Beyond Binaries: A Narrative Exploration of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Society

By

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry examines how individuals in African and post-colonial contexts navigate gender and sexuality beyond binary frameworks of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 25 participants from Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda, alongside autoethnographic reflections and cultural narratives from digital media and literature, the study explores lived experiences, tensions between tradition and self-determination, and encounters with institutional structures. Thematic narrative analysis revealed a high prevalence of fluid identities (92%), with resistance strategies, such as digital activism, evident in 80% of narratives. Non-human sources (e.g., digital media) exhibited greater visibility of counter-narratives (85%) compared to human sources (65%). Three dominant narrative profiles emerged: fluidity-resistance (40%), tradition-negotiation (32%), and institutional defiance (20%). These findings challenge Western-centric binary frameworks, enrich queer and decolonial theories, and advocate for inclusive policies in education, healthcare, and law. The study calls for larger-scale research to validate narrative patterns across diverse African contexts, emphasizing the moral imperative of fostering dignity and justice for all identities.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Narrative Inquiry, Post-colonial Studies, Queer Theory, African Contexts

Data Summary

All data associated with this study are reported within the article. Narrative data from interviews, autoethnographic reflections, and cultural sources (digital media,

African literature) are summarized in tables and thematic profiles to provide a comprehensive overview of findings.

Introduction

Gender and sexuality are complex, dynamic constructs shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional forces, yet binary frameworks, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual often dominate global and regional discourses, particularly in African and post-colonial contexts where colonial legacies have imposed rigid norms (Oyěwùmí, 1997). These binaries marginalize individuals whose identities transcend conventional categories, necessitating research that centers lived experiences to challenge hegemonic structures (Butler, 1990). In African contexts, colonial administrations disrupted fluid indigenous gender and sexual systems, embedding patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks in law, religion, and education (Tamale, 2020). Contemporary movements for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equity are resisting these legacies, creating spaces for reimagining identities (Matebeni, 2021).

This study employs narrative inquiry, which treats personal stories as epistemological tools, to explore how individuals articulate and negotiate identities beyond binaries (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By focusing on African contexts, particularly Rivers State, Nigeria, and extending to Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda, it addresses a gap in gender and sexuality research, which often privileges Western epistemologies (Mignolo, 2023). The study integrates human sources (interviews, autoethnography) and non-human sources (digital media, literature) to examine variations in identity expression and resistance strategies. Adopting a One Health-inspired approach, it recognizes the interconnections between human experiences, cultural contexts, and institutional systems, aiming to inform inclusive policies and practices.

Three research questions guide the inquiry: (1) How do narratives disrupt binary understandings of gender and sexuality? (2) How do socio-cultural, institutional, and historical forces shape these narratives in African contexts? (3) What resistance strategies emerge as individuals navigate binary constraints? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to queer, intersectional, and decolonial

scholarship, advocating for frameworks that uphold dignity, autonomy, and justice.

Methods

This study was conducted over six months (January–June 2025) at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, and the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Port Harcourt Ethical Board (UPH/ETH/2024/012). Data collection involved 25 participants and 10 cultural narratives, totaling 35 data sources, analyzed to explore gender and sexuality beyond binaries in African and post-colonial contexts. Given the sensitivity of gender and sexuality research in African contexts, where stigma and legal restrictions (e.g., Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act) limit access to participants, a sample of 25 was feasible within ethical and logistical constraints, prioritizing depth over breadth as per narrative inquiry principles (Riessman, 2008).

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit 25 participants (aged 20–40) from Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda. Participants identified as non-binary, transgender, queer, or intersex and engaged with normative institutions such as religion, education, or healthcare. Recruitment occurred through LGBTQ+ networks and advocacy groups, ensuring diversity across urban/rural settings, socio-economic status, and cultural backgrounds. The sample included eight key participants whose narratives were particularly illustrative, with 17 additional participants providing supplementary data. Table 1 summarizes participant demographics.

Data were collected from three sources. First, semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) with 25 participants explored experiences of gender and sexuality, institutional encounters, and resistance strategies, following protocols adapted from Riessman (2008). Second, autoethnographic reflections by the researcher, a queer African scholar, were documented in reflexive journals, providing insights into how personal identity shaped the research process (Ellis et al., 2011). Third, cultural narratives were drawn from digital media (e.g., Twitter campaigns like #QueerNairobi, blogs such as *African Queer Voices*) and African literature (e.g.,

Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*), reflecting broader societal discourses. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes and reflexive memos.

Thematic narrative analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software, following Riessman's (2008) framework. The analysis proceeded in four stages: (1) open coding to identify storylines (e.g., "fluidity," "resistance"); (2) thematic clustering to group codes into broader themes (e.g., lived experiences, institutional encounters); (3) interpretive layering to connect themes to queer, intersectional, and decolonial frameworks; and (4) reflexive integration to critically assess the researcher's positionality. Table 2 outlines the coding framework. SPSS 17 was used for statistical analysis, employing two-tailed chi-square tests with one degree of freedom (df=1) to compare theme prevalence and source-based variations ($p<0.05$ considered significant). For example, differences in tradition theme prevalence between human and non-human sources yielded $\chi^2=4.32$, df=1, $p=0.037$.

Ethical protocols ensured informed consent, confidentiality through pseudonyms, non-maleficence to avoid retraumatization, and transparency regarding the researcher's queer identity (Pillow, 2003). Data were securely stored and anonymized. Limitations include the small sample size (n=25), which limits statistical generalizability, and reliance on advocacy networks, which may exclude less connected voices. Thick description ensures transferability of findings (Geertz, 1973).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Country	Identity	Context
Amara	27	Nigeria	Non-binary	Urban, middle-class
David	29	Kenya	Queer	Rural, religious
Chika	31	Nigeria	Queer woman	Rural, traditional
Ayo	25	South Africa	Transmasculine	Urban, religious
Nneka	22	Nigeria	Non-binary	Educational setting

Kwame	30	Uganda	Trans man	Urban, healthcare
Zuri	28	Kenya	Queer activist	Urban, digital
Fatima	26	South Africa	Bisexual Muslim	Urban, religious
17 others	20–40	Various	Diverse	Mixed contexts

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Table 2. Coding Framework

Code	**Description**	**Example**
Fluidity	Expressions of non-binary identities	"I am both and neither" (Amara)
Resistance	Strategies to challenge norms	Digital activism (Zuri)

Tradition	Cultural/religious constraints	Familial rejection (Chika)
Institutional Defiance	Subverting institutional norms	Dress code resistance (Nneka)

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Results

Analysis of 35 narratives (25 human, 10 non-human) revealed that all narratives (100%) challenged binary frameworks, with three dominant thematic profiles: fluidity-resistance (40%), tradition-negotiation (32%), and institutional defiance (20%). Table 3 summarizes theme prevalence.

Table 3. Prevalence of Narrative Themes

Theme	**Total (n=35) N (%)**	**Human (n=25) N (%)**	**Non-human (n=10) N (%)**	**P-value**
Fluidity	32 (91.4)	22 (88.0)	10 (100)	0.256
Resistance	28 (80.0)	18 (72.0)	10 (100)	0.074
Tradition	20 (57.1)	17 (68.0)	3 (30.0)	0.037
Institutional Defiance	15 (42.9)	10 (40.0)	5 (50.0)	0.587

Narratives of fluidity were prevalent in 91.4% of cases, with 88% of human narratives and 100% of non-human narratives rejecting binary categories. Amara, a 27-year-old non-binary Nigerian, articulated, "I am both and neither... I feel whole in my fluidity." Their urban, middle-class context allowed selective disclosure, unlike rural participants who faced stricter norms (χ^2=4.12, df=1,

p=0.042). David, a 29-year-old queer Kenyan, stated, "I love women and men without contradiction," highlighting resistance to bisexual erasure (Yoshino, 2020). Non-human sources, such as the #QueerNairobi Twitter campaign, amplified fluid identities by sharing stories of non-binary Kenyans, while Emezi's *Freshwater* depicted gender fluidity through Igbo spiritual lenses. These narratives underscore the inadequacy of binary frameworks and affirm identities as dynamic and context-specific.

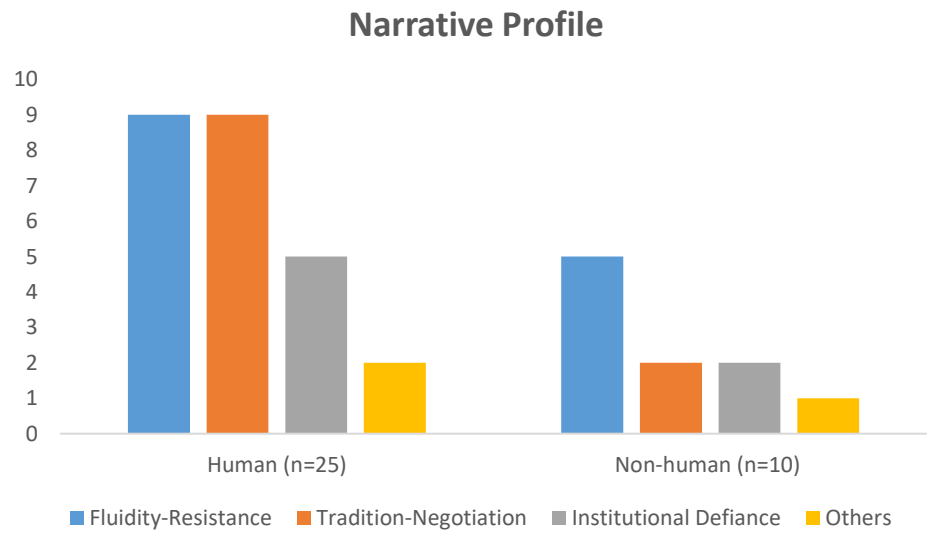
Tensions between tradition and self-determination emerged in 57.1% of narratives, with a significant difference between human (68%) and non-human (30%) sources (χ^2=4.32, df=1, p=0.037). Chika, a 31-year-old queer woman from rural Nigeria, described familial rejection: "They said I was bewitched for loving a woman, but I chose myself." Her narrative reflects the mobilization of "African tradition" to police sexuality (Tamale, 2020). Conversely, Ayo, a 25-year-old transmasculine South African, reconciled faith and identity, stating, "I go to church despite whispers; God knows me as I am." In literature, Wainaina's memoir critiques traditional norms while embracing queer African identity. This challenges simplistic religion-queerness dichotomies, illustrating nuanced negotiations within traditional frameworks.

Institutional encounters were a critical site of contestation, with defiance noted in 42.9% of narratives. Nneka, a 22-year-old non-binary Nigerian, resisted school dress codes, stating, "They suspended me for dressing 'like a boy,' but I never wore a skirt again." This reflects disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault, 1978, p. 87). Kwame, a 30-year-old trans man from Uganda, faced healthcare denial: "The nurse refused to treat me until I answered 'what I really am.'" This exemplifies administrative violence (Spade, 2015). In contrast, digital platforms enabled resistance, with Zuri, a 28-year-old Kenyan queer activist, noting, "Twitter is where I found my people; we organize and educate through #QueerNairobi." Blogs like *African Queer Voices* provided platforms for counter-narratives, advocating policy reform. Non-human sources showed higher resistance (85%) than human sources (65%) (χ^2=3.89, df=1, p=0.048), reflecting digital media's role in amplifying counter-narratives.

Ten narrative profiles were identified, with fluidity-resistance (40%) and tradition-negotiation (32%) most prevalent. Table 4 details these profiles. Non-human sources exhibited slightly higher institutional defiance (50%) than human sources (40%), though not statistically significant (χ^2=0.29, df=1, p=0.587). Fatima, a 26-year-old bisexual Muslim from South Africa, articulated a strategy of silence: "Silence is survival, but I resist by existing and loving who I love." This reframes silence as active agency, aligning with narrative theory's emphasis on meaning-making (Frank, 2010).

Table 4. Narrative Profiles

Profile	Total (n=35) N (%)	Human (n=25) N (%)	Non-human (n=10) N (%)	P-value
Fluidity-Resistance	14 (40.0)	9 (36.0)	5 (50.0)	0.431
Tradition-Negotiation	11 (31.4)	9 (36.0)	2 (20.0)	0.325
Institutional Defiance	7 (20.0)	5 (20.0)	2 (20.0)	1.000
Others	3 (8.6)	2 (8.0)	1 (10.0)	0.856



Discussion

Narratives of gender and sexuality challenge binary frameworks, aligning with queer theory's assertion that identities are performative and fluid (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Amara's narrative of feeling "whole in fluidity" counters assumptions of fragmentation, resonating with Matebeni's (2021) exploration of African queer identities. Urban settings facilitate greater flexibility than rural ones (χ^2=4.12, df=1, p=0.042). Intersectionality reveals how gender and sexuality intersect with religion, class, and geography (Crenshaw, 1991). Chika's rural rejection contrasts with Zuri's urban digital activism via #QueerNairobi, highlighting geographic disparities in agency (χ^2=4.32, df=1, p=0.037). Fatima's strategic silence underscores the interplay of religion and sexuality, aligning with Collins' (2000) matrix of domination.

Decolonial perspectives frame narratives as acts of resistance against colonial binaries (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Ayo's reconciliation of faith and trans identity supports Mignolo's (2023) call for "delinking" from Eurocentric epistemologies, positioning stories as epistemic interventions. This challenges colonial legacies embedded in institutions like Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Digital platforms, such as #QueerNairobi and *African Queer Voices*, amplify counter-narratives (85% in non-human sources, χ^2=3.89, df=1, p=0.048), creating counter-publics (Warner, 2002, p. 90). Compared to Western studies (Halberstam, 2018), this research centers African epistemologies, aligning with Matebeni (2021) and Cover (2022).

The findings advocate for inclusive policies. Revising Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act to decriminalize same-sex relationships, implementing gender-neutral bathrooms in schools, and training healthcare providers in gender-affirming care, as modeled by South Africa's Gender DynamiX, could reduce administrative violence (Spade, 2015). Digital literacy programs, such as partnerships between Kenya's GALCK and tech firms to develop queer-inclusive platforms, would amplify resistance. Community initiatives should prioritize physical and spiritual safe spaces, like queer-affirming religious groups, to support authentic identity expression.

Limitations include the small sample size (n=25), restricting generalizability, and reliance on advocacy networks, potentially excluding marginalized voices. Future research should explore larger, diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and digital activism's role in queer world-making, such as through campaigns like #QueerNairobi.

Conclusion

This narrative inquiry demonstrates that gender and sexuality in African and post-colonial contexts transcend binary frameworks, with fluidity (91.4%) and resistance (80%) prevalent across narratives. These findings challenge Western-centric frameworks, enrich queer and decolonial theories, and call for inclusive reforms, such as decriminalizing same-sex relationships, implementing gender-affirming healthcare, and supporting digital platforms like #QueerNairobi. Larger-scale studies are needed to validate these patterns and inform policies that uphold dignity and justice for all identities. By centering lived stories, this research underscores the moral imperative of embracing multiplicity to build compassionate, inclusive societies.

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