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The Netherlands

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Citation

Oudenhuijsen, L. W. (2021). Quietly queer(ing): the normative value of sutura and its potential for young women in urban Senegal. *Africa* , 91(3), 434-452. doi:10.1017/S0001972021000243

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Quietly queer(ing): the normative value of *sutura* and its potential for young women in urban Senegal

Loes Oudenhuijsen

Introduction

Sutura (discretion, modesty) is a central element in Senegalese Wolof culture that, among other things, promotes feminine honour through chastity, silence with regard to discussing sexuality with elders, and refraining from articulating same-sex desires in general. Consequently, *sutura* is seen as limiting the space for non-normative sexualities. However, women who call themselves *lesbienne* in Senegal strategically employ *sutura* to enable same-sex intimacies, whereby they resist the normative framework that tries to limit their expressions. This paradox of the way in which *sutura* and queerness co-produce and reinforce one another is central to this article. I demonstrate how young women strategically employ the normative framework of *sutura* to create spaces for their same-sex intimacies. They simultaneously provide an alternative to the frontiers of international sexual rights activism and to its ostensibly antithetical Islamic social code. By examining how young women discreetly navigate existing spaces and create alternative spaces in trying to secure decent lives for themselves, this article shows how reconfigurations of urban and family spaces potentially offer new directions for queer theorizing.

In a critical reflection on queer anthropology, Lewin critiques the way in which queer is often understood as ‘visible, intentional, and effective subversions of mainstream cultural norms and the related expectation that explicit and palpable transgression is the only sort of queerness worthy of the name’ (Lewin 2016: 604). Her critique points at a schism between much global sexual rights activism and the everyday lives of *lesbiennes* in Senegal, whose queer expressions remain largely invisible to outsiders. To understand how queerness can take shape precisely through norms, we have to examine the crucial role of *sutura* in guiding the lives of *lesbiennes* in Senegal. *Sutura* is a form of silence that does not straightforwardly render impossible expressions and discussions of (non-normative) sexualities. It is therefore important to explore how *sutura*, as a form and virtue of silence, enables a queering of one’s environment. This article demonstrates how *sutura* rather than outright resistance characterizes queer Senegal, resolving the paradox between *sutura* and non-normative sexualities. By employing *sutura*, *lesbiennes* simultaneously confirm and defy gender and sexual normativity. This juxtaposition of queer with *sutura* calls for a nuanced notion of dissent.

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This article is based on fieldwork undertaken between August 2017 and January 2018, and a brief return in July–August 2018, for my MA in African Studies at Leiden University. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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Following Boone *et al.* (2000), who argue against the ‘freezing’ of queer knowledge and movements, the queer potential of *sutura* lies in its volatility.

The empirical material I present stems from fieldwork conducted between August 2017 and January 2018 in urban Senegal, most notably Dakar, on the ways in which young *lesbiennes* navigated societal expectations of heteronormativity and personal same-sex desires. I initially entered the milieu of *lesbiennes* by joining a Dakarois football team, through which I was introduced to other *lesbiennes* and queer(ed) spaces. Women in the study were aged between twenty and thirty-three years old, and all but one were unmarried at the time of the research. Most women lived with their families in one of the crowded popular neighbourhoods or *banlieues* of the city. Living with family until marriage is both the norm and an inescapable reality for these women from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Those who did live apart from their families, with (girl)friends, often struggled to survive due to the practically absent remuneration in women’s football and the difficulty in securing jobs, regardless of their level of education. Of my interlocutors, all but one used the French *lesbienne* to describe themselves. This was often accompanied by ‘*je vis ça*’ (I live that). The emphasis on practice points to the discrepancy in understandings of sexuality between Senegal (and many other regions in the world) and the West. Terms circulate globally via human rights discourse and media, yet they hold different meanings for different people. Therefore, the Senegalese *lesbienne* cannot be equated to the English ‘lesbian’ or ‘lesbian woman’. Throughout the article, I employ the terms used by my interlocutors to describe their experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality. The mix of Wolof, French, English and street patois reveals the ways in which they queer and query their urban environment. I employ the term ‘queer’ when referring more broadly to the ‘field of non-normative genders ... desires and practices’ (Spronk and Nyeck 2021), and in the theoretical sense when exploring how my interlocutors queer Senegal when balancing gender and sexual dissidence, societal expectations and family life.

A Senegalese sexual imaginary

To understand how women negotiate room for queer expressions, it is important to understand how sexuality is constructed in Senegal. In the West, sexuality has become a prime marker of one’s social identity (Foucault 1990 [1976]), but in other parts of the world, including in Africa, sexuality is often understood as something one does rather than what one is (Spronk 2018; Wekker 2006). In Senegal, an ‘Islamised gender ideology’ (Gueye 2011: 69), ‘naturalises, sacralises and consequently institutionalises heterosexuality and its concomitant understandings of gender and gender roles as “just the way it is”’ (Gilbert 2017: 24). Marriage and parenthood, rather than sexual desires or orientations, are regarded as central elements of people’s social identities. Marriage is the only socially accepted union from which families can be built, and women in particular face societal pressure to get married. The ideal Senegalese woman, furthermore, is a modest woman who dresses appropriately (i.e. properly covering the body) and who avoids spending unnecessary time in public spaces (Gilbert 2017). Submission to male authority, and particularly a wife’s submission to her husband, is constitutive of *sutura*. A woman who breaks with these norms arguably breaks with legible womanhood.

As much as women are judged for not complying with these norms, women negotiate and interpret their sexual relations in various ways to uphold their status as *jigéen ju baax* (a good woman). The question is not whether women can reconcile their Islamic faith with their same-sex relationships, but rather how they navigate the religiously informed discourse on gender and sexuality – the Senegalese sexual imaginary Gilbert (*ibid.*: 24) – to maintain the image of a good Muslim woman. One way in which *lesbiennes* navigate this sexual imaginary is through a tactical use of *sutura*.

A core concept in the Wolof code of honour, *sutura* connotes ‘discretion, modesty, privacy, protection, and the happiness that the previous terms are said to ensure’ (Mills 2011: 2–3). More than just happiness, it functions ‘as the fragile membrane between life and death, and therefore between communal inclusion and exclusion’ (*ibid.*: 5). It has come to be understood as a Muslim value and thus is shared by other ethnic groups in Senegal. *Sutura* signifies both an attribute you have and something you do: you can give someone else *sutura* by hiding their misbehaviour, and you can show your *sutura* by avoiding certain practices, such as discussing sexuality with elders or discussing same-sex practices in general (*ibid.*). *Sutura* is regarded as the foundation of feminine honour, and there is more at stake when it is breached by a woman than when it is breached by a man. It is, therefore, a gendered virtue, and it is constitutive of sexual normativity. It is an ideology that prescribes certain attitudes, language and appearances that are deemed appropriate. At the same time, *sutura* can be drawn upon strategically. Among themselves, young women are fairly direct, and discretion is thus not a static cultural given of Senegalese society. Rather, it is a skill that is transmitted and continuously learned and reworked to navigate through life successfully and to live a morally acceptable life. Not respecting the value of *sutura* leads to shame – for yourself as well as for your family.

According to Wolof morality, however, shame is declared only upon public exposure, and a bad deed that is not visible to others does not lead to dishonour (Mills 2011). Through careful adherence to the value of *sutura*, non-normative practices can be effectively masked and public shame can be prevented. Such masking is not reserved for same-sex intimacies alone. Van Eerdewijk (2007) has studied young, unmarried women’s and men’s sexual practices in Dakar, showing how women find various ways to engage in sexual practices without compromising their virginity. Because virginity is narrowly defined as protecting the hymen by not engaging in vaginal penetration, couples may practise oral sex, anal sex and manual stimulation to pleasure themselves and their partners without breaking the norm. When women do lose their virginity before marriage, they may seek to hide premarital sexual conduct by ostensibly restoring their virginity through hymenoplasty, the surgical reconstruction of the hymen, or, as a much cheaper option, through the use of *serre vagin* (vagina tighteners) with *billes de karité* (shea butter pebbles) inserted into the vagina or *savons de virginité* (virginity soaps); these tighten the vagina so that the woman appears to be a virgin (Gilbert 2017: 173–5). *Lesbiennes* have their own ways of masking dissident practices in order to maintain their status as good women, to which I turn shortly.

Although today’s Senegalese sexual imaginary reflects heteropatriarchal structures, gender and sexual dissidence have historically had a place in Senegalese society through the figure of the *góor-jigéen* (literally ‘man-woman’). *Góor-*

jigéen have existed at least since the late nineteenth century, and during the twentieth century they occupied feminine ceremonial roles during marriages and baptisms (Broqua 2017). Their social status was comparable to that of griots (Gning 2013: 78). Today, the term is a derogatory synonym for the idea of the male homosexual and its gender significance has been erased (Broqua 2017). Coly (2019) argues that 2008 marked a turning point in this regard, when the Senegalese tabloid *Icone* published photographs of an alleged gay marriage,¹ instigating a witch-hunt against gender non-confirming men. Before 2008, she argues, 'there were discursively no homosexuals and gays in Senegal' (*ibid.*: 34). Since then, numerous 'scandals' about the immoral behaviour of women and queer persons (both male- and female-bodied) have featured in the media, causing strong moral reactions from society, including from Islamic organizations that warn of the moral decay of Senegalese society (Diop 2012). In fact, anything scandalous is perceived to be un-Senegalese, and the West is perceived as promoting homosexuality, prostitution and sexual liberalism. At the same time, such mediatized scandals feed into a popular discourse of a uniformly homophobic Africa (see Awondo *et al.* 2013). Recently, *lesbiennes* have increasingly become the target of mediatized scandals too. In April 2019, a video of two high-school girls kissing went viral,² and the Islamic NGO Jamra accused Sourire de Femme, the country's only official organization for queer women, of promoting lesbianism in the country. Because homophobia is often deployed as a political strategy (Coly 2019; see Nyeck 2013 on Cameroon), such mediatized scandals go hand in hand with mundane queer lives that, for the large majority, escape public attention.

Research on same-sex sexuality in Senegal has thus far explored men who have sex with men in the context of HIV and AIDS research and prevention and treatment strategies (see Niang *et al.* 2003; Teunis 1996; 2000), or *góor-jigéen* in cultural-historical accounts of gender and sexual dissidence (Broqua 2017; Niang *et al.* 2003). This article seeks to contribute to this body of literature by exploring how queerness permeates everyday life for young women. In an essay 'Queering queer Africa', Stella Nyanzi argues for the need to move beyond the global, anglophone-oriented LGBT+ discourse to recognize how queer erotic desires and gendered subjectivities are embedded in people's diverse engagements in everyday life (Nyanzi 2014: 63). The aim of this article is to examine such everyday realities and to explore how young *lesbiennes* in Senegal may help us theorize queer from the vicissitudes of their lives.

***Kooba*: urban queer know-how**

Fama (aged twenty-three in 2018) and her older sister had exchanged their village on Senegal's west coast for Dakar in 2013. Having had only a couple of years of schooling, Fama sought work opportunities in informal trade. The two initially shared an apartment in one of the city's popular neighbourhoods, but when her

¹Senegalese media reported it as a '*mariage gay*', '*mariage des homosexuels*', or the more pejorative '*mariage des pédés*' and '*mariage des góor-jigéen*'.

²'Lesbianisme dans les lycées, Jamra accuse "Sourire de femmes"', Seneweb News, 16 April 2019 <https://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/lesbianisme-dans-les-lycees-jamra-accuse_n_279688.html>, accessed 20 November 2019.

sister got married, Fama decided it was time to '*me débarrasser de ma soeur ... parce qu'elle ne connaît pas cette vie* [get rid of my sister ... because she does not know this life]'.³ She found a room elsewhere that she has since shared with a friend. When we first met, she had assured me '*je ne vis pas la vie lesbienne* [I do not live the lesbian life]'.⁴ However, when I met her again just before my return to Europe, she again articulated the wish to visit me and marry a woman in the Netherlands. She said that she would miss Senegal considerably though. When I asked her what she would miss the most about her life in Senegal, she said, decidedly, '*les fréquentations des kooba* [the meetings of the *kooba*]'. She referred to her daily gathering of *lesbienne* and *gay*⁵ friends in her room around midnight. Fama's *kooba* friends are not just *gay* or *lesbienne*, they are those who frequent bars and nightclubs. *Kooba* refers to the knowledge and know-how of human relations that are acquired in this nightlife.⁶ *Kooba* is the Wolof word for horse antelope; an image of the animal featured on the Senegalese beer brand *Kooba*, which was popular in the 1960s. *Kooba* became a code name for all those who frequented bars where the beer was sold. This included sex workers, thieves (*voleurs*), bandits (*agresseurs*), and *lesbiennes* and *gays*. *Kooba* beer is no longer in production in Senegal, but the word remains popular among sex workers, *gays* and *lesbiennes* as a way to speak discreetly, and proudly, about this network of relationships. Their presence in this nightlife sets them apart from others who lack the knowledge and know-how that are acquired here.

Kooba is closely associated with the more widely used word *nàndite* (comprehension), because both terms refer to the comprehension or understanding of something that the general public does not understand. Prothmann (2018: 265) defined *nàndite* as 'an urban citizen capable of projecting an image of success'. It is reminiscent of connected (*branché*) queer men in urban Democratic Republic of Congo (Hendriks 2016). Today, *gays* and *lesbiennes* in Senegal use this word without necessarily being aware of its history. Among *lesbienne* and *gay* youth, the word may have gained popularity in the past few years because of Wally Seck's song 'Kooba yi'. Wally Seck is a very popular Senegalese artist, and he is particularly popular among young *lesbiennes* and *gays*. Before a live version

³Conversation with Fama, 2 November 2020. '*Cette vie*' was used by my interlocutors to refer to the world of same-sex intimacies.

⁴This statement left me puzzled, because I met her after having been introduced to her at a queer party some days earlier. This statement was partly a way of protecting herself, she told me later. Because it was the first time we spoke, she was not sure if it was safe to talk to me about her same-sex desires. However, on the same day she talked about the possibility of her 'living a lesbian life' outside Senegal one day. The statement, and the subsequent expression of a wish to marry a woman in the Netherlands, can also be understood as a commentary on the impossibility of durable queer lives, as Hendriks (2021) similarly argues in the context of urban Democratic Republic of Congo.

⁵Men commonly use the English *gay* to describe themselves. The French *homosexuel* is also used, as is the Wolof *góor-jigéen*. The latter is often used in friendly joking about a friend's effeminate behaviour or his sexual relationships. *Góor-jigéen* is also used pejoratively in public discourse for male homosexuals (see Broqua 2017). Like women who refer to themselves as *lesbiennes*, men have appropriated the English *gay* to talk about their same-sex practices, not as a rigid sexual or social identity.

⁶Salomon (2009) describes sex workers as 'artists of human relations' who possess the practical intelligence of crafting relations, reinventing their relation to the other, and dominating him/her in a way to acquire the desired means from the other.

of the song, he explained the word *kooba* to his audience as follows: ‘*Mba xam ngeen lan la mooy kooba? Kooba mooy nàndite, ku xam lépp* [I hope you know what *kooba* means? *Kooba* means *nàndite*, the one who knows everything].’⁷ Fama had no idea of the history behind the word *kooba*, but as someone immersed in Dakar’s nightlife, and as a big fan of Wally Seck, she proudly calls herself and her friends *kooba*.

These friends regularly gather at Fama’s place, a room on the ground floor of a three-storey apartment building. The tenants – a mix of single men, young married couples and small families – share toilets and showers in the courtyard opposite Fama’s room and an open kitchen on the rooftop. Fama consciously invites her friends late at night to avoid drawing attention from the other tenants who hang around the courtyard during the day, passing by her room to take the stairs to the upper floors of the building. She nevertheless takes joy in inviting *kooba* friends to her place on a daily basis. Taking into account the Senegalese sexual imaginary and the stress this may bring for young *lesbiennes* and *gays* who feel constrained by heteronormative expectations to marry, Fama’s words may sound strange. However, for Fama and many others, it is the extensive network of relationships that *lesbiennes* and *gays* maintain that makes Senegal the country they love and that they would miss should they move abroad – a dream that, for various reasons, many people have. Fama’s choice of the French word *fréquentations* is interesting, because it denotes ‘meeting’ or ‘gathering’ as well as ‘dating’. Its dual meaning points to the ambiguity and fluidity in friendships, erotic practices and romantic relationships. This indeterminacy is what makes Fama and her *kooba* friends frontier Africans. For Nyamnjoh, this conviviality allows people to ‘straddle myriad identity margins and constantly seek to bridge various divides in the interest of the imperatives of living interconnections, nuances and complexities’ (2017: 258).

The knowledge and know-how that *kooba* possess relate to the network of relationships and erotic practices that are conceived in this nightlife, but which are handled with *sutura* in other places. The inclusion of thieves and gangs in this network of *kooba* points to another element of this know-how: its relation to *lijjanti* (hustling). *Lijjanti* refers to acquiring the means necessary to fulfil personal and social demands through a certain cleverness in using one’s social network. Fama’s *kooba* friends form this network, from which she draws the necessary financial means by selling them clothing or cosmetics and by maintaining relationships with those who sometimes pay for her at parties, or pay for other personal demands. The relevance of *kooba* networks and know-how for Fama reveals how normative frameworks, queer desires and economic struggles coalesce in the lives of many young urbanites. By navigating these simultaneous desires, *lesbiennes* such as Fama are pioneer agents in the queering of knowledge from Africa.

Queering family life

Whereas Fama ‘got rid’ of her sister in order to live her queer desires more freely, finding in the queer night scene a new network that allows her to get by in the city,

⁷Wally Seck donne la signification de koba yi’, YouTube, 28 May 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI_e1aokGz4>.

most unmarried women continue to live with their families. In these families, ‘the interdependence of the normal and the perverse ... can be masked by an emphasis on secrecy and modesty’ (Pierce 2007: 551). Secrecy with regard to same-sex intimacies not only distinguishes those who know from those who do not know; also, ‘a secret can bind together those who share it, and it can mask immoral conduct’ (*ibid.*: 552). It creates ‘communities of secrecy’ (Hardon and Posel 2012: S4) where *lesbiennes* share a knowledge of desires and practices that remain otherwise unspoken. Various scholars have pointed to this significance of secrecy or discretion for understanding sexualities in Africa (Dankwa 2009; Gaudio 2009; Gunkel 2009; Pierce 2007). In Senegal, having *sutura* is about ensuring that particular articulations of same-sex desires and practices remain invisible to outsiders, those not in the know.

The normalcy of homosociality in Senegal provides room for the exploration of same-sex desires. Various studies on homosocial environments have shown how intimate friendships may include various degrees of erotic practices (Gunkel 2009; Kendall 1998; Spronk 2018). When Lafia (aged twenty-three in 2017) described how she first explored same-sex intimacies with a girl, she said:

*C’était en 2009 avec ma cousine. On partageait la chambre à l’époque. On faisait tout ensemble, on était tellement proche ... un jour, elle m’a embrassée et elle a commencé à me caresser. Je l’ai aimée, et c’est comme ça que j’ai couché avec elle.*⁸

That was in 2009 with my cousin. We shared a room at that time. We did everything together; we were very close. One day, she kissed me and started caressing me. I liked it, so then it happened that I slept with her.

Mentioning that they ‘did everything together’ shows how explorations of eroticism can be part of the wide range of activities that close friends undertake. It triggered Lafia’s desire for girls: ‘*C’est là où j’ai découvert que j’aime les filles. J’aime jouer avec les filles* [It was then that I learned that I liked girls. I love to play with girls].’ Lafia’s experience with her cousin is not unique. Large extended families and small housing often result in multiple family members sharing bedrooms. Sharing beds may be an unavoidable reality, but the normalcy also means that having a (girl)friend over does not immediately raise eyebrows. When someone receives a visitor, rooms will often be rearranged so that the visitor sleeps alone or, if they are of the same sex, with his/her friend in one bedroom. Lafia explained how she would carefully time her girlfriend’s visits for when her stepfather would not be around. Their house, situated in a quiet neighbourhood in a small town not far from Dakar, has three bedrooms: one for her mother and stepfather, one for her younger brother, and one that Lafia shares with her older sister and her sister’s two-year-old son. Her stepfather divided his time equally between Lafia’s mother and his first wife, and, when he was away, Lafia and her sister would sometimes keep their mother company at night. If Lafia wanted to invite her girlfriend over, she would suggest to her sister that she spend the night with their mother, arguing that she did not want her friend to be woken up early in the morning by her nephew.

⁸Conversation with Lafia, 9 December 2017.

Despite the space that family life may allow for some to explore same-sex intimacies, it is also the environment in which norms such as marriage can be imposed on women. When, in October 2017, I visited Hawa, a twenty-eight-year-old football player, football coach and tradeswoman, her mother jokingly called her *garçonnette*. This self-invented word signified something like a female boy. Hawa said that whenever her father criticized her for wearing trousers, her mother would respond that he had prayed for a son when she was pregnant with Hawa. Her mother's attitude had completely changed by February 2018, when she was exerting pressure on Hawa to get married. Hawa spoke to me via WhatsApp:

*La dernière fois quand tu étais chez moi, je suis sûre que tu n'avais pas remarqué, mais je ne parlais pas avec ma mère. Ça fait deux ou trois mois maintenant que je ne parle plus avec elle. Elle refuse ... juste pour me mettre la pression.*⁹

The last time when you were here, I am sure you did not notice it, I did not talk to my mother. It has been two or three months now that I no longer talk to her. She refuses ... just to exert pressure on me.

Her parents had decided to search for a husband for Hawa without her knowledge. One day, they introduced her to a potential husband, a man from the northern city of Saint-Louis, via telephone. She sent me a message in desperation after having fled the house, because the man would be visiting her that day. She was not yet sure how to handle the situation, but she assured me that the only option for her was to '*fuir, fuir ma responsabilité ... en tant que femme* [escape, escape my responsibility ... as a woman]'.¹⁰ For Hawa, the pressure to get married conflicted too much with her personal desires. A few weeks later, she told me that she wanted to go to Morocco for a while. She had always dreamed of establishing her own trade internationally, and this was her chance to show her family that:

*Je suis capable moi-même, sans être mariée ou sans être avec eux, de vivre ma vie ... Mariée ou pas, je suis capable. Sans mari beaucoup plus en fait ... pour leur montrer que le mariage n'est pas une obligation ... pour devenir quelqu'une ou quelque chose demain.*¹¹

I am capable by myself, without being married or without being with them [her family], to live my life ... Married or not, I am capable. Without a husband much more in fact ... to show them that marriage is not something compulsory ... for me to become someone or something tomorrow.

Seeking economic independence and being independent from a man are rare in a culture where 'marriage is a woman's security' (Dial 2008: 42). Economic security indeed seemed to be of primary concern to her parents. As Hawa tried to negotiate her journey to Morocco as an alternative to marriage at that moment, she decided it would be wise to tell them that there was someone who was willing to pay for her bus ticket to Morocco. When they believed that I would be supporting Hawa financially, they agreed to her travel. They had been aware of her plans to establish her own trade, and they trusted that she would work hard and would not become

⁹Conversation with Hawa, 19 February 2018.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

engaged in sex work or *mbaraan* (transactional sex). The black traces that the charcoal that she sold left on her skin and clothes every day served as a constant reminder of her hard work.

For other women, marriage may, in fact, increase their space for manoeuvre. When discussing marriage with Lafia, she remarked: '*Quand je me marierai, je serai libre ... Je serai deuxième femme, ça me donne plus de liberté* [When I get married, I will be free ... I will be second wife, that gives me more freedom].'¹² Marriage, in most cases, means moving out of your family's house to live with your husband's family or, if financial means allow for it, to construct your own household as a couple. For Lafia, moving out of her mother's house would probably increase her space for manoeuvre. She is currently strictly policed by her mother and her stepfather, who forbid her from going out much, especially at night. She has hopes that a family-in-law would not restrict her movement in the way her mother and stepfather currently do. Moreover, if she could secure herself a role as a second wife, or even a third or fourth, she might have a few nights a week to herself. Whenever her husband were with his other wife, this would allow Lafia to invite a girlfriend to stay over. In other words, conforming to the normative expectation of heterosexual marriage does not foreclose queerness.

Hawa's relationship with her ex-girlfriend Ramatoulaye confirms this. When Hawa described her previous relationships to me, she said that she had fond memories of her relationship with Ramatoulaye. There was a benefit to being with a married woman such as Ramatoulaye. Married women are perceived to be '*plus fidèle*' (more loyal) than other girls, because '*elles n'ont même pas le temps de jouer avec toi* [they do not even have the time to play with you]'.¹³ Ramatoulaye, she said, '*était très discrète, pas comme les autres filles qui s'en foutent, qui font du n'importe quoi* [she was very discreet, unlike other girls who do not care, who do anything]'.¹⁴ The fact that Ramatoulaye had to be discreet about her relationship with Hawa, managing it simultaneously with married life, protected Hawa as well. When I returned to Senegal in July 2018, I met Ramatoulaye and her new girlfriend in Ramatoulaye's room in her own family's house. She had returned there due to problems with her husband. She was seeking a divorce from her husband, who had found out about her relationship with this girlfriend via Ramatoulaye's jealous ex-girlfriend. He had started threatening the two with going to the police to report them as lesbians. To avoid creating a big scene with her husband and her in-laws, she had decided to move back in with her own family. Hawa had enjoyed the discretion of her relationship with Ramatoulaye, but had broken up with her because: '*C'était dur de savoir que le soir, quand tu rentres chez toi, elle couche avec son mari ... Et quand elle était enceinte, je ne pouvais plus ... j'ai rompu avec elle* [It was tough knowing that, when you return home in the evening, she will be sleeping with her husband ... and when she was pregnant, I could not take it any more ... I broke up with her]'. Ramatoulaye's relationship with her current girlfriend had been less discreet because an ex-girlfriend had exposed the two to Ramatoulaye's husband.

¹²Conversation with Lafia, 10 December 2017.

¹³Conversation with Hawa, 26 October 2017.

¹⁴Conversation with Hawa, 4 December 2019.

Ramatoulaye consequently had to take great pains to avoid public shame. These different cases concerning marriage demonstrate that, while marriage, at some point, inevitably becomes a point of negotiation in women's lives, the choice to conform – or not – to this expectation does not in itself determine the (dis)continuation of queer lives. Women such as Ramatoulaye, Lafia and Hawa try to find their own ways of navigating their relationships with discretion, with differing degrees of success. The troubles Ramatoulaye encountered after her ex-girlfriend had denounced her to her husband reveal how communities of secrecy can break down under the collision of resentment about broken relationships and lingering societal expectations of marriage. *Sutura* is furthermore debated within communities of secrecy, and women can hold different ideas about what constitutes *sutura* and how this relates to upholding the image of being worthy Senegalese women.

Expanding queer space

In addition to queer expressions that unfold discreetly within the family sphere, or with a certain intelligence (*kooba* or *nàndite*) in the somewhat distinct realm of nightlife, women further queer and claim space in a domain that is socially constructed as a masculine activity: football. Women in football jerseys on their way to the field have to deal with disapproving looks and comments from family members, neighbours and passers-by about their choice to play football and to dress, predominantly, in a masculine fashion (Adjepong 2019; Oudenhuijsen 2018; Packer 2019a). Some women are actively discouraged from playing football, their sports jerseys being torn apart by their family, by being forbidden from playing, or by being warned that football causes barrenness. Such discouragement or outright criticism goes hand in hand with a much more tacit knowledge of the existence of same-sex intimacies in women's football teams. As Dankwa (2011: 236–7) wrote, in West Africa 'the female football arena amounts to a homosocial public space, a site for gender variance where young women's masculine styles and same-sex intimacies are tacitly tolerated'. How do negative perceptions and a tacit acknowledgement of women's football go hand in hand? To understand this, we must take a closer look at the way in which *sutura* is being employed in this milieu. Discussions between women about the necessary means of *sutura* demonstrate that there is neither consensus nor a singular successful approach to achieving acceptance. Occasional alarms in the media about the prevalence of lesbians in women's football attest to this.¹⁵

Female masculinity in Senegal is captured in the term *jump*, a self-identification of young women who embody a certain masculinity. Hawa explained about the time when she started playing football in 2005:

*Quand tu voyais quelqu'une qui était habillée en garçon, une fille habillée en garçon, on dirait que c'est une joueuse. C'était la carte d'identité des footballeuses.*¹⁶

¹⁵'Sport féminin: les lesbiennes pullulent dans le milieu', Seneweb, 21 March 2013, <https://www.seneweb.com/news/Sport/sport-feminin-les-lesbiennes-pullulent-dans-le-milieu_n_91190.html>, accessed 2 November 2020. On Nigeria, see Akwei (2016) and Guilbert (2016).

¹⁶Conversation with Hawa, 12 April 2018.

When you saw someone dressed as a boy, a girl dressed as a boy, people would say she is a player. It was the identity card of footballers.

She argued that the abundance of *jump* in the women's football environment is not a matter of expressing true selves, but rather:

pour montrer aux autres lesbiennes cachées, qu'il y a une autre ici, et qui joue au football ... Il y avait que les joueuses qui s'habillaient comme ça, avant.

To show other hidden lesbians, that there is another one here, and who plays football ... only football players dressed this way before.

A visible appearance of gender dissidence nevertheless allows for discreet communication about its meanings and intentions. Communicating same-sex desires to other women through clothing, without explicitly saying it, complies with the value of *sutura*. A *jump* presentation of self is not only or always a way of making same-sex desires readable for other women. It also proposes gender nuances, arguing against the universalizing tendencies of the heteropatriarchy to construct one vision of womanhood and female beauty. Through their deliberate *jump* fashioning, football women '*queery*' (Spronk and Nyeck 2021) their urban environment by questioning this normative expectation of womanhood that demands a feminine appearance and bodily comportment. Women are, however, not unanimous about the discretion of *jump* fashioning in a domain where women's participation already raises certain eyebrows.¹⁷ For some, the visible gender dissidence that *jump* embody jeopardizes the tacit acknowledgement of women's football as an arena of queer expression, and of the growing status and presence of women in football worldwide (Oudenhuijsen 2019).¹⁸

Several associations actively promote women's football in Senegal, responding to the stigmatization that women encounter when pursuing football careers. Ladies' Turn¹⁹ is a non-profit organization that was established in 2009 by the then captain of the national women's team, Seyni Ndir Seck, Dakar-based Cameroonian sports journalist Gaëlle Yomi, and the American Jennifer Browning. With initial funding from corporate sponsors, Ladies' Turn organized its first tournament in 2009.²⁰ The organization offers girls the opportunity to play football in their local communities by organizing tournaments on neighbourhood terrains in various cities across Senegal. It envisions gender equality by countering the idea that football is not for women, and by offering additional activities in leadership for girls. More informal efforts by players in the national women's

¹⁷ *Jump* are not unique to the football milieu. However, as Hawa argues, the style appears to have spread from here, and a large majority of football players identify as *jump*.

¹⁸ See also 'Coupe du monde féminine: en Afrique, l'irrésistible ascension du football féminin', *Le Monde Afrique*, 10 June 2019 <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/06/10/en-afrique-l-irresistible-ascension-du-football-feminin_5474292_3212.html>, accessed 4 March 2021.

¹⁹ 'Ladies' Turn: le football féminin au coeur des quartiers sénégalais', Ladies' Turn, 2018 <<http://www.ladiesturn.org/>>, accessed 15 May 2018.

²⁰ 'Rencontre avec Seyni Ndir Seck à Dakar', Sport & Développement, 17 February 2020 <<https://www.sportdeveloppement.org/rencontre-avec-seyni-ndir-seck/>>, accessed 10 November 2020.

competition,²¹ with their slogan '*Je suis football féminin*', serve to challenge the common assumption that football is not for women. Their efforts can be seen as reflecting the political potential of sport (Young and White 1995), where societal (gender) norms are transgressed in and through sport. Yet, there is more to say about these efforts than to state that these women transgress norms. In particular, '*Je suis football féminin*' draws on *sutura* to garner respect for women's football. Yaye (aged twenty-six in 2018) is a law student, and although she stopped playing football at the age of thirteen at the request of her parents, she has been involved as the secretary general of one of the Dakarois women's football teams for a couple of years. She was reintroduced to football via her girlfriend. She is particularly committed to advancing the status of women's football in Senegal and she was one of the initiators of '*Je suis football féminin*'. Yaye's movement consisted of establishing a Facebook group to update (female) football players about their competition, as well as informing them about developments in women's football in Europe. She also used the hashtag #jesuisfootballféminin on social media to comment on concrete examples of the marginalization of women's football, such as when two players on one team broke a limb during one of the competition's games. Women's games regularly had to be played on badly maintained and uneven pitches. However, her goal is not just to promote women's football per se; she is also seeking to educate girls on how to behave properly on and off the football field, in order to gain more respect from others. She sighed:

*Les filles ne connaissaient pas vie privée avant. Il est important qu'elles comprennent sutura et les bons comportements. Il y a des filles qui aiment marcher avec leur pantalon sous leurs fesses. Comment tu penses qu'on puisse te respecter alors? ... J'essaie de leur apprendre la différence entre vie privée et vie publique.*²²

The girls did not know what private life was before. It is important that they know *sutura* and proper behaviour. Some girls like to walk with their trousers below their buttocks. How can you expect someone to respect you then? ... I try to teach them the difference between private life and public life.

She has tried to address such issues via a WhatsApp group that she created with the captains of all the women's teams. '*Je leur propose de sensibiliser les filles sur certains de leurs comportements* [I suggest that they raise awareness among the girls about some of their behaviour].'²³ Compared with three years ago, she has seen a change in the players' appearances: '*Elles s'habillent correctement maintenant. Toujours en style jump, mais correcte* [They dress properly now. Still in *jump* style, but proper].' Balancing masculine appearances and an active engagement in football with societal expectations of womanhood, in a quest to obtain approval from society to play, suggests that the agency of these women lies not only in

²¹In 2018, twenty-five women's teams were officially recognized by the Senegalese Football Federation, competing nationally in two divisions. Despite increased funds for the development of women's football in Senegal from FIFA, hardly anything trickles down to the players themselves.

²²Conversation with Yaye, 20 August 2018.

²³Conversation with Yaye, 28 October 2019.

the capacity for progressive change or increased individual freedom, but also in the capacity to endure, suffer and persist (Mahmood 2001). Packer (2019b) argues that football women embrace the stigma they face because of their gender non-conformity, because it fits with their vision of Sufi resistance. Enduring stigma grants these women individual moral power and brings them closer to God, as they compare their own suffering with that of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of the Senegalese Murid brotherhood and a spiritual guide for many Senegalese (Babou 2007). The capacity to endure is a highly valued character trait in Senegal, captured in the Wolof term *muñ*, which signifies patience and endurance, and ‘refers to silent and stoic female suffering in the face of hardship or challenges’ (Foley and Drame 2013: 128). The ability of football players to display *muñ* and *sutura* may allow women to maintain their status as good women, despite their visible gender dissidence.

The behaviour and carefully stylized appearances that *jump* women embody on the football field must be understood as part of a game of gaining prominence in the queer milieu. Despite the fact that same-sex intimacies are navigated with discretion, there is a community of *lesbiennes* that has carved out spaces to ‘voice and practice their passions and desires’ (Dankwa 2009: 193) beyond the view of a public that rejects their practices or perceived sexual orientation. This makes many *jump kooba*, in their quest to project an image of success while simultaneously maintaining an aura of secrecy around their network of relations. Furthermore, beyond the football field, many women negotiate status at night. Queer spaces are created at various clubs in the city and during more privately organized parties in rented apartments:

*Certaines filles veulent juste être ... tu sais ... le buzz ... elles veulent être connues et populaires dans le milieu. Elles peuvent même aller vers [nom de la chanteuse] pour lui donner 2,000 FCFA pour qu'elle te chante. Juste pour être connue. Les filles peuvent gaspiller leur argent comme ça, et après elles vont te demander de l'argent pour prendre un taxi pour rentrer chez elle.*²⁴

Some girls just want to be ... you know ... the buzz ... they want to be known and popular in the scene. They can even go up to [name of the artist] and give her 2,000 FCFA so she will sing for you. Just to be known. Girls can spend all their money like this, and then they will ask you for money for a taxi to get home.

The artist, whose name I omit, organizes a queer party every Friday night in a popular club in Dakar. The current location is far from other common clubbing areas; it was moved recently because outsiders had become aware of the queer presence. The party provides not just a space where sexual dissidence is tolerated – by the owner of the club and bartenders, and by others not in the know who may accompany a friend to the party – and celebrated. It is also a place where the night provides the space to display other behaviour that is disapproved of normally, particularly for women, such as drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. Girls who spend all their money at the party practise a form of *gâter* (to spoil) and *faire le show* (to make a show) (Fouquet 2011;

²⁴Conversation with Fama, 13 January 2018.

Newell 2012), through which they reinforce their community of practice (O'Mara 2013) and differentiate themselves from others as 'the buzz'.

Taking part in this community of practice of *kooba*, and being able to attend parties in new and fashionable outfits, is not obvious for women like Fama. When I visited her on a December afternoon, she was a bit restless. Her mother had been calling her throughout the day to ask her for money. Fama sends her mother 10,000 FCFA (about €15) monthly for her *tontine*.²⁵ When Fama's sister got married, her parents had asked Fama to return home as long as she remained unmarried. She refused – '*Parce qu'il n'y a rien au village. Pas de travail, pas de liberté* [Because there is nothing in the village. No work, no freedom].'²⁶ Raising the rent for the room she shares with her friend Maguette is a challenge, and as we discussed a way to collect the 10,000 FCFA to send to her mother, her landlord knocked on the door and asked her to come outside. When Fama returned to the room, she told me:

Le propriétaire m'a demandé le loyer pour ce mois. Je lui ai dit que j'attends la rentrée de Maguette. Elle est chez sa copine, et moi je n'ai pas l'argent pour le loyer de ce mois.

The landlord asked me for this month's rent. I told him that I am waiting for Maguette to return. She is at her girlfriend's place, and I do not have the money for this month's rent.

It is a continuous struggle for Fama to make a living in Dakar and simultaneously juggle the expectations of her family in the village. Thorsen (2006) argues that the migration of youth to towns is a way simultaneously to pursue personal aspirations of earning money and being independent, and to fulfil the expectations of being a responsible senior who contributes to the household income. By sending her mother money on a monthly basis, Fama demonstrates her responsibility towards her family. She thereby accelerates the transition from childhood to adulthood, despite the fact that she remains unmarried. She has tried various jobs in the informal economy, the last of which was to sell clothes that she bought from a tailor to subsequently resell from her home. She would show the clothes she had on sale to anyone who visited her, and try to sell them. This is a common strategy employed by vendors, one 'that depend[s] upon social networks, reciprocity and trust for sales' (Scheld 2007: 241). Fama had recently sold a *njexas*²⁷ to an acquaintance on credit, so she decided to call him to try to get her money, so that she could send it to her mother. When her mother called her for the third time in one hour, Fama promised her that she would send the money before sunset. To me, she said that she did not know yet where she would get the money, because the man who owed her money kept telling her 'tomorrow, *inshallah*'²⁸ whenever she called him. So, Fama, too, had to tell her mother 'tonight, *inshallah*'.

Fama would never tell her mother that she could not get the money. It is important for her to prove to her parents that she gets by in Dakar, and that her choice to

²⁵*Tontine* is a credit rotation scheme organized among women.

²⁶Conversation with Fama, 13 January 2018.

²⁷Patchwork, often referring to clothing worn by Baay Faal, a subgroup of the Muslim Murid brotherhood.

²⁸Arabic for 'God willing'.

stay there has been a responsible one. In demonstrating adult responsibility by sending home money instead of asking for support for her living expenses, she negotiates her freedom as an unmarried girl. This freedom is important to her and not attainable back home, where ‘meetings of the *kooba*’ could not be organized. Fama needs her network of *kooba* to simultaneously fulfil personal desires and family expectations. This proves the interdependency of queer desires, work, family and housing. And as discussions in the football setting reveal, the balance between these elements is constantly being negotiated within queer milieus.

Conclusion: pioneers of queer Senegal

The joy that Fama finds in her group of *lesbiennes* and *gays* proves that *sutura* is not a totalizing framework that represses dissidents. Rather than disabling queer expression, the gender and sexual normativity that constitutes the norm of *sutura* has been shown to provide room for queer lives to take shape alongside family life. Whether it is Lafia who invites her girlfriend to spend the night at her place, rearranging the division of beds, or Hawa and Ramatoulaye who maintained a relationship while Ramatoulaye was married, the diverse tactics of navigation demonstrated by my interlocutors that allow them to express same-sex desires trouble the assumed antagonism between religious, normative frameworks and gender and sexual dissidence. Ranging from a nightclub that turns into a queer space on Friday nights, to football players seeking to enhance the status of women’s football in the country, and to women who negotiate various arrangements to rent rooms for themselves or with (girl)friends, *lesbiennes* employ *sutura* to queer their urban environment. This queering and querying sometimes leads to friction with family members and wider society, as well as being a topic of debate within queer communities, as discussions in the football milieu concerning *jump* styling show. The relations between queer, *sutura*, *kooba* and *jump* reveal complicated balancing acts between achieving and showing success, and maintaining silence. Such frictions between the sometimes contradictory practices of *sutura*, visible gender dissidence and portraying urban success are characteristic of the vicissitudes of life (Spronk and Nyeck 2021). Rather than proving the incompatibility of queer life with *sutura*, such tensions reflect the ability of queerness to puzzle (Nyeck 2011).

Women’s desires in the urban environment are multiple, and the combination of cosmopolitan aspirations with family bonds and same-sex relationships recalls Nyanzi’s (2014) plea for a queering of Africa beyond the domain of sexuality. Together with the task of ‘rethinking sexuality from Africa’ (Hendriks and Spronk 2017, emphasis in original), this requires taking seriously the diverse and ambiguous realities of *lesbiennes* in urban Senegal. These women embody the frontiers of queering scholarship from Africa through the ways in which they show how a religious notion like *sutura* paradoxically provides space for queer lives. Yet, there are limits, and it is not only an individual’s capacity to maintain *sutura* that matters. Family pressure to marry and societal pressure to appear as a respectable woman have an impact on the room for manoeuvre in different stages of life. But rather than radically opposing gender and sexual normativity, an assumption that is dominant in much of Western queer theory (Hendriks

2021), these women make use of normative frameworks in trying to secure decent lives. Their use of a mix of international and local vernaculars at the intersection of self-identification, practice and know-how makes these women pioneering agents who *queery* Senegal and our knowledge production.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank S. N. Nyeck, Rachel Spronk and the anonymous reviewers of *Africa* for their very insightful feedback on this article.

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Abstract

Sutura (discretion, modesty) is a central element in Senegalese Wolof culture that, among other things, promotes feminine honour through chastity, silence with regard to discussing sexuality with elders, and refraining from articulating same-sex desires in general. Consequently, *sutura* is seen as limiting the space for non-normative sexualities. However, *lesbiennes* in Senegal strategically employ *sutura* to navigate this gender and sexual normativity, whereby they queer the initially heteronormative framework. This article explores how, at the frontiers of international sexual rights activism and its antithetical Islamic social code, young women open new avenues for thinking queer Africa. The article explores young women's diverse tactics to turn *sutura* from a heteronormative framework into a vehicle for queer expression. These women demonstrate the constant yet indeterminate possibilities to negotiate between normative expectations and queer lives. They furthermore propose an alternative to the international queer frontier of overt resistance and protest, and suggest that the silences that *sutura* prescribe are more productive for queering their urban environment. By balancing the simultaneous desires of same-sex intimacies, family life, societal expectations and urban success, these women are pioneers in offering new routes for 'queering queer Africa', as Stella Nyanzi has described it.

Résumé

Sutura (discretion, modestie) est un élément central de la culture wolof sénégalaise qui, entre autres choses, valorise l'honneur féminin à travers la chasteté, le silence (en ne parlant pas de sexualité avec ses aînés) et le fait de s'abstenir de parler de désirs homosexuels en général. Par voie de conséquence, on pense que *sutura* limite l'espace réservé aux sexualités non normatives. Or, les femmes lesbiennes sénégalaises emploient le concept de *sutura* de manière stratégique pour naviguer cette normativité sexuelle et de genre, moyennant quoi elles opèrent une queerization du cadre initialement hétéronormatif. Cet article explore comment, aux frontières du militantisme international pour les droits sexuels et de son code social islamique antithétique, les jeunes femmes ouvrent de nouvelles pistes pour penser l'Afrique queer. L'article explore les diverses tactiques qu'utilisent les jeunes femmes pour transformer le cadre hétéronormatif du *sutura* en mode d'expression queer. Ces femmes démontrent la possibilité constante mais indéterminée de négocier entre les attentes normatives et la vie queer. Elles proposent ainsi une alternative à une approche internationale flagrante de résistance et de protestation queer, et suggèrent que les silences prescrits par le concept de *sutura* sont plus productifs pour la queerization de leur environnement urbain. Entre désirs d'intimité homosexuelle, vie de famille, attentes de la société et réussite urbaine, ces femmes sont des pionnières qui ouvrent de nouvelles voies à ce que Stella Nyanzi décrit comme « la queerization de l'Afrique queer ».