

Gender, Sexuality and Caribbean Diversity¹

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Introduction

It is my honour and privilege to speak with you today and to have a conversation about these complex issues which are sometimes challenging to confront but which are important to us in both personal and professional ways. I bring greetings from The University of the West Indies, Institute for Gender and Development Studies and the UWI St. Augustine Campus.

This event is of special significance for me for a number of reasons. First, I did all of my graduate work in The Netherlands where I interacted with many persons from Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, developing close friendships and collaborations. Second through my membership of CAFRA – The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action, I collaborated and worked together with many feminists and women's movement activists of Suriname of an earlier generation, actually my generation so it is great to be back and to work with a new generation and to be able to mentor and ensure that the future is a good one for all of us.

Of direct relevance to this particular workshop is the long history of interest in the development of Women's and Gender Studies at Anton de Kom University. How many meetings we have had, visits from university personnel etc. over the past 25 years so now finally it is great to see this Institute finally up and running and hosting us from the rest

of the region. I also want to mention here that in the early days of the UWI Women and Development Studies Group (WDSG). There was much collaboration with the Women's Studies Group of the University of Guyana so it is great that that Institute is also on track and that we at the UWI can share in this developmental process with you.

The UWI-IGDS was institutionalized in September 1983 after eleven years of lobbying, small scale teaching, research, seminars and publications under the auspices of the WDSG. One of the reasons for this delay was the insistence of the founders that the IGDS should be interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary and so not located within any one faculty. In so doing it challenged all the rules of disciplinary organisation upon which universities have been built for centuries. But this afforded the IGDS the autonomy to develop under its own administrative and disciplinary control. This has allowed us to be innovative, creative and activist but always insisting on the highest standards of scholarship and learning. We therefore bring to your project over 36 years of work in this area.

Today the IGDS operates through three campus units – Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago and a Regional Coordinating Office in the Vice-Chancellery which houses all the regional offices. On all campuses we offer undergraduate minors and one major (in Jamaica) and graduate courses – Post-graduate diplomas, M.Sc., M.Phil. and

Ph.Ds. The online journal – *The Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* has become a mechanism for sharing our scholarship and also for bringing together Caribbean-related scholarship and bring it to a global audience. This year we celebrate the 25th University of the IGDS and the 70th Anniversary of the UWI. Over this period the IGDS has made important contributions to education and gendered knowledge generally, it has produced persons with in-depth expertise, it has been a site for research for members of the society more widely and a resource base for students at all levels, governments, women's and men's organisations, other ngo's and international organisations. The IGDS was also key in the introduction of masculinity studies in the region and would welcome more opportunities to work with national and regional organisations on these issues. Most importantly the IGDS has been an activist institution, a partner in transformational issues e.g. gender and education, gender-based violence, child sexual abuse and issues of sex/gender diversity and identity e.g. in the more recent activism around the historic ruling on the Buggery Laws in Trinidad and Tobago. This leads us to today's presentation.

Caribbean Diversity

The Caribbean is united by a history of colonial conquest, decimation of indigenous peoples, large-scale forced or bonded migration of peoples from other parts of the world; establishment of forced labour systems of enslavement and indenture, the plantation system, its geographical

location close to the United States and the related geo-political influences as well as the its relationship to the Caribbean Sea. At the same time, it has always been understood as a diverse region with both intra-regional diversity – language, colonial background, economy, ethnic composition etc. Today our countries are at varying levels of political sovereignty, some are colonies, and others are overseas departments while an increasing number are independent while a few are republics. The diversity of approaches to gender and sexuality have been strongly influenced by colonial ideology and legal systems so for example the experiences of the Dutch Caribbean differed somewhat from that of the Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean. At the same time there is a strong imperative towards collective action for the common good and willingness despite challenges, to work towards a shared vision. These two imperatives co-exist and together feed our identities as Caribbean people but also feed the tensions in our very souls.

These imperatives towards unity in diversity are also represented in some of our national mottos that seek to encapsulate our yearning for unity in diversity. In Guyana for example, the national motto is - *One People, One Nation, One Destiny*, while Jamaica often perceived as a solid unitary country – certainly when contrasted with my own country Trinidad and Tobago; its national motto '*Out of Many one People*' provides a recognition of diversity and difference even as it calls for

people to come together despite this. Similarly, the Trinidad and Tobago motto – *Together we Aspire, Together we Achieve* can be seen as a similar call to rise above the existing diversity towards a collective vision and common action towards a common good.

Binaries in Western Cosmologies

In this presentation I seek to re-connect with this underlying regional recognition of diversity and difference to challenge many every day assumptions about normalcy. I seek to peel away the layers of myth and prejudice surrounding a subject area that is quite complex and largely misunderstood as I explore the concepts of sex/gender identity and diverse gender expression and the different ways in which these are experienced cross-culturally and within our region.

Generally, in the discourse on gender and sexuality as well as in everyday understandings, masculinity and femininity, male and female are understood as binary opposites - to be masculine is to be not-feminine to be male is to be not female. Which means that if femininity changes as it has been doing in recent times, then masculinity also needs to change.

Indeed, it can be argued that the male/female masculine-feminine binary is one of the central thought patterns of the Western culture and ideology, an ideology that has become hegemonic throughout the world

through colonial conquest and more recently through a globalized media and popular culture. Some would argue that it is the binary upon which all other binaries are understood. It is not only a binary however but an asymmetrical one: asymmetrical in power, value and privilege, something also characteristic of other binaries. Therefore, the value attached to masculinity and maleness is greater than that attached to femininity and femaleness and as a result, masculinity always has to be proven.

The Sex-Gender Binary

The sex/gender binary is another more recent construction along these lines. It emerged as a way of differentiating the socially constructed ways of expressing male-female differences i.e. masculinity and femininity (gender) from the anatomical, physiological or biological differences of male and female (sex). Kate Young a central figure of the School that conceptualised this understanding of 'gender' explained it in this way:

...by using gender we are using a shorthand term which encodes a very crucial point: that our basic social identities as men and as women are socially constructed rather than based on fixed biological characteristics. In this sense we can talk about societies in which there are more than two genders (and in an anthropological record there are several such societies) as well as

the historical differences in masculinity (femininity) in a given society (Young, 1988:98, emphasis added).

The fluid character of the concept 'gender' allows us to understand cases where one's physical sexed body (anatomy/biology) and gendered behaviour (gender expression) do not fit as easily into these binary divisions. This concept also allows for and recognise the existence of persons and of behaviours that do not fit neatly within the categories of 'male' and 'female' or masculine and feminine. In many ways the ever-growing list of categories – LGBTQI... are inadequate to properly encompass the complexities of sex/gender identities and sex/gender diversity.

Although for purposes of international law and national legal systems clear distinctions and definitions are required, as noted in the 2012 OAS Document – "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression: Key Terms and Standards:

"From a perspective of sociology and psychology there has been great emphasis on the fluidity of identity construction and self-definition: working from this perspective, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are not static qualities in a person; on the contrary, they are dynamic, and depend on the construction that one makes of oneself and upon social perceptionⁱ. (OEA/Ser.G, CP/CAAP-INF. 166/12, 23 April 2012)."

Binaries have a way of simplifying things but life is usually much more complex. “A cross-cultural perspective makes it clear that there are many different ways that societies can organise their thinking about sex, gender and sexuality.’ (Nanda, 2000:1).” Serena Nanda reminds us that cultures construct their sex and gender systems differently and they do not always divide neatly into male and female, man and woman. Yet because ideas of sex, gender and sexuality are at the core of individual identities it is extremely difficult to dislodge our feelings and ideas about them (Nanda, 2000:1). In many of our societies therefore the dominant practice has been to suppress that which challenges the hegemonic world view and bury them underground. What we do know however is that this did not make them go away just into the margins of our societies.

A Note on Concepts and Terminologies

A range of terminologies have emerged to address this complex area of human experience, what is important to note is that in many parts of the pre-colonial world different concepts and terminologies existed which reflected their own indigenous ways of comprehending and experiencing sex/gender variation and diversity.

Heterosexism and Heteronormativity

The term **heterosexism** - *refers to attitudes and behaviours based on the assumption that being heterosexual is the only 'normal' and 'correct' way of*

life, and is in fact superior to the alternatives.

A related concept is **heteronormativity** which *refers to the tendency to structure the organisation of society and its systems in a way that takes for granted a heterosexual ordering of society*. It is important to note that heteronormativity affects not only persons of alternative sexualities and sex/gender identities but also many of us who consider ourselves 'normal'. I would also like to add that many countries of the global South, including the Caribbean have been negatively affected by these colonial notions of heteronormativity which include within them notions of power, hierarchy and female subordination.

Heteronormativity and Caribbean Family Systems

The area of family and domestic relationships is one good example of heteronormativity. The understanding of Caribbean family forms, especially Afro-Creole Caribbean family forms as deviant, has meant that there has seldom been an attempt to understand or analyse these on their own terms. They have often been understood as deviant forms of the European norm and since the 19th Century have been the subject of consistent attempts to make them conform; with limited success and much negative impact. How different Caribbean social life would have been if these family forms were understood as having a structure and dynamic of their own.

Western-oriented family systems assume the core relationship to be the **conjugal** relationship between one woman and one man usually in marriage. Afro-Creole Caribbean (and in many instances African-New World) family forms therefore have come in for criticism as they often did not conform to this heteronormative structure. This is interesting as while they are often based on heterosexual intimacy; their structure in many instances is not centred on the core of the heterosexual couple. Rather its core could be a constellation of kinship relationships among women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or between women and male kin e.g. with sons often living in their mothers' homes even after they fathered children, or with brothers or uncles living in the home.²

Unlike Euro-American systems Afro-Creole Caribbean forms have traditionally been informally matrilineal and consanguine, i.e. with blood relations especially on the mother's side having stronger significance than conjugal marriage or partnership ties which were heterosexual. The informal matrilinearity in these households means that consanguine ties to one's family of origin tend to be more significant than the conjugal ties of marriage. As a result, for example, women's and men's family responsibility often extends to matrilineal kin and men's loyalty to their mothers could often be greater than to their wives and partners. This is immortalized in the calypso of Lord Kitchener's 'Wife and Mother':

² The terms developed by colonial officials and scholars to refer to this type of family e.g. denuded, matrifocal, matriarchal, mother-centred, grandmother families etc., all reflect the view that women are inordinately central to this form of family.

If your Mother and your Wife are drowning, I want to know
which one of them you would be saving?? Chorus – I can always
get another wife but I can never get another mother in my life...

Indo-Caribbean³ family forms have been traditionally quite different although this is changing. The heterosexual couple was embedded in a patriarchal patrilineal lineage system with extended kin. Marriage was a rite de passage to adulthood. The presence of clear male leadership meant that it conformed more easily to the heteronormative ideal. At the same time as we will discuss later, India as with other Asian countries has a much greater acceptance of sex/gender diversity, something which is becoming more manifest today with the increasing acceptance of third gender categories. Chevannes (2001) found greater acceptance of sex/gender diversity and gender expression among Indo-Caribbean communities that he studied in Guyana.

At the Fourth World Congress on Women in Beijing in 1995, not surprisingly therefore, it would be the Caribbean delegates who led the arguments for language in the Declaration that recognised the diversity of family forms globally. This resulted in the inclusion of the sentence in paragraph 29 that:

³ In Suriname this group is usually referred to as Hindustani

“In different cultural, political and social systems, various forms of the family exist (1995,12).”

a statement that is now apparently under threat in some global fora.

The reach and impact of heterosexism and heteronormativity therefore go beyond sexual activity per se to prescribe wider structures and systems in the society.

Sex/Gender Identity

The concept of identity is an interesting one for studies of gender and sexuality. It could be argued that sex/gender identity is probably the most fundamental identity that we develop. Of course, when we are born we have no sense of this but those around us do and relate to us accordingly. Identity therefore is a perception of oneself or a sense of self in relation to others. Although the separation of sex and gender was and continues to be a useful analytical distinction, an individual's sex/gender identity formation it is not so easy to distil into separate parts.

The Yogyakarta Principles

- ◎ D 18 ...*gender identity is each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or*

function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.

Additionally, while we may understand ourselves as sexed i.e. as biologically or anatomically male or female and begin to recognise the gendered characteristics of behaviours, our experience of ourselves as sexual virtually goes unremarked until it is brought to our attention. This may be done negatively as in “don’t do that” or encouragingly as when Caribbean mothers and aunts wiggle baby boys’ penises accusing them of being “just like their father” or of smiling when women enter the room - evidence that they “like woman” – in other words assuring themselves of the baby’s heterosexuality. Indeed, in our region much sexist behaviour is perceived as welcome assurance that our son is ‘okay.’

Gender Expression

The Yogyakarta Principles

E 21 ...Gender expression has been defined as “the outward manifestations of the cultural traits that enable a person to identify himself/herself as male or female, according to the patterns that, at a particular moment in history, a given society defines as gender appropriate.

(OAS, Sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression: Key terms and standards, OEA/Ser.G, 23, April 2012).

In addition to clear identities as male or female, persons are also required to behave and act or perform their gender in ways appropriate to their sex. **This refers to all of us who perform and express our gender identity at every moment consciously or subconsciously.**

Acceptable forms of Gender Expression differ from society to society and from one generation to the other. [in Africa is not uncommon to see men walking holding hands or women holding hands in India, the latter was possible when I was very small but with the increasing 'gay panic' this non-sexual act took on a new meaning].

Until the last three-four decades however, the distinction between sex and gender had not been made therefore what we now call gender-appropriate behaviour was perceived of as natural to one's sex. This was true of many societies, where certain behaviours were accepted as naturally related to one's sex. The main difference occurs however in relation to how different societies understood and dealt with persons whose behaviour did not conform to these binary divisions whatever they were.

These variations in meanings and practice result in what Serena Nanda called **Gender Diversity** or **Gender Variation**. Depending on the society, such persons may be treated with ambivalence, fear, ridicule, awe or as persons with special sacred significance. In some societies e.g. Hindu India, spaces exist where such persons could be located as third gender categories, such as the Hijra or Kothi phenomena; although these

are constantly being re-positioned. In others the strict definition into binary opposites precludes such ambivalent spaces from emerging resulting in such persons being hidden, invisible or underground. Interestingly for many of these marginalised persons sex work often becomes the main economic option.

Intersexuality

This has always existed but has been usually shrouded in silence, medically treated or ignored. In the past they were referred to as hermaphrodites. This term was initially used to refer to persons who were born with ambiguous genitalia. In such cases medical and psychological opinion in North America and Europe in the 20th Century, stressed that gender identity was acquired and fixed early in life, therefore early surgical intervention was/is recommended in order to allow for early sex assignment. Today there is a growing recognition that sex differences may exist even if not visible in genitalia. A recent study found that the frequency of intersexuality is greater than commonly believed. In the US for example it has been cited as 1:2000 and in Israel as 1:1000 (Meoded Danon and Yanay, 2016:57)

This approach was challenged in the late 20th Century as intersexed persons protested and rejected what they saw as genital mutilation. Especially if done at an early age before they develop their sex/gender identity. They accuse the medical profession of acting as a “gatekeeper

of the Euro-American sex/gender dichotomy" by surgically "normalizing" those who do not fit and of affecting their future capacity for sexual sensitivity (Nanda, 2000:99-100).

Some intersexed persons may make the decision to undertake surgical and hormonal treatment to re-align their bodies with their gender identities. Bodily reassignment is a choice that many individuals who can afford make; usually later in life in order to achieve what they feel to be integrity between their sexed bodies and their gender identity. In many ways this reflects the continued power of the sex/gender binary and the difficulties of living in a situation of sex/gender ambiguity.

Homophobia and Related Concepts

The term **Homophobia** refers to the *fear of homosexuality; not the fear of Homosexual People but the fear of Homosexuality;*

- *This includes the fear of being associated with homosexuals;*
- *The fear of being mistaken for one;*
- *Fear of 'catching it' or 'being spoiled'*

In many parts of the Caribbean, homophobia is extended to all forms of sex/gender diversity. In many parts of the region, all manifestations of sex/gender diversity are referred to as homosexuality, or 'gayness' The global terminologies – LGBTI have been adapted and incorporated into local use in ways that may be peculiar to local culture, language and

history. David Murray notes e.g. the specific use of the terms 'queens' and 'gays' in Barbados. While traditional indigenous identities and terminologies have been marginalised or dubbed/re-worked in light of the new terminologies (Murray,2009:5). In addition, the umbrella term 'trans' is used to encapsulate the range of identities and practices and including transgenderism, transsexualism, transvestitism etc. etc.

Homophobia affects everyone not only persons of alternative sex/gender identities and sexualities; It reminds us to watch how we dress, walk, move our hands, who we talk to, which places we frequent; It affects what tasks our children do at home, and if they stay indoors or 'lime' outdoors etc. Much research suggests that homophobia affects young males approach to education which is now perceived as a feminine activity. In many parts of the region e.g. the street is identified as the space for makes and the house or *yard* (Jamaica) for women. Mothers could be blamed for keeping boys too much in the house. Trinidadian scholar Wesley Crichlow reflected:

"It was my mother who would chastise my behaviour when she thought it was stereotypically feminine; "Stop acting like a girl." she would say. She had very clearly defined gender roles for her children which decided the chores that she would assign us..."

I always felt my mother knew that I was a buller and hoped that religion or a heterosexual relationship would cure me, so that I could hide from her. She was very particular about where I went, who called for me and my clothes and hairstyle...I never imagined that I could fool her, and I therefore always felt great pressure in her presence, which reminded me of her

religious beliefs and their attitude towards same-sex practices (Crichlow, 2004:194-195)."

Homophobia as a Health Issue

The fear of homosexuality has implications for the behaviour and life outcomes of almost all men, and increasingly today young men in the Caribbean. Young men have increasing demands to prove that they are small men and not batty men as mentioned in the dancehall lyrics. Male on male violence in addition to other purposes, serves to defend ones' honour and prove that they are not homosexual, or violence against other males who cross gender boundaries through their – gender expression, gender performance, or simply doing well at school to show that they too can "Bun down Babylon." (Lisa Crooms, 2009).

Hyper-heterosexuality also leads to risky (sexual) behaviour and the psychological stress of living with sex/gender diversity leads to specific health needs of Sex/Gender Diverse groups and related mental health challenges - rejection, depression, anxiety, self harm; alcohol and drug Addiction;

Colonialisms and Sexualities

What we do know is that in virtually every part of the non-Western world entered into by the European colonialists there was some form of sex/gender variation which was vilified, attacked, demonised, pushed

underground, and eventually closeted or made to disappear. In most instances these were practices, behaviours, part of everyday life or part of ritual and ceremony, not necessarily identities. A few days ago Prime Minister Theresa May apologised to prime ministers and officials of the Commonwealth (comprising former British colonies) for saddling them with the backward laws relating to sexual behaviour and orientation instituted during the colonial period, laws which Britain herself had already got rid of. Today, many ex-British colonies in Asia e.g. Nepal, India and Pakistan are reversing these laws to recognise what they describe as 'third sex' or 'third gender' categories that had been criminalised during the colonial period

Conceptualizing Sex-Gender Diversity in the Caribbean

In a 2009 review of scholarship on Caribbean sexualities, Kamala Kempadoo noted that a growing scholarship on sexualities was emerging in the region, although this was still limited. For Kempadoo sexual praxis, i.e. how sexualities are practiced and expressed emerged as the key theme in Caribbean scholarship on sexualities. She argued that in this region, "sexuality does not form a primary basis of social identification and therefore the focus has been on behaviours, activities and relations. **Additionally, she notes: "the specification of sexual identity groups often elides the very varied sexual arrangements in the region and can work to hinder broader understandings of how Caribbean peoples relate sexually** (Kempadoo,2009: 2). Atluri, and

others call for a nuancing of the contemporary rhetoric of the homophobic Caribbean, arguing that this: ...is frequently rooted in a neo-colonial paternalism which misses the often-untranslatable way in which sexualities operate in non-Western contexts. (Atluri,2009: 2)."

One of the most significant contributions on this theme has been Gloria Wekker's classic analysis of mati work in Suriname. Papers based on her doctoral dissertation (Wekker, 1993/1994: 1999) have become a master narrative so to speak for post-colonial analyses of same-sex practice. In the earlier publication, Wekker describes **mati-work**, an indigenous approach to same-sex relations among women in her native Suriname contrasting it with attitudes among African-American lesbians in North America. She notes the early recording of this phenomenon by a high-ranking Dutch official A.J. Schimmelpenninck van den Oye who in 1912, had this to say:

...I am referring to the sexual communion between women themselves ('matiplay'), which has, as I gather, augmented much in the past decades, and alas! penetrated deeply into popular customs.

(-). It is not only that young girls and unattached women of various classes make themselves guilty of this, the poorest often going and living together in pairs to reduce the cost of house rent and food for each of them, but women who live with men, and even school girls, do the same, following the example of others

(Ambacht, 1912: 98-99 cited in Wekker, 1993/1994:55).

This phenomenon was also documented and commented upon by later Dutch colonials and researchers (Herskovits, 1936; Buschens, 1974; Janssens and van Wetering, 1985; Van Lier, 1986). Richard and Sally Price documented this use of the term *mati* to refer to men of the Saramaka maroons also in Suriname who had been shipmates in the middle passage, and the term *Sibi* to refer to a special friendship among Saramaka women (Wekker, 1993/1994:56).

What is interesting is that features of mati culture - a form of homosocial and homoerotic bonding among women that is not exclusive, mentioned in older sources have been preserved to this day. These couples often involve an older and a younger woman who would typically have children and maintain ties with men, either as husbands, lovers, brothers or sons (Wekker, 1999:121). In the early 1990s Wekker observed:

There were, for example female couples who wore "parweri": the same dress, women who embroidered handkerchiefs with loving texts in silk for each other: "lobi kon" (love has come) and "lobi n'e prati" (love does not go away), women who courted each other by means of special ways of folding and wearing their anyisa, headcloths, and finally the widespread institution of "lobi singi" (love songs)...It is furthermore, important to note that a mati career, for most women, is not a unidirectional path: thus it is very possible that a woman takes a man for a lover, after having had several relationships with women. It is not unusual for a woman

to have a female and a male lover at the same time. Nor does mati life imply restriction to one partner... (Wekker: 1993/1994:56-57).

In the more recent piece, Wekker (1999) contends that Mati unlike 'gay' and 'lesbian' identity, is not a monolithic category. Indeed, it is a practice or possibly praxis and is normally spoken of in an active tense as doing *mati work*. Mati practitioners therefore perceive of themselves as engaging in behaviour as opposed to having an identity. This kind of sentiment is also evident in the original notion of *zami*, the french creole term⁴ for same – sex loving among women. In those parts of the region where the term was or is used it was also part of an active rather than passive noun. People spoke of 'making *zami*' or 'to make *zami*', never of being *Zami* until Audre Lorde made it her name (Lorde (1982). Today *zami* has become an equivalent of lesbian.

Wekker puts forward the notion of multiplitious subjectivities arguing that in contrast to the dichotomous, either/or hierarchical thinking of the western system where one is either homosexual or heterosexual, with bisexuality "muddying the clear waters" – In what Wekker calls a Creole (possibly African-influenced universe) she argues:

A person is conceived of as multiple, malleable, dynamic and possessing male and female elements. Furthermore, all persons are inherently conceived of as sexual beings...It is possible to talk about the self in masculine and in feminine terms, in singular and in plural forms, and in terms of third person constructions,

⁴ Derived from the French – Les Amis , Lise Winer, *Dictionary of the English-Creole of Trinidad and Tobago*, McGill/Queens University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2009: p.986

regardless of gender of the gender of the speaker (Wekker, 1999:1330.

This approach is supported by Arnhem and other Africanist scholars who argue for “the importance of not only exposing dichotomies but also dissolving them – effectively making them evaporate in order to create a space for radically different lines of thinking. (Arnhem, 2004:9).”

What is also interesting is that *Mati*, *Sibi* and *Zami* all come from words for ‘friend’ *mati* from the Dutch – *Maatje*; *zami* from the French – *Les Amis*. Similarly, the word ‘friending’ was used in Trinidad and Tobago and Grenada to describe a long-term non-married sexual relationship. This suggests that close and reciprocal friendship was at the core of these relationships.

In his ethnographic study of Gender socialization in Anglophone Caribbean communities Barry Chevannes (2001) noted the strong sanctions against male homosexuality in particular among Afro-Caribbean communities. He found much less anxiety however in the Indo-Guyanese community of Overflow. He posits that this anxiety around and hostility towards male homosexuality among Afro-Caribbean males, reflects the growing anxiety and insecurity about “achieving traditional terms of domination over women” whereas Indo-Caribbean men located in much clearer patriarchal family structures

were less challenged by the feelings of insecurity in relation to women (Chevannes 2001:220).

Living and working in Trinidad and Tobago I suggest that much more work is required in examining this area. Indo-Caribbean society, although highly patriarchal, also exists within a tradition of androgynous deities and a more open acceptance of androgynous practice in social, religious and cultural settings. Nanda observes that in India, despite the central importance of the “complimentary opposition of the sexes,” there is an acknowledgement of a range of sexual variation, ambiguities and transformations, such that:

“Despite the criminalization of many kinds of transgender behaviour under British rule and even by the Indian government after independence, Indian society has not yet permitted cultural anxiety about transgenderism to express itself in culturally institutionalised phobias and repressions. (Nanda, 2000:28).

Vertovec writing on Trinidad in 1992, reported on the presence “traditional transvestite dancers” who dance with babies as a mode of blessing and protection for children at the Sipari Ke Mai⁵ festival. This practice is no doubt a legacy of the hijra tradition which still exists in India (See Nanda, 1993; McNeal, 20--: 248-249). In the existing context of ethnic contestation in the Caribbean, however, the need for a strong

⁵ Sipari Mai Festival – A festival which takes place on the Thursday and Friday before Easter each year. It pays homage to the female Sipari ke Mai the Hindu/Indo-Trinidadian interpretation of La Divina Pastora a Roman Catholic statue located in the Siparia Roman Catholic Church. For more on this see, Steven Vertovec, *Hindu Trinidad: Religion, Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Change*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan Caribbean, 1992, pp. 219-221)

Indo-Caribbean masculinity to confront what is perceived as a hard Afro-Caribbean masculinity has necessitated a distancing from this androgynous tradition although it continues in sub-conscious and unconscious ways at different levels of society (See Puar, 2001). Not surprisingly in the recent challenge (2018) of the Buggery laws in Trinidad and Tobago the Sanatan Maha Sabha joined with the state and the evangelical and Pentecostal churches to oppose the challenge.

But moving beyond colonialism what is it that continues to nurture and feed contemporary homophobias which have become almost marks of national identity in some parts of the region? There may be a number of propositions which may need to be explored. First the reconstructed power of fundamentalist religion is one factor, although this varies throughout the region. Linden Lewis observed that levels of tolerance ranged from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados where it was higher to Jamaica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines where it tended to be lower (Lewis, 2003:109-114). One can suggest that the power of Protestantism in the latter and mainstream Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism in the former may be one explanation but, in all cases, the more recent US based pentecostal and evangelical religious influences may have exacerbated traditional prejudices and masked long-existing tolerances.

Conclusions

Recent Research and Sexual/Gender Diversity in the Caribbean

Today a slow but steady body of research on contemporary sex/gender diversity in the Caribbean region is emerging. This is important as the anglophone Caribbean region has been cast as one of the most homophobic and intolerant regions in the world. Generally, one can say the following general conclusions could be drawn:

- Although there is a significant degree of homophobia, there is also a great deal of tolerance and in some instances acceptance of varying degrees of sex/gender diversity and diverse sexualities; the degree of acceptance and tolerance varies across the region.
- There has also been a long-term and widespread presence of sexual diversity in the Caribbean which is increasingly being documented and analyzed (i.e. Glave 2008, Kempadoo, 2004, Murray 2002, Padilla 2007, Wekker 2006; Silvera, 1997).
- Interestingly there has also been traditionally an acknowledgement of gender-variant identities and male and female same-sex relationships which appear to have been much more tolerated in the past than today. Examples include – *zami* in Trinidad, Grenada and French-creole speaking countries, *mati* in Suriname terms that refer both to female friends and/or lovers and *man-royals* in Jamaica.

- It has been suggested that in the Caribbean trans persons are visible e.g. queens in Barbados and drag queens in Trinidad and operate “as the default public representation of homosexuality (Murray,2009:13).” Among the wider community, there is a greater focus on diverse sexual praxis as opposed to identities.
- There is evidence that violence and discrimination against such persons has increased in the last 25-30 years. Interestingly coinciding with the increasing social movements for human rights and social inclusion and the more recent heightening of religious fundamentalisms.
- As reported by David Murray:

“...most queens felt that they were more accepted “back then.” This opinion emerged through the memories of queens in their 50s or older, such as Darcy and Cynthia, and in younger queens like Divine, Didi, Cherry (all in their 30s) and Gigi who would remember stories and experiences of older queens from their childhoods and compare them with their lives today. Explanations abounded as to why attitudes had changed, but the most common factors noted were the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic throughout the 1980s, the increased popularity of fundamentalist churches (Pentecostal, Wesleyan, Evangelical, 7th Day Adventist), and the increasing popularity of Jamaican music, specifically dance hall in the 1990s, with its aggressively hetero-masculine, misogynist, and homophobic lyrics. (Murray,2009: 8-9).
- The heightened ‘fight back’ against sex/gender diversity in this region, can also be understood as a re-assertion of Caribbean

masculinity in a context of important changes in gender relations and the status of women.

As a region whose citizens are descendants of displaced and decimated Indigenous peoples, enslaved and bonded labourers from Africa and Asia, refugees from discrimination in Europe and persecution and poverty in Asia, and the Middle East, the struggle for social inclusion and human rights has been a continuous one. In the post-emancipation period, there have been struggles for inclusion on the basis of 'race' 'colour' 'class, 'sex' and not sex/gender diversity. Each one of us or our ancestors would have been included in one of these excluded and discriminated against categories. As scholars, activists and citizens, we have a special responsibility as we seek to extend human rights to yet another excluded group. I therefore thank you for being here today for and for allowing me to share these thoughts with you.

THANK YOU!!

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ⁱ According to the literature: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, in *Identity*, J.Rutherford (ed.), Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 222–237, 1990.