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(State-Sponsored) Homophobia and the Invisibility of Queer Women in Senegal

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(State-sponsored) homophobia and the invisibility of queer women in Senegal[1]

This article examines state-sponsored homophobia in Senegal, focusing on its key actors, underlying causes and socio-political consequences. Central to this discussion is the erasure of the góor-jigéen*, a historical figure whose exclusion reflects broader efforts to suppress all forms of sexual and gender diversity in the country. Framed in a rhetoric that constructs homosexuality as both "un-African" and incompatible with Islam, this narrative further criminalizes LGTBQ+ individuals and reinforces the legal, religious and cultural mechanisms of oppression they face all at once. Particular attention is also given to the lives of queer women in Senegal, whose experiences remain largely overlooked and understudied both in academic research as in public discourse, contributing to their generalized invisibility. In examining how queer women strategically employ* sutura *and* teránga *to navigate repression and maintain social ties, this research highlights how they are discreetly contesting traditional norms and creating spaces for queer expression.*

Keywords: state-sponsored homophobia, góor-jigéen, queer women, sutura, teránga

Homofobia promovida pelo Estado e a invisibilidade das mulheres queer no Senegal

Este artigo examina a homofobia promovida pelo Estado no Senegal, centrando-se nos seus principais atores, causas e consequências sociopolíticas. No centro desta discussão fica o apagamento do góor-jigéen*, uma figura histórica cuja exclusão reflete esforços mais amplos para suprimir todas as formas de diversidade sexual e de género no país. Enquadrada numa retórica que apresenta a homossexualidade como simultaneamente "não africana" e incompatível com o Islão, esta narrativa contribui para a criminalização das pessoas LGBTQ+ e reforça os mecanismos legais, religiosos e culturais de opressão a que estas estão sujeitas. Presta também especial atenção às vidas das mulheres queer no Senegal, cujas experiências continuam a ser largamente ignoradas e pouco estudadas, tanto na investigação académica como no discurso público, contribuindo para a sua invisibilidade generalizada. Ao analisar de que forma as mulheres queer recorrem estrategicamente à* sutura *e à* teránga *para navegar a repressão e manter os seus laços sociais, esta investigação evidencia como contestam, de forma subtil, as normas tradicionais e criar espaços para a expressão queer.*

Palavras-chave: homofobia promovida pelo Estado, góor-jigéen, mulheres queer, sutura, teránga

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Despite significant legal advancements in LGBTQ+ rights, such as the decriminalization of same-sex relationships and marriage equality, state-sponsored homophobia remains deeply entrenched globally. In Africa in particular, 33 governments continue to criminalize same-sex relations, reinforcing discriminatory laws and fostering hostile environments of oppression against LGBTQ+ individuals. Senegal exemplifies this reality, where state-sponsored homophobia is legitimized by political and religious leaders and where queer individuals are portrayed as a threat to societal morality and persecuted under Article 319 of the Penal Code. This hegemonic rhetoric, that claims homosexuality to be both un-African and incompatible with Islam, has led to the erasure of historical representations of gender and sexual diversity in the country, such as the *góor-jigéen*, allowing homophobia to gain traction among society. Queer women, whose experiences are largely absent from both academic research and public discourse, face unique challenges in navigating this repressive environment. By examining what it means to exist at the intersection of queerness and of femaleness in Senegal, this article explores how queer women strategically draw from their own cultural toolbox – employing *sutura* (discretion) and *teràngа* (hospitality) – to navigate repression and maintain social ties while discreetly creating spaces for queer expression at the risk of legal persecution and social ostracism.

Note on terminology and methodology

This article acknowledges the complexities and inconsistencies that may arise in the use of terminology related to queer identities in Senegal, as the expressions employed are not universally accepted and may not reflect how individuals self-identify. These variations arise from multiple factors, including the diverse concepts and expressions presented in the work of the cited authors when addressing this topic. Likewise, many terms may also be contested and carry conflicting meanings, partly because of their Euro-American footing, which often fails to acknowledge important cultural nuances and can have pejorative connotations associated with assumed truths on sexuality and gender (Spronk & Nyeck, 2021, p. 392). Local epistemologies, such as the Wolof expression "*góor-jigéen*", are employed to address specificities that are indigenous to Senegal but can also be limiting as they mainly refer to gay men (Rueda et al., 2020, p. 7). The choice to use the term queer in this paper is intentional, as it seeks to encompass and capture the rich and fluid nature of sexual and gender diversity, especially in a context where traditional categories may not fully capture the complexity of local experiences (Abbas & Ekine, 2013).

This article was conducted within the project: Sexual and reproductive rights and cultural resistances based on gender in Western Africa: Inequality, violence and legitimacy (SEXRWA) (2018-2021) PTDC/SOC-ANT/31675/2017, funded by FCT, with CEI-Iscte as host institution. Regarding the methodology employed, the research was carried out using qualitative analysis of secondary sources and specialized studies on sexual diversity in Africa, with a focus on queer women's experiences in Senegal. A conscious effort was made to incorporate and amplify voices and perspectives from the African continent and diaspora, as well as women's narratives, to challenge the narrow lens through which these stories are often told. Key contributions came from postcolonial feminist scholars like Sylvia Tamale, Coudou Bop, and Ayo A. Coly, as well as researchers such as Marc Epprecht, Signe Arnfred, Stephen O. Murray, and Will Roscoe. Other influential works included those by Rachel Spronk, Sybille N. Nyeck, Stella Nyanzi, and Peter Geschiere. Senegalese scholars like Babacar M'Baye and Coudou Bop were fundamental for understanding the cultural and historical context of homosexuality in Senegal, as well as the work of Christophe Broqua and Boris Bertolt and Lea E. J. S. Massé in analyzing the instrumentalization of homophobia in the country. Studies by Ivy Mills, Loes Oudenhuijsen, and Beth Parker gave the much-needed insight into the realities of queer women in Senegal. Finally, due to the impossibility to conduct personal interviews, non-academic sources such as newspaper articles, blogs, and social media were consulted to gather firsthand testimonies regarding the topic.

Sexual minorities in Senegal: arbitrary arrests, community violence and impunity

In Senegal, consensual same-sex sexual relations have been legally banned since 1965, five years after the country gained independence from France in 1960. All the same, the current Senegalese Criminal Code is largely inspired by the 1940s French one, from where it adopted the term *acte contre nature*[2] (Mbaye, 2016, p. 11; Mbaye, 2018, p. 15; Rueda et al., 2020, p. 8). Although homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned in any Senegalese law, Article 319, paragraph 3, of the 1965 Senegalese Criminal Code stipulates that:

> *sera puni d'un emprisonnement d'un à cinq ans et d'une amende de 100.000 à 1.500.000 francs, quiconque aura commis un acte impudique ou contre nature avec un individu de*

[2] [Unnatural act.]

> *son sexe. Si l'acte est commis avec un mineur de 21 ans, le maximum de la peine sera toujours prononcé*[3] (Mbaye, 2018, p. 15).

Based solely on the law, it appears that same-sex sexual relations are criminalized but not sexual orientations *per se* – that is, homosexual acts are persecuted, but not necessarily homosexuals themselves (Human Rights Watch, 2010). A distinction that the Senegalese government has insisted upon when defending itself against the allegations of other nation states and human rights organizations, by claiming that being gay is not a crime in Senegal (Coly, 2019, p. 31). Nonetheless, in practice, the enforcement of this law is currently being used to target individuals based on their presumed sexual orientations as well as to criminalize gender identity and expression in the country.

As denounced by Amnesty International in their 2020-2021 Report (Amnesty International, 2021, pp. 313-314), there has been a significant increase in the number of defamatory campaigns and death threats aimed at LGBTQ+ individuals in Senegal. Additionally, the number of arbitrary arrests has risen, with systematic use of police brutality being reported (ILGA, 2020). Given the growth of community violence and of hate crimes against queer individuals over the past years, the implicit endorsement of the Senegalese government regarding the homophobic attacks in the country seems evident (Bainier, 2021). This complicity is underscored by a broader societal context, where political figures and religious leaders often contribute to a climate of intolerance that exacerbates community violence against LGBTQ+ individuals (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Bertolt & Massé, 2019). As such, tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality in Senegal are extremely low. According to a 2016 Afrobarometer poll, less than 5% of Senegalese (approximately 3%) expressed that they would "like or not care having homosexuals as neighbors" (Pichon & Kourchoudian, 2019, p. 5). In fact, queer individuals are often denounced and publicly exposed by their neighbors (Serena, 2014, p. 90), who, as noted by Ayo A. Coly (2019), "have also started reporting or punishing alleged homosexual activity" (p. 33). In some cases, the most extreme vigilante practices and neighborhood watches have involved breaking into private residences to strike those suspected of being gay, as well as exhuming the bodies of alleged homosexuals from their graves (Mills, 2011, p. 119). Following the State-Sponsored Homophobia Report by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), Senegal remains one of 69 UN member states in which consensual same-sex relations are illegal and where homosex-

[3] [Will be punished by imprisonment, from one to five years, and with a fine of 100,000 to 1,500,000 francs, anyone who commits an indecent or unnatural act with an individual of their same sex. If the act is committed with a minor under the age of 21, the maximum sentence will always be applied.]

uality is actively persecuted (ILGA, 2020, p. 25). That is, a country where there are no legal protections for LGBTQ+ citizens and where being gay and/or being perceived as such is a criminal liability faced with legal and societal punishment.

In recent years, Macky Sall, the president of Senegal, has consistently maintained that the country is "not ready to decriminalize homosexuality" (Corey-Boulet, 2013), nor willing to openly accept it. A political stance that has earned Sall the respect of many, who praise him for not turning his back on the country's core values and resisting international pressures. Like when he stood up to former U.S. President Barack Obama during his 2013 visit to Dakar and shot down his proposal to decriminalize homosexuality in Senegal (Nossiter, 2013). A position he reaffirmed during Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's official visit in February of 2020, stating: "We cannot ask Senegal to legalize homosexuality and organize tomorrow's Gay Pride. It is not possible. Our society does not accept it. [...] It is our way of living and being. It has nothing to do with homophobia" (Africanews, 2020). Since his election in 2012, Macky Sall – who had previously been called "*le candidat des homosexuels*"[4] by his opponent Abdoulaye Wade (Broqua, 2016, p. 170) –, has been unequivocal regarding Article 319, by insisting that it would not be repealed under his tenure, declaring: "*Jamais, sous mon magistère, l'homosexualité ne sera légalisée sur le sol sénégalais*"[5] (Aziz, 2016).

Homosexuality as un-African and un-Senegalese

In Senegal, approximately 95% of the population identifies as Muslim, 3% as Christian, and the remaining 2% as belonging to traditional and animist religions (Broqua, 2016, p. 2; Bop, 2008, p. 6; Serena, 2014, p. 87). Following Marame Guèye (2019), "in Senegal, Islam is often heralded as the monitor of all behaviors, regardless of the fact that the republic is not an Islamic one and has a secular constitution" (p. 3). The religious authorities in the country, known as Marabouts[6], hold significant power and legitimacy within Senegalese society, playing a crucial role in enforcing sexual morality based on their interpretation of religious texts (Bop, 2008, p. 5). When discussing homosexuality, their stance is unequivocal: "This is a Muslim country, and in our religion, we can't accept that" (Nossiter, 2013). The primary argument against the decriminalization of homosexuality in Senegal is its perceived incompatibility with Islam, which is seen as a threat to society and to the preservation of the country's cultural and religious values.

4 [The homosexuals' candidate.]

5 [Never, under my presidency, will homosexuality be legalized in Senegalese soil.]

6 Religious scholars, holy men.

Additionally, as noted by Marc Serena (2014), in Senegal and across many African countries, homosexuality is often perceived as something inherently "un-African" (p. 92). This notion is rooted in the shared belief that homosexuality was first brought to the African continent by European colonizers and is still being exacerbated through globalization and neo-imperialism today. As such, more often than not, homosexuality is seen as a Western intrusion, considered incompatible with indigenous African cultures. As Mohamed Mbougar Sarr points out in an interview held with *Jeune Afrique*:

> *Comme la plupart des sociétés africaines, la société sénégalaise a été brutalement projetée dans la mondialisation. Les grandes questions sociétales se posent désormais à elle en des termes qui lui sont étrangers. Par exemple,* [...] *certains m'ont soutenu que « l'homosexualité venait de l'extérieur ».* (Juompan-Yacam, 2021, p. 38)[7]

Following Bertolt and Massé's research (2019), these prevailing negative sentiments towards homosexuality in Senegal can also be attributed to the unintended effects of foreign interventions in the field of sexual and reproductive rights in the country (p. 33). As Oudenhuijsen (2021) points out, in Senegal, "the West is perceived as promoting homosexuality, prostitution, and sexual liberalism" (p. 437). Consequently, efforts to decriminalize homosexuality have accentuated a form of exclusionary cultural nationalism grounded on heteronormativity, leading to a crusade against LGBTQ+ individuals and those advocating for the so-called Global Gay Agenda (Coly, 2019, p. 41). This "massive wave of acute homophobia", following Ayo A. Coly (2019), is not an isolated phenomenon (p. 44). As she sees it, "African homophobias are in conversation with each other, often borrowing from and competing against each other and, also, collectively enunciating an African moral superiority against the political and economic dominance of the West" (Coly, 2019, p. 27). While acknowledging that "the recent outbursts of homophobia in various African countries have followed quite different trajectories" (Geschiere, 2017, p. 11), it is important to view the situation in Senegal as part of a broader regional trend that is being exploited by many politicians to deflect political opposition and divert public attention from pressing domestic issues (Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 33; M'Baye, 2013, p. 113; Reid, 2022). Albeit with the exceptions of South Africa, Lesotho, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea Bissau, Seychelles and Botswana, that are among the

[7] [Like most African societies, Senegalese society has been brutally thrown into globalization. The major societal issues are now posed in terms that are alien to it. For example, [...] some people have argued that "homosexuality comes from abroad".]

few African countries that have decriminalized same-sex relationships and provide legal protection to LGTBQ+ citizens (Dionne & Dulani, 2020).

The erasure of the *góor-jigéen*

Despite the widespread moral panic portraying homosexuality as both a novelty and foreign influence (Bop, 2008, p. 5), historical evidence reveals that same-sex relations have long been present in Senegal and that it is rather the terms used to describe them that have changed overtime. Thus, contrary to popular belief, gender and sexual diversity have traditionally existed in the country for centuries (Bop, 2008, p. 5; M'Baye, 2013, p. 118; Oudenhuijsen, 2021, pp. 436-437; La France, 2016, pp. 34-35). A notable example is the *góor-jigéen*,[8] translated from Wolof to English as 'man-woman'[9] (M'Baye, 2013, p. 113), a native, pre-colonial figure that has existed in Senegal since at least the late nineteenth century and whose social status was comparable to that of griots – poets, musicians, and custodians of the oral tradition (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, pp. 436-437; Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 23; M'Baye, 2013, p. 113; La France, 2016, pp. 34-35). According to Babacar M'Baye, Professor of Pan African Studies at Kent University, "If we just focus on the term, 'góor-jigéen', it is composed of two words: 'góor', which means a man or men in general, and 'jigéen', which means a woman or women in general" (Moreiras & Barkallah, 2021). Following his explanation, "góor-jigéen means a man, a human being, that has two identities, two characteristics, two forms of behavior, [and] two forms of self-representation that combine masculinity and femininity" (Moreiras & Barkallah, 2021), further implying that a person could present "both male and female characteristics", as well as "possess a dualistic gender and sexual identity" (M'Baye, 2013, p. 122). As noted by Bertolt and Massé (2019), the *góor-jigéen* encompassed two types of realities: men who engaged in same-sex sexual practices and men who openly crossdressed (pp. 23-24).

In Senegalese culture, *góor-jigéens* usually adopted the social roles and physical attributes associated with femininity (mannerisms, makeup, hairstyles, and clothing) and took on a series of important roles in Senegalese society (M'Baye, 2013, p. 221). Generally, *góor-jigéens* would entertain guests as performers (poets, musicians, and masters of ceremony), and were present during many popular celebrations, including "those taking place upon returning from pilgrimages to Mecca" (Bop, 2008, p. 5). They were also said to be "showered with gifts by their benefactors who protected them" (Bop, 2008, p. 5), as they were the consorts

[8] Also written as *goordjiguène, goor-djiguène, gordjiguène, gor-djiguène,* or *gor-digen.*

[9] Which can also mean 'effeminate' and 'womanish'.

and confidants of the *driankés*,[10] distinguished rich women whom they advised and spent time with (Mills, 2011, p. 120; M'Baye, 2013, p. 123). According to Cheikh Niang, "*Les femmes leaders (les driankés), qui menaient les grandes mobilisations sociales, avaient autour d'elles des homosexuels. Il y avait systématiquement des homosexuels qui habitaient dans leur cour*"[11] (as cited in Mbaye, 2016, p. 12). It has also been noted that during this time, *góor-jigéens* were allowed to marry men, although it did not necessarily imply that the couple shared the same household (Bertolt & Massé, 2019, pp. 23-24). Moreover, following Babacar M'Baye (2013), during the Islamic holiday of Tamkharit, "Senegalese men and women (and boys and girls) were allowed to dress in the clothes and adopt the mannerism of the opposite sex or gender", allowing them to "switch and emulate variant gender identities" (pp. 122-123). These practices suggest that different forms of gender variance were historically accepted in Senegal. Nonetheless, and even if *góor-jigéens* were said to "not suffer in any way socially", it should be noted that "the Mohammedans refused them religious burial" (M'Baye, 2013, p. 121). This ambivalence regarding *góor-jigéens* highlights the interplay between acceptance and exclusion present in Senegal at the time, particularly in religious contexts.

Nevertheless, as stated by the journalist Michael Davidson:

> In 1949, [...] Dakar was already the "gay" city of West Africa. When I returned nine years later, the French rulers had gone, and Dakar was gayer than ever. For some reason, buried in history and ethnography, the Senegalese [...] have a reputation in all those regions for homosexuality, and in Dakar one can quickly see that they merit this reputation. (Broqua, 2017, pp. 165-166; Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 24; Rodriguez et al., 2021)

In her work, Ayo A. Coly (2019) also refers to Dakar as the "gay capital of Francophone Africa" (pp. 27-29), as during this period, the city was a "host to social cultures of gender variance that also subsumed same-sex sexualities" (Coly, 2019, p. 27). Following her research, despite the "scapegoating of gender-nonconforming men by French colonials" (Coly, 2019, pp. 29-30) as part of their *mission civilisatrice* (M'Baye, 2013), "gender variance endured and made marks on the post-colonial urban Senegalese landscape" (Coly, 2019, pp. 29-30). In an interview held by Marta Moreiras and Arwa Barkallah for *Africanews* (Moreiras & Barkallah, 2021), Babacar M'Baye recalls how, during his childhood in the 1970s and 1980s, there wasn't "any violence perpetrated against those individuals;

[10] Also written as *diriyaanke*, refers to women in positions of social importance.

[11] [The women leaders (the *driankés*), who led the big social mobilizations, had homosexuals around them. There were always homosexuals living in their courtyards.]

[...] we considered them like our fathers [and] gave them the same sense of respect that we gave to our fathers and our uncles" (Moreiras & Barkallah, 2021). Likewise, the Senegalese author Mariètou Mbaye Biléoma, best known as Ken Bugul, also describes how in the 1960s, in her small town of Guinguinéo,

> *Dans toutes mes autobiographies, il n'y a pas un livre où je n'en parle pas, parce qu'ils faisaient partie de notre quotidien.* [...] *Tout le monde allait voir comment ils dansaient parce qu'ils étaient bons danseurs. Ce n'était même pas un problème de les intégrer parce que ça ne se posait pas*.[12] (as cited in Coly, 2019, p. 30)

Senegal thus maintained a "culture of tolerance or, at best, indifference towards gender variance", both prior to the French colonial rule and after it obtained its independence (Coly, 2019, p. 30).

The invention of the homosexual

Before the '*góor-jigéen*' originally lacked the negative connotations associated with the Western notion of homosexual (Coly, 2019, pp. 33-34) and contrary to what is experienced today, until not long ago, *góor-jigéens* were accepted as a part of the community, albeit with certain limitations (Moreiras & Barkallah, 2021). Nowadays '*góor-jigéen*' has become a pejorative and derogatory term used to insult, mock, and belittle those suspected and/or accused of being gay. Like other gendered slurs, such as '*fag*', '*faggot*' or '*homo*' and '*pédé*'[13], the term '*góor-jigéen*' mainly applies to men who do not meet the expectations of masculinity or who behave in an effeminate manner (Scruton, 2017, pp. 49-50). Given the lack of another specific term in the Wolof language, it can also be used to insult and discredit women who do not embody the patriarchal standards of femininity and who adopt dissident sexual and/or gendered behaviors and/or expressions. Over time, the term has become interchangeable with 'homosexual', 'gay', 'lesbian', 'transvestite', and 'transgender' (Mills, 2011, p. 118; M'Baye, 2013, p. 113). As described in the testimony of one of Niang's informants:

> The term *gor jigéen* frightens us. When someone says it in our presence, it makes us shiver. The term is like a siren sound that we expect to be followed by insults, blows, or stones thrown at us by out-of-control mobs. (Niang et al., 2003, p. 505)

[12] [In all my autobiographies, there's not a book where I don't talk about them, because they were part of our daily lives. [...] Everyone went to see how they danced, because they were good dancers. It wasn't even a problem to integrate them, because it didn't pose an issue.]

[13] French homophobic slur which derives from the abbreviation of pedophile.

The replacement of the *góor-jigéen* by the homosexual is, according to Ayo A. Coly (2019), an "orchestrated reinvention" (p. 31). That is, a "meticulous manufacturing" (Coly, 2019, p. 45) that resulted in the displacement of the indigenous figure of the *góor-jigéen* who became "socially unintelligible" (Coly, 2019, p. 39), and was redefined as a threat to society. This consequently contributed to the negation of his rights as a full citizen (Bop, 2008, p. 5; La France, 2016, p. 3) and to the delegitimization and criminalization of homosexuality as a sexual practice and identity (Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 25; Broqua, 2017, pp. 79-80). Following Ayo A. Coly (2019), as "popular homophobia represents the politically engineered sociocultural response to this invented figure" (p. 34), it wasn't until the adoption of the Western labels of 'gay' and 'homosexual' that anti homosexuality as it is experienced today started to emerge in Senegal.

Promoting fear: the role of politicians, religious leaders, and the media

State-sponsored homophobia

Ever since the "displacement of the indigenous figure of the *góor-jigéen (goor-djiggen)* by the homosexual" (Coly, 2019, p. 45), the instrumentalization of homophobia has become a recurrent political strategy in Senegal. Oftentimes, politicians are the ones who encourage and legitimize the use of violence against queer individuals in the country (Rueda et al., 2020, pp. 10-11), by fostering a hostile environment towards anyone suspected of being gay or of taking part in any actions aimed at promoting sexual and gender diversity (ILGA, 2020, p. 121). As noted by Coudou Bop (2008), "those who are working for homosexual rights are called 'fags' and are even threatened with harm" (p. 5), leaving little to no room for organized activism in the country at the risk of suffering greater repercussions or being outlawed.

This reality becomes particularly evident during political campaigns, where homophobic discourses are pronounced to gain electoral support (Bop, 2008, p. 5). Thus, explaining why homosexuality remains fixed on the political agenda as a salient and pressing issue (La France, 2016, pp. 5-6). The recent protests condemning homosexuality, as well as the latest law proposal seeking to modify Article 319 of the Senegalese Criminal Code, are indicative of how this matter is currently being handled in the country. By pushing for stricter legislation, it seems Senegalese society wishes to implement greater sanctions against those who "practice, promote, or conceal homosexuality" (M'Baye, 2013, p. 112). Moreover, this new law also intends to replace the term '*actes contre nature*' by "lesbianism,

homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, intersexuality, zoophilia, necrophilia, and other similar practices" and to reinforce the current sanctions against individuals who engage in same-sex relations from prison sentences of 1 to 5 years to those of 5 to 10 years, as well as from fines of 100.000 to 1.500.000 FCFA to those of 500.000 to 5.000.000 FCFA (*Senegal Parliament Rejects Law Increasing Prison Time for Homosexuals*, 2022). Recent cases have shown how these actions have also been followed by stricter enforcement of the existing law (ILGA, 2020). Following the testimony of one of the men interviewed after the protest "*Sénégal dit NON à l'homosexualité*" that took place in Dakar on the 23rd of May of 2021:

> *Depuis le 23 mai, le climat ici est horrible. On nous considère comme des animaux sauvages. Dans la rue, on est beaucoup plus regardés encore qu'avant, et j'ai encore plus peur. J'essaye de m'habiller différemment, d'être discret.*[14] (Bainier, 2021)

As explained by Babacar M'Baye (2013), "understanding homophobia requires us to focus not only on the truth or falsity of the hegemonic claims about the subjugated community but also on how such assumptions empower the dominant group's attempt to control the oppressed group" (p. 111). Other authors such as Michael J. Bosia and Meredith L. Weiss (2013) also consider that political homophobia should not be reduced to an ideology nor to individual prejudice but should be understood as "a state strategy, social movement, and transnational phenomenon" that is used for the "legitimation of political and economic power" during "the course of nation building" (pp. 2-3). In their research, Boris Bertolt and Lea E. J. S. Massé (2019) argue that political homophobia in Senegal "remains a recent, modular phenomenon embedded in power relations between Senegalese society and the West, religious authorities and political leaders, and between political leaders and their opponents" (p. 33). Based on their findings, state homophobia operates as a cultural marker that builds national identity and reasserts national integrity in the face of Western influences, while also redefining moral boundaries in times of social and political instability (Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 33). A strategy that involves the scapegoating of an "other", in this case of a sexual minority, to gain political support and access to power (Bosia & Weiss, 2013, p. 14; Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 22). Following Lianne La France's findings (2016), rather than being fueled by homophobic sentiments *per se*, the politicization of homosexuality in Senegal is the result of political opportunism (p. 6). For Ayo A. Coly (2019), the political mechanics at play in Senegal are also evident, as she accuses politicians in Senegal of having consciously fue-

[14] [Since May 23rd, the atmosphere here has been horrible. We are considered like wild animals. In the street, we are being stared at a lot more than before, and I'm more afraid than ever. I try to dress differently, to be discreet.]

led the rise of homophobia for their own personal gain (p. 39). According to her, by spreading homophobic sentiments across the country to promote self-serving agendas, politicians have profited from a new form of political currency (Coly, 2019, p. 28). This political tool (Tamale, 2013) is currently being utilized to serve the interests of conservative politicians and religious leaders in their joint efforts to establish a new model of governance and turn the "destiny of the embattled nation around" (Bop, 2008, p. 3; Coly, 2019, pp. 39-40) by freeing Senegal from immorality (Broqua, 2016, p. 173).

The fight against HIV/AIDS as a catalyst

Since the late 1990s, Senegal has implemented numerous initiatives and preventive campaigns aimed at putting an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, by focusing on those at greater risk of infection and in need of antiretroviral treatment, these same actions have contributed to the stigmatization of homosexuals in the country (Lamarange et al., 2009, p. 659). As argued by Christophe Broqua (2016), by publicly exposing "men who have sex with men" (MSM), the population at higher risk of HIV/AIDS infection in Senegal, this public health issue unleashed a "catalyst effect" that increased the hostility expressed towards homosexuals around the country (p. 167). These campaigns had "bitter consequences for homosexuals, especially affecting their physical and moral integrity", which, according to Coudou Bop (2008), led to the "disintegration of the rights they have fought for so long to acquire, among them notably their right to good health" (pp. 2-3), making them even more "reluctant to consult [healhcare professionals] when symptoms occur" (Lamarange et al., 2009, p. 636). As a result, homosexuals in Senegal became an even greater target of domestic, community, and institutional violence (Broqua, 2016, p. 173; Bop, 2008, p. 6; Lopez, 2018).

Religious persecution

By accusing homosexuals of "destabilizing Senegalese society, corrupting moral values, and throwing the nation in total disarray" (Coly, 2019, p. 37), this lack of overall sympathy towards them has allowed for:

> The constellation of religious actors who are obliged against homosexuality, first and foremost Jamra[15], to dominate the public debate and to exercise their critical vigilance in the face of anything that may resemble, in one form or another, [a] positive expression of homosexuality. (Broqua, 2016, p. 175)

[15] The Islamic group Jamra, previously known as Djamra, is an Islamic NGO in the country devoted to fighting immorality.

The acceptance and normalization of homosexuality, and therefore its decriminalization is seen by most religious leaders in Senegal as "the latest insidious Western colonial imposition that must be resisted" (M'Baye, 2013, p. 122), as well as another "attempt by Western actors or states, including France, to interfere" in the country (Broqua, 2016, p. 171).

By denouncing the increase of homosexuality, religious leaders are calling upon politicians and the overall population to "fight against homosexuality before it will be too late" (Bop, 2008, p. 2). In sum, backing up any anti-gay bills and calling for tougher sentences against homosexuals in Senegal and in neighboring countries (Pichon & Kourchoudian, 2019, pp. 4-5). In the words of Abdoul Latif Coulibay, one of Jamra's former leaders, "*le combat contre l'homosexualité et toutes les déviances qui déshumanisent l'individu est un combat légitime et moral, mais aussi hautement civique et patriotique*"[16] (as cited in Coly, 2019, p. 38). Thus, dictating that a "good" Senegalese Muslim, who protects the integrity of the nation and the wellbeing of younger generations, must not only be heterosexual but also a fervent "antigay vigilante" (Coly, 2019, p. 40). A new logic of identity that is "incompatible with defending homosexuals and even less with presenting oneself as such" (Broqua, 2016, p. 174). As in Senegal, it is considered "*suicidaire de ne pas se déclarer contre l'homosexualité*"[17] (LaLibre.be, 2016).

According to Coudou Bop (2008), this social fear and cultural anger have triggered a form of "homophobic hysteria", which has led to a nationwide "crusade" against the "enemies of faith" and turned their persecution into a matter of religious morality and national patriotism (pp. 2-4). Following the statement made by one of Ivy Mills' informants:

> A man that's known as being homosexual can't be buried in a cemetery. His body needs to be thrown away like trash. His parents know that he is gay, and they did nothing about it. So when he died, we wanted to make sure he was punished (Mills, 2011, p. 119).

This growing intolerance has also been associated with the rise of religious fundamentalism in the country (Rueda et al., 2020, p. 13; Bop, 2008, pp. 7-8). Based on the study carried out by Boris Bertolt and Lea E. J. S. Massé (2019), over the past years, religious authorities who support a rigid application of the sharia have gained increasing popularity among the youth (pp. 29-30). As such, a greater number of young people are being drawn to the fundamentalist line, which,

[16] [The battle against homosexuality and all the deviances that dehumanize the individual is a legitimate and moral battle, but also a highly civic and patriotic one.]

[17] [suicidal not to declare oneself against homosexuality.]

according to Codou Bop (2008), "makes them believe that religion is the only answer to the economic and social problems they encounter" (p. 7). Following Babacar M'Baye:

> [A] significant part of the country's desperation was displaced onto homosexuals and transgender people as many Senegalese retreated into antihomosexual moralistic discourses as a means to appease their rage against a regime that had left the country in shambles. (M'Baye, 2013, p. 113)

Thus, explaining why "Senegalese society is becoming more and more intolerant, as well as more and more hypocritical" (Bop, 2008, p. 5). The growing exposure to these homophobic discourses has crystallized the anger of Senegal's predominantly young population (Coly, 2019, p. 40; Bop, 2008, p. 3), which has led to a "process of re-appropriation and restoration of [traditional] values" (M'Baye, 2013, p. 113). Following Coudou Bop's work (2008), "a more diligent analysis of the actions of these past several years by Senegalese fundamentalists reveals a strategy which has been used in other similar instances" (p. 2). As she sees it:

> First the focus was upon the issue of women's rights [considered "Westernized feminists" seeking to destroy the "Senegalese family"], and today, upon homosexuals, an even more vulnerable group because of the profound social stigma against them. (Bop, 2008, p. 2)

A strategy that consists in "unleashing popular vindictiveness" against a designated group "accused of acting contrary to Islamic moral values" (Bop, 2008, p. 3). Consequently, "by disseminating homophobic rhetoric based on religious interpretations and putting pressure on political leaders and the government" (Bertolt & Massé, 2019, p. 33), spiritual leaders are directly influencing the political agenda in the country today. Moreover, by seizing the opportunity that the press has furnished them to further decry homosexuality, "these same people manipulate the media to represent themselves as defenders of the faith and of the moral order" (Bop, 2008, p. 3).

The media: loudspeakers of hatred

Over the last decade, the growing obsession of the tabloids regarding the topic of homosexuality has led to the violent exposure of countless queer individuals in the country. By associating them with pedophilia, the spread of HIV/AIDS, and overall criminality, the Senegalese media has actively contributed to

the proliferation of homophobic sentiments across Senegal (Rueda et al., 2020, p. 14). As denounced by Human Rights Watch, "all too often, the Senegalese media has presented one-sided accounts, become a cheerleader for intolerance, or itself recommended violence against people perceived or known to be gay" (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Far from exposing the truth, many news outlets are the ones spreading rumors and creating scandals. A practice also taking place in other neighboring countries, such as Cameroon, where public news networks have published the names and photographs of presumed homosexuals on multiple occasions (Geschiere, 2017, p. 12).

The 2008 gay marriage controversy, also known as *L'affaire du Mariage Homosexuel de Petit Mbao* (Mbaye, 2016, pp. 11-12), showcased the power of the Senegalese press, who, with little to no evidence, created a national scandal that put homosexuality on the front pages of every newspaper. This led to "the arrest, public humiliation, and prolonged persecution of men suspected or known to be gay" (Human Rights Watch, 2010) and signaled the beginning of the ongoing "witch-hunt" against gender-nonconforming individuals in the country (Coly, 2019, p. 27). Consequently, the year 2008 marked a turning point in Senegal (Coly, 2019, p. 28), as from there on, newspapers started reporting on alleged homosexual activity on a regular basis (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 437). Prior to the scandal, as noted by Ayo A. Coly (2019), "there were discursively no homosexuals and gays in Senegal" (p. 34) and up until then, Article 319.3 of the Senegalese Criminal Code was considered as being part of the "long-dormant legislation against homosexuality" (Ayo A. Coly, 2019, p. 33).

In recent years, as shown in Loes Oudenhuijsen's research (2021), lesbians and queer women have also become the target of these mediatized scandals (p. 437). In 2012, the *Grand-Yoff affair* regarding an alleged sex tape that starred three young women ignited a lot of controversy in the country. Following Mbaye (2021), despite the apparent similarities with the derogatory discourse employed in other similar media coverages, in this case women's bodies were described pornographically by male journalists who stated that the women hadn't taken any pleasure in the act and had felt "guilt" and "shame" for their actions (p. 22). Reaffirming the belief that sexual relations cannot exist outside of a heterosexual framework, that is, without a male counterpart. This scandal exposed women's same-sex practices to the general public while it also discredited lesbianism in the country (Mbaye, 2021, pp. 21-24). Following a 2013 article entitled: *Sénégal: cinq femmes arrêtées pour « actes contre-nature »*, "*au Sénégal, quand on parle d'homosexualité, cela concerne surtout les hommes, et on oublie les femmes, [...] [mais] les gens*

commencent maintenant à faire la chasse aux lesbiennes"[18] (Le Corre, 2013). By also being subjected to the media's scrutiny, women's same-sex relationships are becoming more visible, reflecting a shift in the evolving dynamics of homophobia in Senegal (Mbaye, 2021).

Furthermore, given the increasing access to smartphones and social digital platforms, the fight against homosexuality is also being waged on the internet. The wide circulation of videos where homosexuals are filmed being harassed, tortured, raped, and even murdered has made this reality particularly evident. This violent content generates thousands of views online and ends up going viral, further endangering victims by exposing their identities and whereabouts (Barkallah, 2021). As noted by Ivy Mills (2011), "the tragic story of Madièye Diallo is particularly noteworthy, as his exhumation in the city of Thiès was filmed on cellphone video, circulated via cell, and sold in the market in DVD format" (p. 119). Today, social media is being used to blackmail and extort LGBTQ+ individuals and is playing a crucial role in the dissemination of homophobic sentiments and of hate crimes across the country. This new epoch of "antigay vigilantism" is characterized by the mediatic exposure of individuals known or suspected of being gay. That is, by the violation of the Senegalese notion of discretion, *sutura* (Coly, 2019, p. 38).

Sutura, suspicions, secrecy

Breaching *sutura and* the limits of *teràngа*

To get a greater sense of what the culture of silence stands for in Senegal, it is crucial to understand what lies behind the notion of *sutura* (Coly, 2019, p. 32). That is, to grasp how social behavior is codified around the idea of keeping what is private away from the public sphere. As noted by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, the author of the novel *De Purs Hommes*, "*les choses se savent, se vivent, mais ne doivent surtout ni se dire, ni s'écrire*"[19] (Juompan-Yacam, 2021, p. 39). S*utura* is simultaneously a fundamental value in Islam as well as a central element in Senegalese Wolof culture (Mills, 2011, p. 116). As explained by Loes Oudenhuijsen (2021), *sutura* is both an attribute you possess as well as something you do (p. 436). You can, for example, give someone else *sutura* by hiding their misbehavior and show your own *sutura* by avoiding certain practices (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 436). Following Wolof morality, as shame is only declared upon public exposure,

[18] [In Senegal, when we talk about homosexuality, it's mostly about men, and we forget women, [...] [but] people are now starting to hunt lesbians.]

[19] [things are known, and lived, but must never be spoken or written about.]

a bad deed that is not visible to others does not immediately lead to dishonor (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 436). *Sutura* is thus used to veil and cover what is not meant to be seen or spoken about.

Additionally, s*utura* is regarded as the foundation of femininity in the country and serves the purpose of protecting and maintaining the hierarchical, patriarchal, and Islamic structures in place (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 436). As women are the ones expected to ensure that things are kept quiet and remain hidden, there is always more at stake when *sutura* is breached by a woman than by a man. Following Loes Oudenhuijsen's research (2021), "among other things [*sutura*] promotes feminine honor through chastity, silence with regard to discussing sexuality with elders, and refraining from articulating same-sex desires in general" (p. 434). Stressing how *sutura* involves the politicization of private matters, such as desire, intimacy and (same sex) sexuality. As argued by the author Leila Slimani regarding sexuality in Muslim communities, "*en una sociedad como la nuestra el honor es lo primero. No se juzga la vida sexual de la gente sino la publicidad que dan, o se atreven a dar, de ella*"[20] (Slimani, 2018, p. 20). Public exposure can thus be life-threatening, as "in Senegal, you don't need proof, only suspicions" (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

According to Bertolt and Massé (2019), by infringing the boundaries between femininity and masculinity that reinforce the submission of women to men, *góor-jigéens* are accused of violating *sutura* (p. 25), as their mere existence challenges the social order in place and breaches the fine line between "inclusion and exclusion and around life and death" (Mills, 2011, pp. 119-120). According to Ivy Mills (2011), "the *góor-jigéen*, by his very being, has broken the social contract and violated the *sutura* that enables the harmonious reproduction of the community" (p. 119). Consequently, *góor-jigéens* are denied the right to privacy conferred through *sutura* and are said to possess a "contaminating pollution" (Mills, 2011, pp. 119-120) that makes them unworthy of being welcomed in the community. That is, undeserving of *teràngа*.[21]

Translated from Wolof to English as hospitality, *teràngа* is another central value of Senegalese culture that implies respect, solidarity, and tolerance (Riley, 2019, pp. 113-114; Oudenhuijsen, 2018, p. 8). Nonetheless, when *sutura* is breached, communal *teràngа* immediately vanishes. As explained by one of the informants of LaLibre, "*la condamnation sociale dont sont victimes les homosexuels révèle*

[20] [in a society like ours, honor comes first. It is not people's sex lives that are judged, but the publicity they give, or dare to give, to them.]

[21] Also spelled as *teraanga*.

la face cachée de la 'teránga', l'accueil et la tolérance, chère au pays"[22] (LaLibre.be, 2016). Following Marc Serena's research (2014), "*la legendaria hospitalidad senegalesa, la teránga, se desvanece cuando alguien se sale de la norma*"[23] (p. 98). Just like *sutura*, *teránga* is also considered an ethos of femininity and is another gendered performance expected of women (Riley, 2019, pp. 113-114). As argued by Loes Oudenhuijsen and Ivy Mills, when a woman breaks with these social values, she arguably breaks with legible womanhood and faces the risk of being exposed and losing her status as a *jigéen ju baax*[24] (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, pp. 435-436; Mills, 2011, p. 3). Thus, in Senegal, discretion is not only a social expectation but can also be a matter of survival (Barkallah, 2021).

The invisibility of queer women in Senegal

Although queer women are, to a certain extent, unacknowledged in Senegal, as Ayo A. Coly points out:

> The relative invisibility of women who have sex with women in homophobic discourses in Senegal suggests that what is also at stake here is the dramaturgy of the virile nation-state and the continuing circulation of heteropatriarchal masculinity as political currency (Coly, 2019, p. 45).

This reality highlights how in Senegal homophobia and sexism are two edges of the same sword (Mbaye, 2021, p. 22). By challenging the ideals of femininity and of masculinity, women who have sex with women (WSW) are accused of disrupting the social order in place and of "attacking men's virility" (Barkallah, 2021). As a result, gender nonconforming women are subjected to greater structural violence, physical abuse and social ostracism (Packer, 2019, pp. 2-6). Moreover, they are also said to suffer a "*double, voir une triple peine* [...] *celle d'un coming-out douloureux, d'un mariage forcé puis d'un viol conjugal et punitif afin de rétablir l'honneur*"[25] (Barkallah, 2021). As explained by Trifonia Melibea Obono, "corrective" rape, forced marriage, and unvoluntary pregnancy, are common practices currently being used to "convert" women and "cure" them of their homosexuality in many African countries, including Equatorial Guinea (Obono, 2019, p. 25).

To navigate and survive this highly restrictive milieu, knowing how to manage discretion and secrecy are mandatory. In the words of one of Oudenhuijsen's

[22] [The social condemnation of homosexuals reveals the hidden face of "teránga", the notions of hospitality and tolerance, so dear to the country.]

[23] [The legendary Senegalese hospitality, *teránga*, vanishes when someone steps out of the norm.]

[24] [A good Muslim woman / a respectable woman.]

[25] [Double, even triple punishment [...] that of a painful coming-out, a forced marriage and then a punitive marital rape in order to restore honor.]

informants, "you have to know how to play, otherwise they will catch you" (Oudenhuijsen, 2018, p. 98). Through a careful adherence to Senegalese cultural and gendered values, such as *sutura* and *teràngа*, queer women have come up with successful ways of masking their dissidence (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 436). By "strategically employing *sutura* to navigate gender and sexual normativity", lesbians are able to discreetly open new avenues for queer expression all while avoiding suspicions (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 436).

Queering their environment against all odds

In Senegal, women's individual freedom and personal autonomy are usually highly restricted, especially in comparison to men, who are also expected to get married and have a family but who face lesser difficulties when it comes to successfully leading double lives (Packer, 2019, p. 10). As explained by Obono, Oudenhuijsen, Morgan and Wieringa, there is always more at stake when mothers step out of the norm, as women risk being evicted and losing custody of their children if their homosexuality is publicly disclosed (Obono, 2019, p. 31; Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 440; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005, p. 19). Nonetheless, marriage and motherhood do not necessarily imply the end or discontinuation of queer lives, as same-sex desires cannot be "wished away" or "erased" (Tamale, 2013, p. 40; Obono, 2019).

Most queer women choose to hide their dissidence in broad daylight. The darkness of the night, by contrast, enables them to stay out of sight, cover up their trails, and escape, even if just momentarily, to hidden locations where they are able to elude society's vigilant gaze and express themselves freely (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 435). These settings also provide queer women with the space to display other behaviors that are publicly frowned upon, such as drinking, smoking, and doing drugs. Following Loes Oudenhuijsen's research, the knowledge and know-how acquired in these *secret milieux* is defined as *kooba*, an expression mainly used by sex workers, gays, and lesbians to "discreetly and proudly" talk about their underground network and subculture (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, pp. 435-438). Through their personal hustle, also known as *liijanti* (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 439), many young queers, mostly urbanites, are finding new ways of expressing themselves and claiming greater personal freedoms.

In addition to the expressions that unfold discreetly overnight, queer women are also claiming their place in another predominantly male-dominated arena: the football field. *Les footballeuses*, who proudly display their jerseys both on and off the pitch, often face great hostility on behalf of society and are discouraged by their families to pursue the sport (Packer, 2019, p. 11; Oudenhuijsen, 2018, p.

2). Nevertheless, this hasn't stopped them from playing football or from dressing in a predominantly masculine fashion. This style, colloquially referred to as *jump* (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 444), consists of "dressing in typical men's athletic or hip-hop clothing and embracing masculine gestures and speech patterns" (Packer, 2019, p. 9), and is seen as an important transgression through which *les lesbiennes* unapologetically express their dissidence and challenge the "feminine appearance and bodily comportment" expected of them as women (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 444). Given their relative visibility, their sexual orientation is often questioned. According to Beth Packer, *les footballeuses* confront these suspicions with *muuñ*, also known as "the silent and stoic female suffering" (Packer, 2019, p. 13), which they perform in the face of challenges and hardships. Following her research, in order to reconcile their same-sex desires with their faith and beliefs, Senegalese Muslim queer women undergo their own personal "greater jihad" (Packer, 2019, p. 22), as fully embracing their sexuality poses them a true challenge in a religious community that deems their desires as "unholy" and "unnatural".

Their diverse and complex realities are recognized by *Sourire de Femme*, the first and only public queer woman organization in the country, which has become a beacon of hope in Senegal fighting to end all discrimination against lesbian, bisexual and transgender women and providing them with assistance and guidance to overcome their struggles. By continuously negotiating their place in society and mixing "international and local vernaculars at the intersection of self-identification, practice, and know-how" (Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 449), gender non-conforming women in Senegal are continuously finding new ways of "queer[ing] their path to salvation" (Packer, 2019, p. 26).

Final conclusions

By fighting against discrimination, whether it be due to their gender, sexuality, or both, queer women are a symbol of resilience and resistance in the face of growing hypocrisy and intolerance, as state-sponsored homophobia and its instrumentalization remains a recent and complex phenomenon in Senegal, inscribed in both regional and global tendencies that believe homosexuality to be un-African and incompatible with Islam, as well as a Western obsession and imposition.

This has resulted in the dehumanization of the *góor-jigéen* and omission of its history, as homosexuals have been portrayed as a threat to the wellbeing of society actively seeking to corrupt the youth. A powerful homophobic rhetoric that is currently being used by the main political, religious authorities and news outlets

in the country, who are intentionally fueling this ongoing "crusade" against the so-called "enemies of faith and morality".

It is in the intersection of these realities that queer women's lives thus unfold, interconnected as they are, and where they suffer from converging discriminations. By analyzing how gender nonconforming women simultaneously navigate and challenge the hetero-patriarchal structure in place, it is possible to understand the different ways in which they create new avenues for queer expression, while they continue to draw from their cultural toolbox (*sutura* and *teràngа*) and strategically use the notions of silence and discretion to go unnoticed.

Although the global breakthroughs in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights as Universal Human Rights constitute an irreplaceable reference, we must question the one-dimensional narratives about gender variance and dissident sexualities grounded in Western understandings that consider "visibility" as the only linear way to promote and safeguard the rights of African queers in the face of rising global homophobia. In the words of Peter Geschiere (2017), there is still a greater need to further "Africanize queer studies" (p. 7) and to acknowledge how homophobia in Africa is not monolithic or static.

As it is from a mix of international and local vernaculars, and from the advancement of personal freedoms, especially those of women, that a change will come. That is, by allowing African and Senegalese queer women to choose their own path and rhythm. In the words of one of the women interviewed by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa (2005), "We, lesbian women, are born here in Africa, we belong here, who can say we are unAfrican?" (p. 22).

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