topic of homosexuality. As the language of the federal government is English, it is not surprising that the matrix language in all these tweets is English. Of course, this is also related to the fact that initially social media language has been predominantly English. However, with the expansion of mobile phones and the inclusion of African language symbols, this is changing rapidly, so that Mair (2020) calls his data-base Corpus of Cyber-Nigerian, which clearly indicates the hybridity of "cyber discourse" (incl. Nigerian Pidgin).

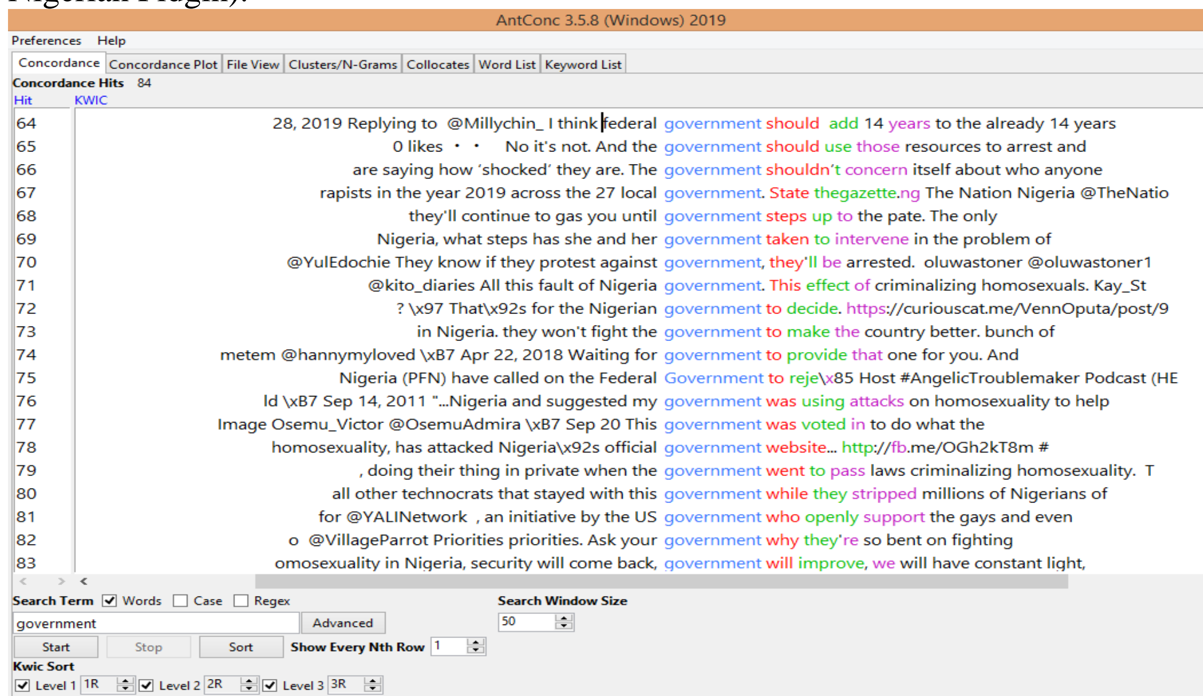

Figure 3: 'Government' in the Data

Thus while the government is framed as being complicit in homophobic violence in Hits 71, 76, 79 and 82 especially through the criminalisation of homosexuality and the empowerment and emboldening of security agents and private citizens in attacking homosexuals, Hits 64, 68 and 69 problematise homosexuality within the Nigerian context. Hit 64 advocates an extension, a doubling actually, of the jail term for confirmed homosexuals; Hit 68 requests for the government to step to the plate in silencing homosexual tendencies while Hit 69 questions whether the government has been proactive enough in combating homosexuality. Through these counter-advocacies, the government is put in the middle of the narratives. It is obvious that the government has a huge role to play in influencing the perceptions and attitudes to homosexuality. The role of governments through policies also forms the focus of Tweets 15 and 16:

15. "The fact that you don't understand that those "better opportunities" exist BECAUSE of human right **policies** (bold mine) supporting gay rights, women's rights, anti racism etc is part of the problem."
16. Some idiots support Obama! The same guy that destroyed Nigeria with his useless **policy** (bold mine)! He sanctioned Nigeria because we won't legalize homosexuality in our own Country??? Wow! Wow!

Tweet 15 suggests that ‘human rights policies’ continue to be central to homosexual advocacies. It further contrasts the role of non-discriminatory policies in ‘saner climes’ with the situation in Nigeria and opines that such policies create the ‘better opportunities’ which Nigerian migrants and members of the marginalised homosexual community enjoy abroad. In its advocacy for the acceptance of homosexuality while affirming the role of the government, the tweet thus expresses a conviction that favourable policies, especially those that embrace all sections of the Nigerian society, will only improve the condition of living in the country. The over-reaching implications of policies also form the crux of Tweet 16, which reinforces the perception that the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) of 2014 was a reaction to the United States’ sanctions because Nigeria ‘won't legalize homosexuality in our own Country’. These tweets sustain the double-edged nature of government policies as they can be used to either positively or negatively contribute to the lived experiences of queer people.

6.2. Human Rights in the Nigerian Context

As we do not want to concentrate on or give voice to the anti-homosexuality perspective, especially as it seems to be the prevailing strain in Nigeria with the rising spate of homophobic violence as a result of government criminalisation of homosexuality, we pay attention instead to how the government can ensure the enforcement of human rights and the assurance of equality among all members of the Nigerian society. In more recent times, apart from arguments that foreground the biological naturalness of homosexual orientation, human rights has become a salient detail in drumming support for ostracised and minorities groups of people (Nordberg, 2012). According to Holzhacker (2014), the integration of this dimension has occasioned significant legal and political gains for the advocacies on behalf of LGBT equality. At the heart of this movement is the United Nations’ universal human rights declaration and this is applied to national advocacies for the acceptance of citizens regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity (McGoldrick, 2016). According to Helfer and Miller (1996: 85), ‘by locating sexual orientation within a set of rights claims, lesbians and gay men can link their struggle to a tradition that has transformed a panoply of basic human needs into rights respected under domestic and international law’. This has yielded fruits as, since 1990, over 40 countries have legalised same-sex relationships, spurring the United Nations to further launch a global campaign tagged ‘Free & Equal’ to raise awareness to homophobic violence and discrimination. Helfer and Miller further highlight the role of respective governments in fostering equality when they assert that individuals as citizens have:

> …the freedom to establish intimate relationships, to enjoy sexual practices, and to develop a sexual identity takes on the quality of other fundamental and universally recognized rights…Every human being has a sexual orientation and every individual should have the ability to develop and manifest the sexual activities and identity that reflect that orientation in harmony with his or her own desires, and to receive the respect and protection of the state. (Helfer & Miller 1996: 86)

These of course are still challenges that have been unmet in the Nigerian environment. Thus, in addition and beyond the Nigerian government meeting the UN goals by

putting in place regulations and policies to protect the rights of marginalised communities, adequate public sensitization to re-orientate perceptions of same-sex relations and to stem the tides of violence and discrimination against non-heterosexual Nigerians must be undertaken. Through these activities, an equitable society can be built.

7. Conclusion

This article has been concerned with an examination of the linguistic practices by Nigerians in discourses on homosexuality online. This has been engaged with attention paid to how these practices reveal attempts at outreaching for the decolonisation of knowledge on homosexuality. Through the identified features, we identify how the interactants present and assert their identities and ideological stance within the discursive field. In the recourse to Hausa language, there is a manifestation of regional cum identity politics in the negotiation of opinions on homosexuality in Nigeria. Hausa language is the lingua franca in Northern Nigeria; it is also a language with significant international use. By tweeting in Hausa and trending the Arewa hashtag, there is a dichotomisation of the perspectives to homosexuality – presenting Northern Nigeria as more opposed to homosexual practices. Of course this is not essentially reflective of the true state of events. Actually, all regions of the country were united in the support of the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act by the federal government. In navigating the perspectives to homosexuality, we also identify the appropriation of namecalling, linguistic equivalence and historicisation in the data. While namecalling is usually found within contexts that seek the perpetuation of homophobia, linguistic equivalence and historicisation attempt to decolonise existing knowledge on the presence and attitudes to same-sex relationships in pre-colonial Nigerian (African) societies. They also through these strategies advocate a revitalisation of these pre-colonial norms in negating the pervasive anti-homosexuality narratives.

As an aside within this discussion, one identifies the limitations of and concerns over the role of literacy and social class in social media accessibility. The preponderance of English in the narratives brings into focus the pervasive role of the English language in Nigeria. Taiwo (2008, 2010) for instance, in contextualising why English is the matrix language for digital engagement in Nigeria, remarks on the cultural constraints which manifest in the realisation of greetings and prayers as contexts of the use of indigenous language expressions. This effectively means that cultural restrictions have implications on the language use online. Beyond the prestige associated with its use, the English language also avails internationalisation especially in view of the borderlessness of the Internet. In addition, technological constraints like input keyboards, which thankfully are being constantly remediated, often inhibit the use of indigenous languages online. However, while one may allege that social media platforms are elitist since most Nigerian users are educated youth with enough financial wherewithal to afford Internet connectivity, the identifications of multilingualism as well as references to historical realities constitute ways in which indigenisation is showcased and energised with queer narratives. Identity construction in Nigeria is thus clearly embedded in ideological frames of anti-colonial and anti-

governmental discourses that are identifiable not only in language use but also in attitudes towards homosexuality in Nigeria.

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