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Violence, Exclusion and Resilience among Ivoirian Travestis

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Abstract

Among sexual and gender minorities in Côte d'Ivoire, *travestis* are defined as individuals born anatomically male who live as women on a full- or part-time basis. Travestis encounter harsher stigmatization and violence than sexual minorities whose gender normativity allows them to avoid unwanted attention. Moreover, they have traditionally been underserved by Ivoirian sexual minority rights groups, who have worked to distance themselves from travestis, framing them as recklessly indiscreet. In this paper, we examine the extent to which travestis' isolation has lessened in the wake of the post-election violence that followed Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 presidential election. We trace how Ivoirian travestis became increasingly vulnerable following the installation of a new national army that proved more hostile to them. And we show how, as a result of anti-travesti abuses committed by the army, non-travesti sexual minority activists became increasingly aware of the plight of travestis, and took steps to include them in their programming. These activists may have also been motivated by an increasing interest in transgender issues on the part of international donors. Finally, we explore the extent to which emerging human rights and HIV/AIDS programming has resulted in newly embodied positions for travestis as they confront identifications reflecting Western trans-spectrum identities.

Keywords

travestis; men who have sex with men; stigma; political homophobia; sex work; Côte d'Ivoire

Introduction

Prior to its closure in 2013, Le Club, a bar in a bustling neighborhood in the south of Abidjan, was packed to the brim most weekends with members of the city's *branché* community – a coded, local term used by sexual and gender minorities to describe themselves and one another. Outside, small groups formed, gossiping, arguing and assessing one another's outfits. Some taxi drivers, lined up on the street awaiting clients, looked on in amusement, others in disgust. Inside, stylish patrons pairing designer shoes with rolled-up jeans or high pumps with skintight dresses perched on faux-leather couches near tables cluttered with beer bottles and the occasional bottle of sparkling wine. As a DJ in the corner

played everything from the latest Rihanna single to local coupé-décalé tracks, those on the dance floor stared themselves down in a wide floor-to-ceiling mirror.

On a night much like this in 2012, the doors to Le Club swung open and men dressed in military uniforms and carrying Kalashnikov rifles filed into the bar. Speaking harshly, some of them demanded free drinks from the staff while others singled out effeminate male patrons and, especially, travestis, ordering them into a military cargo truck outside. Some travestis were forced to strip in the street before boarding. Fear quickly rippled through the crowd. Many of the members of the newly formed national army, the Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), had previously belonged to a rebel force that controlled the north of the country for nearly a decade before migrating en masse to Abidjan during the country's 2010–11 post-election violence (Wells 2011). Since taking over the country, the FRCI had become notorious for human rights abuses meted out against officials and citizens affiliated with the previous government and, in some cases, sexual minorities (Corey-Boulet 2012, Thomann 2014). During this initial raid at Le Club, they threatened to take the effeminate men and travestis back to their bases if they didn't receive a hefty bribe.

The incident turned out to be the first in a series of FRCI raids at Le Club that spanned several weeks. Many of our research participants described this evening and others like it in dramatic detail. During one raid, Claver, the executive director of Alternative-Côte d'Ivoire (Alternative), Abidjan's most prominent LGBTI non-governmental organization (NGO), tried to engage the uniformed men directly, identifying himself as a human rights activist and arguing that the soldiers were violating Ivoirian law. The soldiers responded by threatening to beat him, then firing a warning shot that struck the bar's security guard, who died the following day. Many members of Côte d'Ivoire's branché community described these raids as their most frightening encounters with the security forces in the post-conflict period. But for travestis, and especially travesti sex workers, they were just one aspect of a broader pattern of violence that characterized the time following the country's power struggle. Even more alarmingly, since becoming a ubiquitous presence on the streets of Abidjan, members of the FRCI had been rounding up travesti sex workers in regular raids (Corey Boulet 2012, Thomann 2014). Travestis reported being stripped, beaten and raped at military bases and private villas that had fallen under army control, held without explanation often overnight and sometimes for several days.

Though what constitutes a travesti varies depending on who is asked, the prevailing discourse on travestis in Côte d'Ivoire defines them as individuals designated male at birth who assume a female or feminine gender identity, dressing as women all or much of the time. Travestis sometimes undergo medical treatment, including hormone injections, to produce secondary sex characteristics associated with women, such as breast growth, fat redistribution and the thinning of body hair. Like other sexual minorities, travestis in Côte d'Ivoire are accused of being not just aberrational but foreign, having allegedly imported their identities from elsewhere, namely the global North.

As their run-ins with Côte d'Ivoire's new army show, the stigma and violence travestis encounter as a result is often more extreme than for those sexual minorities whose gender normativity allows them to avoid unwanted attention. Furthermore, travestis fit awkwardly

within the global movement for sexual minority rights, as they do not necessarily embrace – nor do their lives neatly accord with – the standard transgender label employed by international NGOs and human rights organizations.

This paper describes how the lives of Ivoirian travestis have been shaped by the country's political crisis, which spanned more than a decade and culminated in a brief civil conflict in 2010–2011. It traces how travestis became increasingly vulnerable to violence following the brief post-election conflict and subsequent change of power in 2010–2011, and how, even prior to that, they had already been disempowered by a community of donors and local activists who never viewed their needs as a priority. Yet it also shows how non-travesti sexual minority activists responded to the abuses travestis endured by becoming more inclusive in their programming. These activists may have also been motivated by an increasing interest in transgender issues on the part of international donors. Finally, the paper raises questions about the extent to which emerging human rights and HIV/AIDS programming have resulted in newly embodied positions for travestis as they confront and potentially internalize new identifications that reflect Western trans-spectrum identities.

Methodology and Position of the Researchers

We come to this work from different professional and academic backgrounds. Thomann conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Abidjan between 2010 and 2015, primarily in two community-based NGOs, Alternative and Arc-en-Ciel +. During this time, he conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with peer educators, activists and members of the *branché milieu*, including over a dozen travestis. In September 2012 he met Corey-Boulet, a reporter for The Associated Press (AP) who was living in Abidjan, when Corey-Boulet came to conduct an interview with Claver at the headquarters of Alternative. While reporting on the ongoing violence and political repression in Côte d'Ivoire after the 2010–11 post-election conflict, Corey-Boulet began to cover sexual and gender minority issues, which he had previously covered in Liberia. Corey-Boulet has continued conducting regular interviews with members of the *branché milieu*, including travestis, as part of a two-year fellowship funded by the Washington, D.C.-based Institute of Current World Affairs.

In the period after Corey-Boulet's first interview with Claver, a spike in violence against travestis at the hands of the FRCI was a topic of regular discussion at Alternative. After interviewing several survivors of this violence, Thomann contacted Corey-Boulet about the possibility of bringing media attention to the abuses. The resulting reporting received wide coverage in the U.S. and French media (Corey-Boulet 2012, 2013, 2014).

As two white, American gay men, we recognized and grappled daily with our positioning in the *branché milieu* and within Ivoirian society more generally. Our "race" was the first thing most people noticed about us, and the reactions we elicited as we moved about Abidjan offered regular reminders of the wealth that our white skin signals. Our identification as gay men also played into our relationships. On the one hand, our *branché* research participants were comfortable discussing their sexual and gender identities with us at least in part because of an assumed shared identity and desire. On the other hand, we were expected to observe behavioral standards that we were unaccustomed to considering, such as remaining

discreet in public settings and not bringing overtly effeminate branchés to spaces frequented by more gender-conforming branchés. For example, after each of Thomann's interviews, he liked to treat his research participants to a soda or a beer. Often this meant meeting branchés with whom he had developed friendships, such as Fabrice and Yannick, for drinks at a local bar less than a mile from Alternative's headquarters. On two occasions, Yannick scolded Thomann for bringing effeminate men to "our spot." "Matthew, the girls who work here don't know about us. And you're bringing guys with weaves to drink beer in front of them," he said. Fabrice, Yannick and many of our participants purposefully avoided contact with travestis and other branchés whose physical embodiment of their sexual and gender identity would put their own reputations as heterosexual men at risk. In order to maintain their masculine privilege, they had to avoid, if not repudiate, sexual and gender non-conformity. Yannick, Fabrice, and other branchés lived in a gray zone, the product of imposed structural forces that compel victims to turn against one another in their struggle to survive (Levi 2004). Forced into precarious positions, we witnessed many of our gender-normative friends "jockey for survival" (Bourgeois 2009, 428), usually through the exclusion and occasional denouncement of effeminate branchés and travestis.

Other than Claver, who is a highly visible public figure and insisted that we use his real name in our work, we have assigned research participants pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. At the request of leadership at both Alternative and Arc-en-Ciel +, and because of the highly publicized nature of their work, we have retained the real names of the organizations. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken directly from interviews conducted in French by the authors and translated by the authors.

Ivoirian "Transgenderisms" and Ivoirian Heteronormativities

There is significant slippage in the terminology employed in work on sexual subjectivities outside of the North Atlantic context. In many ways, the globalized lexicon of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights fails to capture the complexity of sexual and gender minority practices and identities in Côte d'Ivoire. As Sylvia Tamale argues in her work, researching sexuality in Africa (and anywhere for that matter) without paying attention to gender "is like cooking pepper soup without pepper" (Tamale 2011, 11). Following Tamale, we conceive sexuality as multi-layered and deeply tied to gendered ideologies and other social realities, such as ethnicity, religion and class. Like the *'yan daudu*, Muslim northern Nigerian men discussed by Rudolph Gaudio (2009) who transgress local sexual and gender normativities, we argue that the sexual and gendered subjectivities of those discussed in this article challenge ethnocentric perspectives of sexuality as universally constructed.

Our research participants sometimes self-identified using North Atlantic terms such as the English "gay" and the French "*homo*," while at other times employing a coded, local lexicon known as *woubi-can*, which allowed them to have discreet discussions about broad sexual preferences, specific sexual acts, penis size and preferred sexual positions. In Abidjan, many men who have sex with men and travestis refer to themselves and to the community more generally as *les branchés*. In French, the verb "*brancher*" literally means "to plug in," and is used as slang for someone who is "hip" or "cool," suggesting that someone who is branché is "plugged in" to popular culture. In Abidjan, sexual and gender minorities were able to

employ the word *branché* in public settings to connote non-normative practices and/or identity, without allowing passersby to comprehend its hidden meaning.

Drawing on definitions provided by travestis themselves, we use the term “travesti” to refer to an individual born anatomically male who lives as a woman on a full- or part-time basis. To be clear, labeling all travestis as transgender individuals would be inaccurate. Like the travestis described in Don Kulick’s work in Brazil, many travestis in Côte d’Ivoire do not “conform to standard northern Euro-American sexologies” (Kulick 1998,12) and many were only marginally aware of “transgender” as a social and political category.

Recent scholarship in the field of transgender studies has engaged the expansion of the transgender label across cultural contexts, particularly in the humanitarian and HIV sectors (Valentine 2007, Vidal-Ortiz 2008, Dutta 2013, Stryker and Aizura 2013, Aizura et al. 2014, Dutta and Roy 2014, Stryker and Currah 2014). As many of these scholars point out, the term transgender has been universalized, offering new political inclusion to gender non-conforming communities around the world while eliding local expressions of gender variance. As Aizura et al. explain, “the term transgender itself does not begin to encompass the radically different relationships that gender nonconforming populations across the world have to healthcare, basic rights, safety from criminalization or stigmatization and legal protection or regulation of bodies, identity, and space” (Aizura et al 2014, 308). We join these scholars in both their critique of the transgender rubric and their reluctance to recommend discontinuing its use. While many of our activist research participants employ the category in their human rights work, and others are likely to do the same with increased investment from the global North, we pay careful attention here to the way transgender is deployed by travestis themselves and raise questions about how its use will alter their position within the broader sexual minority movement in Côte d’Ivoire.

Politicians, activists, and scholars from both Africa and the global North have fiercely debated the issue of African homophobia. From such dialogues, the notion of a singular “African homophobia” has emerged, giving the impression that there is something uniquely homophobic about the continent. This is particularly the case when Western politicians, activists and journalists point to anti-gay rhetoric without contextualizing its roots in colonial social constructs and, more recently, in African anxieties over sovereignty and globalization.

Marc Epprecht has examined how African homosexuality has been represented and interpreted from colonialism through to more recent discussions dealing with HIV, human rights and anti-neocolonial movements on the continent (Epprecht 2008). By the time AIDS was identified on the continent in the mid-1980s and it was noted that it affected woman and men equally, Western researchers were more than happy to suggest that heterosexuality was the only African sexuality in existence (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987). While they against Western portrayals of African sexuality as inherently promiscuous, transaction-based and reflecting loose morals, African leaders generally endorsed the view that homosexuality did not exist on the continent (Epprecht 2013,41–42). This persistent ignorance on the part of many African leaders, as well as scholars and activists from the global North, resulted in a

lack of research on same-sex HIV transmission and of prevention messaging tailored to the needs of sexual minorities.

With the emergence of locally- and internationally-supported identitarian movements organized around non-normative sexual rights in the mid-1990s, the issue of homosexuality was again brought to the forefront of debates over African sexuality, particularly in the new democracies of sub-Saharan Africa (Currier 2012; Epprecht 2008, 2013; Lorway 2014; Reid 2012; Tucker 2009). In the context of a continent ravaged by neoliberal structural adjustment programs and populated by an army of technocrats and activists from the global North, sub-Saharan African leaders became increasingly concerned with a decline in sovereignty. Epprecht points out that this led to homosexual scapegoating and increased police surveillance (2008, 60), as politicians and the popular press made links between economic downturns and homosexual activity. Still, the emergence of sexual minority movements and “homophobic” responses to them should be contextualized in their national context (Awondo et al. 2012). As Epprecht points out, the coalescence of postcolonial anxieties over national economies and sovereignty suggest that something “far subtler than homophobia appears to be at play” (Epprecht 2008,12). In the Ivoirian context, homophobia (along with transphobia) may not be a useful word to describe all forms of violence faced by branchés. Rather, this violence could be characterized as heteronormativity, which suggests a larger ideological pattern, rather than homophobia, which suggests an individually rooted belief. As this article will show, issues of direct physical violence that are normalized and accepted, even by many branché activists, are the result of more complex phenomena than the concept of homophobia captures.

The origins of Abidjan’s sexual liberalism

With a population of over 4 million, Abidjan is the third-largest francophone city in the world and Côte d’Ivoire’s economic capital. Driving over the Charles de Gaulle Bridge from the airport and catching the first glimpse of the bright lights, towering skyscrapers and billboards of the central business district, Plateau, one has the impression of being in a commercial district of the United States rather than a recent conflict zone in West Africa. In the wealthy Cocody district, women wearing tailored suits made from expensive Dutch waxprint fabric head home from the market while chatting on Blackberry smartphones and Samsung tablets. In Internet cafés, young Abidjanais retweet Beyonce’s Twitter posts. In its chic restaurants, Chinese businessmen consult on new construction projects and European expatriates discuss development projects over local cuisine. Despite years of economic decline, growing inequality and a protracted political crisis, Abidjan retains a cosmopolitan allure.

Abidjan was established as the capital of the Ivoirian colony in 1920. Prior to this date, the area in and around Abidjan was home to the Ebrié people, members of the Akan tribe that migrated from neighboring Ghana in the 17th and 18th centuries and settled in villages near present-day Abidjan. During most of the colonial-era, Abidjan was a city inhabited by male migrants from the countryside. Its population was approximately 125,000 during the period leading up to decolonization in 1960 (Vidal 1979,141).

In the first years after independence in 1960, everyday life and women's visibility were changing as the post-colonial government pursued a process of modernization intended to make the city the center of West African trade and development. By 1978, the height of Côte d'Ivoire's post-colonial success story, Abidjan's population had grown to 1.3 million. In collaboration with the French government, the regime of founding President Félix Houphouët-Boigny launched a state-capitalist project, making investments in private industry while providing jobs and improved social services to citizens. These improvements were most visible in Abidjan, which was internationally recognized as a cosmopolitan capital where new forms of African modernity were emerging.

By the 1970s the city had become a "self-consciously ultramodern and Westernized city" (Nguyen 2010, 159) and the backdrop for the proliferation of new discourses of gender and sexuality. In her pioneering work on gender in post-independence Abidjan, Claudine Vidal documents some of these changes, in particular the emergence of a sexually liberated group of women who blended Western and Ivoirian aesthetics. Changing gender roles were widely debated in the media as housewives became recognized as businesswomen in an informal economy (Vidal 1977).

Discourses on homosexuality also emerged from this new drive for modernity. In their 1984 article, "*Libéralisme et veçus sexuels à Abidjan*" [Liberalism and sexual experience in Abidjan], Vidal and Marc Le Pape argue that new sexual and gendered experiences resulted from a liberalization of the values that had existed under colonial regulation and the adoption of a "live-and-let-live" attitude by Houphouët-Boigny. They documented an increased visibility of homosexuality in popular discourse, namely in news media covering Ivoirian social life and culture. However, the authors ignore the fact that same-sex sexualities had been documented among many of the ethnic groups that now make-up Côte d'Ivoire (Hutchinson 1861, cited in Murray and Roscoe 1998), including amongst the Ebrié tribes whose villages, now to the east of Abidjan, remain known among branchés as tolerant spaces.

More overt expressions of alternative sexualities were also sometimes tolerated and, in some cases, welcomed. Male prostitution catering to Europeans, for example, went from "rare and discreet" in the 1960s to public in the 1980s, centered in public places. Vinh-Kim Nguyen, whose work chronicles the shifting "sexual modernity" of Abidjan during the AIDS crisis, also argues that Houphouët-Boigny's "Ivoirian Miracle" enabled the proliferation of ideological and social space for homosexual sociality (Nguyen 2006, 247). But there remained lines that were not to be crossed. Le Pape and Vidal cite the case of "Oscar," a Malian hairdresser who would transform himself into Aïcha Koné, the popular Ivoirian disco singer, and lip-sync her songs as part of a café act. Oscar received positive press in print outlets and even appeared on television, but he was later seen to have gone too far when he allowed journalists to take his photo, capturing his gender transgression permanently in the frame. This permanence, it seems, broke the illusion that Oscar's feminine gender identity was restricted to his performances — a bridge too far even in the cultural capital of a country that prided itself on being open and modern.

A nascent travesti movement

In 1994, a group of militant travesti activists stormed the headquarters of an Ivoirian newspaper in an angry response to “sarcastic reporting” about the community, assaulting journalists and breaking a number of windows. This incident and others like it led them to form a group, *L’association des travestis de Côte d’Ivoire* (Travesti Association of Cote d’Ivoire) (Nguyen 2010, 145).

A few years later, a French documentary about the group, *Woubi Chéri* (1998), provided a groundbreaking look at what it was like to be travesti during this time. Moreover, the film highlights two elements of the travesti experience that continue to be relevant today: the struggle to find the right words to talk about the travesti community and the role of sex work in supporting its individual members.

At one point in the film, Barbara, the leader of the Travesti Association of Côte d’Ivoire, discusses branchés’ coded language and how it applied to travestis:

B: We have our own dictionary, our own way of talking. So, for example, when we say *woubi*, woubis are boys who play the role of the woman, who aren’t necessarily travesti, who remain boys and who love men. Me, I am a travesti, it’s special. Well, they call me woubi too because despite everything, I am a boy but I behave like a woman. And then there are the *yossis*. They are boys who sleep with women, travestis, and homosexuals. They are boys who keep their role. They play the role of the boy. They are the ones who behave like boys. They are the husbands of the woubis.

As Barbara points out, woubis and yossis are two poles of an idealized (though not always realized) gendered homosexuality in Côte d’Ivoire, with clear distinctions made between feminine (woubi) and masculine (yossi) branchés and between passive and active sexual partners. Like those gendered homosexualities in rural South Africa discussed by anthropologist Graeme Reid, the categories of woubi and yossi reveal a “sharp distinction between masculine and feminine, with a marked hierarchical aspect that resonates with a heterosexual model” (Reid 2012, 59).

Barbara’s definition also captures some of the overlap and ambiguity in these terms in the Ivoirian context – for instance, when she notes that she could be described as both a travesti and a woubi, something that gender-conforming woubis would surely dispute. Nearly 20 years later, the definition of travesti in Cote d’Ivoire still varies widely, even among travestis themselves. It is not uncommon for a member of the branché community to give conflicting definitions within the span of a single interview. Points of contention include how often one must dress and present as a woman to qualify as a travesti as well as whether sex work is an essential component of travesti identity.

Jean, a self-identified woubi and LGBTI activist, offered the following explanation when asked what distinguishes a travesti from a woubi:

J: A woubi is a complete homosexual who doesn’t dress as a woman. Someone who is a man. That is a woubi. But the moment you start dressing in women’s clothes

you are a travesti. A travesti is someone who dresses as a woman. It can be momentary, it can be frequent. You can be dressed as a boy during the day, but at night you dress as a woman. You are a travesti. There are those who do it 24/7. There are those who don't do it 24/7. There are those who do it half-time: day, man; night, woman. That is a travesti, someone who transforms himself.

Others, however, provided more nuanced definitions for the term travesti. Julie, a 24-year-old travesti and peer educator at Alternative, indicated that those who dress as women occasionally did not necessarily belong in the same category as those who assumed a permanent female gender identity. She also occasionally used the word "transgender" [*transgenre*] in referring to certain travestis, betraying her exposure to sexual minority rights discourses from the global North. However, like travesti definitions in general, the use of the word *transgenre* varied, pointing to the fluidity of the concept.

J: There are transgender (transgenres) who live strictly as women as often as possible. Like me, like Sarah. There are also travestis who are professional sex workers, some of whom change just at night to do sex work. During the day they are dressed as men. There are also transgenres who are sex workers, like Sarah, who live strictly as women.... And there are occasional transgenres who do it maybe just two times each year.

In addition to this contested language, Woubi Cheri also highlights the centrality of sex work to the travesti experience, showing travestis out on the stroll in search of clients and featuring an interview with one who describes how sex work has allowed her to become financially independent.

In a landscape marred by very limited opportunities for employment and severe anti-travesti discrimination, sex work remains the most viable occupation for many travestis today. While exceptions exist, all the travestis we've interviewed since 2012 currently support themselves primarily through sex work or have engaged in sex work at some point in their lives. When we asked Jocelyne, a travesti sex worker, if most of the travestis she knew engaged in sex work, she exclaimed, "Yes, they are travestis!" In providing a definition of a travesti, Raoul, a self-identified woubi and LGBTI activist who was friendly with many travestis, suggested that sex work is an essential part of their lived experience.

One reason for the industry's appeal is the fact that there are few barriers to entry: the only requirement is finding a client. While fulfilling this requirement does not always come cheaply or easily – clothes and makeup must be purchased, skills such as negotiation must be learned – travestis are willing to make these investments knowing they are unlikely to encounter barriers to entry once they deem themselves ready to begin working. The payoffs for sex work, while unpredictable, can be substantial, often higher than the salaries for low-skilled positions typically occupied by Ivoirian women.

Interviews with travesti sex workers revealed that the appeal of sex work extends far beyond money. Other scholars have documented similar experiences among sexual minority sex workers in a variety of contexts (Edelman 2011, Lorway 2009, Kulick 1998). In addition to financial support, travesti sex workers said their jobs provide them with skills to perfect their female gender presentation, a place to bond over shared experiences with other travestis and,

crucially, experience coping with the stigma that is likely to follow them for the rest of their lives.

Some travestis said they benefited from the challenges inherent in sex work, specifically the harassment and even the violence they encountered while out on the stroll. Raissa, a 24-year old travesti and one of the few travesti LGBTI rights activists in Abidjan, clearly could have survived without the money she earned from the sex trade. Her family, while not exorbitantly wealthy, was comfortable. When we interviewed her, she was pursuing an arts degree at a private university in Abidjan. After she described her violent run-ins with FRCI soldiers, we asked her why she continued to work in the sex trade. She said the violence itself was something that had helped her learn and grow. “For me, the street has been a life training,” she said. “Because me, I was somebody very calm, very reserved. And when I got there, it really opened my eyes. You know how to fight, you know how... yeah. So that trained me a bit. Which means that now I am no longer afraid.” Raissa’s depiction of sex work is important because it suggests that the experience of being a travesti is not exclusively one of suffering. Rather, it involves bravery, grit and a distinct lack of shame that can, at times, rankle other members of Abidjan’s branché community.

Travesti marginalization in the branché community

Not long after Woubi Chéri’s release, Barbara emigrated to France, and the Travesti Association of Cote d’Ivoire lost momentum. Members’ militant activism fizzled out and, over time, their contributions were largely erased in the context of the nonprofit industrial complex, which shifted the focus to “men who have sex with men” and channeled money into organizations representing them.

Nguyen argues that HIV/AIDS NGOs disseminated discursive practices concerning (homo)sex and (homo)sexuality and began serving a “quasi homosocial sphere” (Nguyen 2005, 258). Indeed, NGOs came to play an integral part in the homosocial milieu, and many of the activists and HIV peer educators that work for Alternative and Arc-en-Ciel + became well known among Abidjan’s branchés, enjoying a kind of celebrity status. These networks offered political inclusion and new opportunities for self-fashioning, though these opportunities were typically extended only to only certain members of Abidjan’s branché milieu.

Travestis, in particular, grew increasingly marginalized within a nonprofit industry focusing on HIV vulnerability among “men who have sex with men.” NGO staff members heavily policed their presence and behavior. As a result, even though travesti members of the branché milieu – especially those engaging in sex work – were potentially the most vulnerable to violence and HIV infection, they benefited little from increased outside investment in their health and human rights.

The presence of travestis at community-based NGOs became a subject of much controversy. Most of the peer educators and activists preferred their advocacy to remain discreet and often chided effeminate men and travestis for drawing unwanted attention to the milieu. At

times even Claver, the head of Alternative, can be unabashed in his criticism of travesti behavior:

C: If you have to dress as a travesti, that's going to cost you, your family. It's not worth doing it. I call those things that aren't necessary... I can't keep people who feel like they are women from doing it. But if you think that you can wear a dress and walk in front of a mosque and they are not going to stone you, go right ahead. Because you know that's going to cost you your life.

This mentality was pervasive up to and through Cote d'Ivoire's 2010–11 post-election violence. As a result, as travestis entered a particularly dark period in terms of stigma and abuse, other members of the *branché* community remained largely in the dark about what was happening.

Travesti vulnerability during and after “la crise”

The shantytown in which Sarah lives is set in a ravine, under a bridge that connects Cocody's Deux Plateaux and Riviera neighborhoods. The houses were made of a mixture of mud and concrete. Many had large, black trash bags bound around the walls to keep out water. We followed Raoul, one of the few travesti-friendly peer educators at Alternative, along the dirt path, turning a corner and walking up a steep incline, deeper into the shantytown. He made a left into one of the *cours communes* [communal courtyard].

Two one-room units lined the left side of the courtyard, with an outdoor shower and a concrete stall with a hole that serves as a toilet. A rectangular courtyard took up the rest of the space. Sarah emerged from the second doorway. Her breasts were bound and her short hair, which she usually covered with one of her shoulder-length wigs, was tucked tightly under a baseball cap. Another travesti, wearing a hooded nightgown, stepped out of the first doorway and greeted us. “I'm Yasmine,” she said. Sarah pulled back the blue-and-yellow *pagne* cloth hanging over the doorway to the second unit and ushered the three of us into the small room. Advertisements for *palme d'or*, a popular skin care product, lined the walls from floor to ceiling, making the room look wallpapered and cozy. On the left side of the room was a vanity, with several skin care and other beauty products lining its shelf. Settling in on the mattress, Yasmine explained that she had been on her nightly stroll when members of the FRCI stopped her. She pulled up her nightgown, pointing first to her swollen foot, then to bruises, scrapes and wounds on her legs, arms and shoulder.

Y: We, the travestis, we suffer a lot right now. They chase us every time. When we go out, we are not comfortable working anymore. And myself, last night, I was a victim because there was a FRCI [soldier] who chased me and he knew I was a travesti. He chased me until he caught me. And when he caught me he said, “You're fucked. You're really fucked.”

The officer stripped Yasmine before she escaped. She ran, falling over the uneven pavement as he chased her back toward the shantytown. She made her way home where Sarah was waiting, arriving half-naked, bleeding and barely covered by her torn dress. As Sarah began explaining her shock upon her arrival, Yasmine held up a pump by its broken heel and shook

her head. Sarah spoke of how she had experienced similar kinds of violence at the hands of the FRCI.

S: I have been subject to plenty of violence. It's always the FRCI, they can't stand us. They can't stand the travestis. One time, I went out and just like that they took me. My cell phone was stolen, they took my cell phone and my money. They beat me relentlessly and stripped me naked.

As we wrapped up the interview, we asked Yasmine if she planned to file a complaint against the FRCI base where travesti sex workers were often taken to be beaten.

Thomann: Do you think you will file a complaint?

Y: Where? What am I going to go and say? That I am a travesti and that they violated me?

S: There is no law to defend us.

Y: Maybe when I get there, I'll be locked up for that [being a travesti sex worker]. I don't know. We are violated but we can't complain. Who are you going to complain to? Who would defend you? Who is going to defend a travesti? I don't know. If you're hurt, you care for yourself. You can't complain. They're just going to say "Oh, it's just a travesti, it's just a pédé."¹ Whatever. Who's going to defend you?

This type of violence against travesti sex workers, described to us by more than half a dozen other travestis who had experienced it firsthand, has clear ties to the Ivoirian political conflict. Like all violence targeting sexual minorities, it must be contextualized, in this case as occurring in the wake of months of fighting and as former rebels, many of whom had never been to a major city before, took over the country's security apparatus. While our social network in Abidjan was connected to networks of branchés in the central cities of Yamoussoukro and Bouaké, our research participants claimed that branché milieus had not emerged north of Bouaké. As such, they explained, these mostly Muslim fighters from northern Côte d'Ivoire had never seen groups of travestis before.

The travestis we spoke with confirmed that the subjectivities of the FRCI drove the violence. Sarah and Yasmine argued that security forces under Gbagbo were not nearly as harsh as the FRCI.

S: Before [the conflict] there weren't actions like that. If they took you they may tell you that you have to pay a certain amount and then they would liberate you. But there wasn't any violence... It was the moral police, they send you to central, you pay a certain sum and you're liberated. You're not raped. But since the advent of this new regime they are always looking for problems with us.

The insistence of Sarah and Yasmine that the recent violence was connected to the conflict was confirmed by every travesti we met. Raissa, a 24-year-old travesti sex worker, explained that she and other travestis had placed restrictions on where they worked after the arrival of

¹Though employed much like the English word "faggot," the word pédé has etymological roots that are significant. It is the apocope of the word "pédéraste" which refers to intergenerational relationships between boys and older men in Greek antiquity that were both sexual and educational.

the FRCI. When we first asked Raissa to talk about her experiences with the FRCI, she began with the start of the war.

R: The first time, I was in Deux Plateaux. It was the beginning of the war, really. When they had just elected Alassane [Ouattara]. It had already died down and there was a curfew. And I was in Deux Plateaux in a taxi. I came upon an FRCI blockade. When we got to the blockade, they asked me where I was going. I said I was going home, when I was really going to the “office” [the street]. So, I went to the office. And they came and found me there. When they found me there were three of us. They got out, they grabbed our stuff. They emptied our bags onto the ground and started to smack us around. And there was one who said that he was going to kill us. We asked for forgiveness. There were a lot of them, I can’t remember exactly, around ten or something like that. They stripped us and beat us. There was one who said he was going to kill us and started loading his gun. We started to cry and asking for forgiveness, just asking for forgiveness. There was one among them, who wasn’t actually FRCI, he was an old gendarme of Gbagbo and since he was used to seeing us he didn’t have a problem with us. So it was him who said to stop. He tried convincing them, that ‘No, they’ve been like that for a long time’ and ‘We’re used to seeing them around here. You’ve already smacked them around, just leave it at that.’ So that’s how they left us. They took all of our stuff with them. So we got dressed and went home.

Like Sarah and Yasmine, Raissa placed the tolerance of the former regime in the foreground of her testimony. She situated the event as happening “just after they had elected Alassane [Ouattara].” Her savior is a former member of Gbagbo’s gendarmes. She also recounted another time when the FRCI were prepared to kill her after finding her on her stroll. Central to the description of this second incident is the religiosity of the FRCI, who are assumed by Abidjanais to be Muslim. Raissa said that one of her attackers told onlookers that the Quran says that if you kill a homosexual, you go to heaven. This characterization of the FRCI (and those assumed to be northern and Muslim more generally) as violent due to their religion and their lack of exposure to the cosmopolitan city life of Abidjan was common among our branché research participants. In a November 2012 interview, Raissa explained that, eventually, violent attacks lessened and were replaced by mere “shake-downs.” She chalked this up to FRCI becoming more used to travestis.

R: They’ve stopped a bit. It’s not like before when they beat us every day. Now they’ve become... now there are no longer attacks. Before, they were annoyed to see men dressed like women. “Why don’t you work? Why are you out here looking for money?” But now they know that we earn more money than the women. So now when they come, they slap us around they take our telephones, our money. And then they leave... They’ve have gotten to know us.

Travestis’ stories about FRCI violence only partially reflect the extent to which Ivoirian homophobia is believed to be rooted in ethnicity, religion and broader questions of belonging. Branchés consistently characterized Muslims and northerners (residents of northern neighborhoods in Abidjan as well as the country’s northern region) as uneducated, less tolerant and more prone to violence. That geographic origin, often linked to ethnicity

and religion, was so often highlighted as the reason for violence toward branchés suggests that homophobia and ethno-religious belonging are ideologically linked in the minds of many sexual minority activists. Such views have roots in Côte d'Ivoire's political crisis, during which various political actors questioned the cultural and political legitimacy of northern Ivoirians, who occupied a subaltern position in Abidjan's colonial and post-colonial economy. In the wake of political battles over succession, debates over land rights and neoliberal economic reforms that crippled the country, Ivoirian politicians resorted to ethno-nationalist discourses that politicized birthplace, culture and religious affiliation. Emerging from these complex histories are cosmologies of relative modernity (Malkki 1993) that are particular to Abidjan and its colonial, post-colonial and recent history of political violence. Identity politics mobilized by politicians led to the emergence of an "urban sense of national identity" (Newell 2012, 3), whereby northerners are depicted as uncultured and ill-suited to urban life. As Claver's explanation suggests, branché activists draw on such national identity markers in their portrayal of the violence that branchés suffer, arguing that the FRCI are a threat to a culture of cosmopolitanism and of LGBT tolerance for which Abidjan has developed a reputation (Kouassi 2011, Corey-Boulet 2013, Fioriti 2014).

Travestis' current position in the branché milieu

For several months after Côte d'Ivoire's political crisis officially ended, non-travesti members of the branché community had little idea of the violence being meted out by the FRCI against travesti sex workers. However, the crimes eventually became too flagrant to ignore. Moreover, incidents such as the raid on Le Club described in this paper's introduction enabled gay men to appreciate the soldiers' capacity for violence against travestis.

There is some evidence that the violence has inspired gay men to be more accepting and inclusive of travestis, particularly at the activist level. Immediately after the post-election violence, travestis had no official representation at Alternative. However, in 2012, Sarah, a travesti sex worker, began working there after being attacked multiple times by FRCI soldiers. Over time she assumed greater responsibility within the organization. This process was abetted by the French embassy's decision to award a \$50,000 grant to Alternative for programming that would promote the human rights of sexual minorities, including transgender populations. Following the disbursement of this grant, which is much broader than the HIV-focused funds local activists have received through other organizations, Sarah and other travestis have received extensive paralegal training and have been working directly with travestis throughout Abidjan who have come to distrust the organization.

Today, Sarah's role consists primarily of enlisting other travestis to participate in existing programs such as workshops and trainings for HIV/AIDS peer educators. In addition, she said Claver regularly deputizes her to help free travesti sex workers who have been caught up in nighttime police raids, which often requires paying bribes at police stations and holding centers. Julie, another travesti, also began working at Alternative in the wake of the crisis. Both she and Sarah have mixed feelings about their roles. While they said their presence in the organization is a clear sign of progress, Alternative remains dominated by gay men, and the vast majority of its programming has little to do with issues of concern to

travestis. Moreover, there is some suspicion on the part of both Sarah and Julie that Alternative's newfound interest in travesti issues could merely be a reflection of the priorities of donors. Alternative now frequently cites travesti violence in its human rights reporting and funding proposals, and even staff members who exhibit derisive attitudes toward travestis speak out and publicly represent travesti suffering in circles of international donors and advocates, documenting such abuses in an apparent bid to garner legitimacy and funding.

Nevertheless, Claver has made clear he values the travestis' presence, and the general sense of welcome they've encountered at Alternative is among the factors that have so far stopped them from branching off and starting their own travesti-specific organizations. Claver has also on several occasions expressed interest in organizing programs providing psychosocial support for the children of travestis, though funding has not materialized. Thus, while he at times blames travestis for their own suffering, he clearly possesses some concern for their welfare and that of their family members.

This is not to say, however, that tensions between travestis and other sexual minorities have altogether disappeared. Workshops organized by groups including Alternative often include implicit and explicit warnings against behavior that travestis consider essential to their identity. One of the more blatant examples of this type of messaging came on May 17, 2014, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT), a decentralized campaign organized by governments, international organizations and LGBTI groups to mark the day the World Health Organization declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder. To mark the occasion, Alternative held a meeting and discussion at its headquarters in Abidjan's Angré neighborhood. The building, a two-story converted villa on a busy street, is the site of regular weekend discussions for members of the branché community – chiefly gender-normative men – and serves as a safe gathering space for them during the week, regardless of whether they have official ties to Alternative.

The theme of the discussion that day was "Côte d'Ivoire: Homosexuality and Democracy." Toward the beginning, one of the facilitators asked the 40 or so people in attendance to raise their hands if they believed that, despite the absence of anti-gay legislation in Côte d'Ivoire, violence against sexual minorities was widespread. Many hands went up, and some attendees began sharing stories of violence they'd encountered personally. After a while, a travesti took the floor and described, quickly and with little evident emotion, an attack in which she was beaten, stripped and anally raped by multiple men who did not wear condoms or use lubricant. Most of the room fell silent, but not everyone. One of the men in the room, Eric, who had earlier scoffed at the notion that sexual minorities were regularly targeted for violence, openly laughed.

The facilitator tried to shift the discussion to some of the factors that contribute to homophobia in Ivoirian society, focusing on the media in particular. But Eric wasn't finished. Taking the floor himself, he argued that gay men and travestis brought mistreatment upon themselves. Referring to homophobic Ivoirians, he said, "In their head, what is a homosexual? A homosexual is someone who has thrown away his life, who is not intelligent." And yet, he said, effeminate men continue to insist on broadcasting their

homosexuality to the world. Travestis, he added, are even more brazen. He concluded that anyone who was born with a penis should “walk like a guy.”

Despite the presence of two travestis in the room, including one who had described her own rape just minutes before, Eric’s comments did not prompt any objection. The only person who made the point that the assailants – and not the victims – in anti-gay attacks were the ones who might need to change their behavior was a French representative of the International Federation for Human Rights, a young man who up until then had been sitting quietly in the back of the room.

Eric’s description of who is to blame for violence against travestis highlights a significant difference between how many travestis view themselves – as people with strong feminine identifications and, in some cases, female gender identities – and how they are viewed by other members of the *branché* community. Rather than respecting travestis’ assumed and declared gender identity, *branché* men such as Eric tend to view them instead as exceptionally flamboyant versions of themselves. As a result, in the context of conversations about violence, their female gender presentation is seen as little more than a behavioral quirk – one that is blamed for attracting unwanted attention and harassment.

This conception of travestis is also prevalent outside Abidjan. In Bouaké, Côte d’Ivoire’s second-largest city, located in the north of the country, many *branchés* said they found the environment to be more hospitable than Abidjan in part because there are no travestis there. In fact, *branchés* in Bouaké rarely used the word *travesti* at all, instead describing Abidjan’s travestis as especially effeminate *woubis*. Inza, a *branché* in Bouaké, lumped travestis along with *woubis* when he tried to explain the difference between *woubis* in Abidjan and *woubis* in Bouaké. In Abidjan, he said, *woubis* “have no fear” and “do extravagant things.” He continued: “They stay out all night. They cross-dress in the middle of the day. There are boys with [hair] extensions. That’s Abidjan.” In Bouaké, by contrast, he said it would be impossible for a *woubi* to dress as a woman because of the attendant stigma and potential for violence, both of which are exacerbated by the fact that it lacks the anonymity of a big city. Jonathan, another *branché* in Bouaké, similarly described people who were born male but dressed as women as “extravagant *woubis*,” and claimed he would never be seen on the street with one. “Those are the ones who shock the population. Everyone would look at us. They’d insult us,” he said. “It would be good if activists... could change the behavior of these extravagant *woubis*.”

Ivoirian activists and peer educators focused much of their efforts on changing “risky” sexual behavior. This is in line with the prevailing public health ideology, which contends that individualized risk drives negative health outcomes and advocates individual behavior change as key to improving health. The peer educators had received training in behavioral change communication (BCC) strategies so that they could work with *branchés* to lower sexual risk taking behaviors.

We quickly learned that peer educators also used BCC strategies to discourage behaviors that fell outside the realm of sex and that such interventions were key to the process of identification among *branchés* in these spaces. At identity workshops, messages were

related to members of the organization concerning a variety of social behaviors that could attract unwanted attention to the individual and to the milieu more broadly. Peer educators and activists used the BCC model to police undesirable gender non-conforming behavior. When we asked Philippe, an HIV peer educator at Arc-en-Ciel +, why he thought he had never experienced blatant discrimination or violence like many others had, he said: “Well, maybe it’s because my behavior is good. Yes, it’s my behavior.” The behavior of less fortunate members of the organization, particularly those who were gender non-normative, was a frequent topic of discussion, as described by Felix, the 28-year-old head of monitoring and evaluation at Alternative:

F: We try to give them a certain education. When they come to see us, they show up and they see that we are correct [meaning gender normative]. You can be branché and behave like that [correct]...I have seen a big change. We saw a big change because when there are activities in homes, or in other spots, they *se deguiser* [disguise themselves]. But once they leave, they change. They change their clothes and then they are correct.

These types of interventions, which effectively erase the travesti experience, are proof to Julie that one day it might be necessary to form an organization that focuses solely on the challenges facing travestis. Despite the increasingly inclusive nature of Alternative and sexual minorities in Abidjan generally, Julie said travestis remain the only true guardians of their interests because few outsiders can possibly understand their lives.

J: It’s really not the same set of challenges. When you are a homosexual, you have the possibility to walk everywhere and no one can know. You can walk, you can live in your family. When you are a travesti, you need to dress all the time as a woman in order to be in harmony with yourself. Eventually you are rejected by your family because you are no longer the same person you were when you were born. You have changed your identity.

Conclusion

As the above testimony makes clear, travestis have not been fully integrated into the world of Ivoirian branchés. This reality was further underscored by the latest edition of the “Miss Woubi” beauty pageant, which has been a source of controversy both within and beyond the branché milieu for the past several years.

On a cool Friday evening in early October 2014, more than 100 branches gathered on the grounds of a villa in the upscale Vallon section of Abidjan’s Deux Plateaux neighborhood. “Tonight we’ll see the chic, the glamor, we’ll put on a good show,” the MC promised as attendees took their seats in plastic chairs. Over the next several hours, 14 contestants – most of them woubis – modeled everything from bathing suits to “traditional” clothing before giving short speeches on the challenges of living in a society dominated by anti-gay views. Despite the large turnout, two groups were conspicuously underrepresented both on the stage and in the crowd, though they stayed away for different reasons. First, travestis lamented that the event was dominated by woubis who were merely dressing as women for amusement and to draw attention to themselves. While the organizer said Miss Woubi was

intended to be inclusive of travestis, he defined the term loosely to encompass any branché man who dressed as a woman for any period of time. Sarah said this discouraged her from coming. “That doesn’t interest me too much, because I said to myself, ‘It’s not the travestis who come. It’s something for the gays, for everyone,’” she said. “If someone asked me to participate as a judge I could go, but because it’s more for the gays it’s not really for travestis and transgender people.”

The most prominent of Côte d’Ivoire’s LGBTI rights activists were also largely absent, citing concerns about security. Despite a prohibition on all forms of recording and photography, in 2012 the weekly tabloid newspaper *Allo Police* published pictures of that year’s Miss Woubi pageant, including some that featured the faces of participants. The resulting scandal so rattled those involved that the event was canceled entirely the following year. In the run-up to the 2014 pageant, activists said the breach was evidence that the event was poorly organized. They expressed fear that, because of widespread disdain for travestis, both participants and attendees could be exposed to violence if security forces or anti-travesti civilians heard about the pageant in advance.

Thus, while Miss Woubi was ostensibly organized to celebrate travesti expression and style, the composition of the attendees highlighted two of the main challenges described in this paper: the lack of security in the face of violence as well as travestis’ marginalization – whether intentional or unintentional – at the hands of other sexual minorities. As we have shown, the country’s 2010–11 post-election crisis resulted in an uptick in violence that, at least temporarily, put travestis at even greater danger. As other branchés became aware of the extent of travesti suffering, they took steps to be more inclusive and accommodating toward a population that, historically, has inspired ridicule and even disdain. This progress has been limited, however. As the Miss Woubi pageant demonstrated, there are still unresolved questions over travestis’ appropriate role in Abidjan’s branché community and whether full integration is desirable and obtainable.

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