Degree Project
Master’s Degree
Beyond Modernity and Tradition: digital spaces for Sexuality Education in Kenya

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Subject/main field of study: Cultural Anthropology
Course code: AS3013
Credits: 15
Date of examination: 11/06/2020

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Abstract:

The thesis carries out a critical examination of the problematic and complex dynamics aroused by the conceptual gap between the Modernity and Tradition, suggesting that such polarization is present in the way people think and talk about sex and sexuality in Kenya. Considering the difficulties of implementing Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Kenyan secondary schools, the study questions the possibility of isolating and distancing different sexual values and attitudes, and supports instead the need for a different approach to teaching sexuality, capable of bridging those differences through an inclusive language. Digital Platforms are critically examined as potential spaces for the realization of the theoretical project of an “Ecology of knowledges”, thus as places for developing respectful and comprehensive dialogue about sexuality among adolescents.

Keywords:

Modernity/Tradition, Sexuality Education, Digital platforms, Inclusive dialogue, Bridging cultural differences, Ecology of knowledges
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Preface

The present thesis aims to explore the effects of relying on the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition in discourses about sexuality in present-day Kenya. The two concepts of Modernity and Tradition represent a fundamental theme in anthropological studies and theories – and social sciences in general – whose meanings and uses for researches had changed along with the development of the discipline; in the last years new criticisms had been developed toward the dichotomy, and my intention is to use the current debates regarding sexuality (especially the Sexuality Education Curriculum in Kenyan secondary schools) as a case study to carry out a critique of Modernity/Tradition, by analyzing to what extent it is part of such discourses and questioning its usefulness when talking about sexuality.

The choice of focusing on sexuality education for adolescents in Kenya came from the acknowledgment that although the Kenyan government has moved in the direction of implementing school-based programs that would better cover arguments related to sex and sexuality, there are still many challenges and tensions, particularly with regard to the integration of CSE (comprehensive sexuality education). I will try to understand if and in what degree it is possible to establish causal connections between the difficulties of talking about sex and the cultural dynamics activated by the dichotomy, especially in regard to the kind of relationship it establishes between different cultural values.

The need of developing an effective and culturally sensitive communication about sexual issues is a highly important topic in contemporary Kenya, given the positive outcomes expected by its development, as well as for fostering healthy sexual behaviors and empower vulnerable subjects. For this reason researchers are exploring new promising areas for implementing it, such as digital technologies. The online world is in fact producing great changes in Kenyan society and young people seem to rely on it as a massive source of information about sexuality. In comparing the language\(^1\) used in digital platforms (social medias and mobile networks mainly) with the one used in secondary schools the thesis examines in what ways the former ones might actually represent a new safe place of knowledge and cultural production, able to connect the numerous perspectives about sexuality in a different way in comparison to other discourses, more coherent with adolescent’s experiences and capable of bridging different cultural values.

I might suggest that the importance of the arguments that will be developed is dual. The first reason lies in the centrality of the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition itself, whose value I do not aim to ignore or negate;

\(^1\) In the theoretical framework I will define my understanding of language as an approach to discussion.
it is exactly for the recognition of its relevance that I am developing my critique, in order to deepen our awareness of the meanings and mechanisms implied in it. Secondly, the thesis is an attempt to contribute to the contemporary investigations of digital platforms in Kenya, a field of research that is emerging day by day, and whose integration within other discussions, such as sexuality education, might help in open them up and discover new contents.

1.2 Research Problem and Objective

The broader area of interest from which I started developing my master’s thesis concerns the dynamics of cultural change, especially when considered in a perspective of encounter and clash between systems of thoughts, habits, knowledges and cultures in general. I am interested in looking at what kind of interactions occur when different perspectives meet, and how those interactions are then represented in discourses. When we transfer this discourse in the ‘conceptual context’ produced by the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition in Africa, it often takes the form of a cultural clash between the two poles, whose different values are imagined as oppositional and separated by an irreconcilable gap that puts people in front of a choice of either/or. The representation of reality, such as sexual experiences, result then as static and in a relationship of competition, where one of the two systems of knowledge and behavior (depending on who is talking) must prevent the other. In this sense the research is an academic effort to look for new forms of cross-cultural dialogue that do not imply any epistemological superiority. The more specific objective of this thesis is to evaluate whether and in what way digital technologies can offer a new innovative approach to talk about sexualities among Kenyan adolescents, that can welcome and combine different knowledges. My aim is to look at the online language, evaluating its characteristics, potentialities and limits, comparing it first with the one used in Sexuality Education Curriculum in secondary schools in order to highlight their differences, and secondly with the epistemological project formulated by the Portuguese anthropologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos so to consider if digital spaces might represent the place where to put in practice the theoretical design of an *ecology of knowledges*.

Based upon evidences gathered from scientific articles and interviews, I will argue in the light of the results carried out along the study is that the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition shows itself to be not necessarily helpful in talking about sexuality, because of the effects it produces on discourses. This effect reduces the complexity and fluidity of sexual experiences and imaginaries in frozen, oppositional pictures, which do not mirror the negotiations people have in reality and their middle-way positions between different values. Keeping an eye on the challenges and problems affecting the digital technologies I will try to demonstrate that they have some peculiar characteristics (such as anonymity, inclusive dialogue,
interactivity and democratic participation) which can actually bring the discourses about sex closer to what adolescents need to know more about it.

Although I will provide the readers with a brief background regarding the historical evolution of the meanings related to Modernity/Tradition, and the more recent changes in Kenyan society as for the implementation of Sexuality Education and the spread of Internet and mobile phones, the thesis is mainly focused on the contemporary cultural dynamics of encounters and clash with respect to the subjects afore mentioned. The limits in terms of space and time for the developing of the research also implied the exclusion of deeper analysis of some important themes connected to sexuality and sexual health care, such as an account more sensitive to gender perspective or to the prevention of HIV/AIDS, which will be not considered a part from the general discussion of adolescents’ agency in combining different values and the need to reflect it in discourses; a deeper focus on these topics would have otherwise led the research towards other horizons. The thesis also bears the boundaries of a geographical focus on discourses in Kenya (even if materials from other countries will be also considered) for reasons of easier accessibility to source materials. In choosing Kenya as area of interest I consider in fact the linguistic shortcomings I had: I do not speak French, Portuguese or any African Languages, that could be a problem in carrying out the interviews. Furthermore, Kenya is among the few countries which have with a fairly extensive evaluation of Sexuality Education Curriculum in secondary schools, and with more reliable data regarding spread and access of Internet and digital technologies.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives previously laid out, the research questions that will drive my investigation are:

- In which ways does the Modernity/Tradition dichotomy affect the discourses embodied in sexuality education curricula in secondary schools in Kenya?

- To what extent digital platforms provide adolescents with a new language to talk about sexuality?

- Considering de Sousa Santos’ theory of Ecology of knowledges, in what degree is it possible to find in the digital language a new way to combine cultural differences?

Through these questions I will first focus on the dichotomy, its original meanings and more recent developments and criticism, in order to stress what kind of knowledge it produces when used to deal with sexual issue. This will allow me to present alternative approaches to traditional and modern perspectives and sexual behaviors, which reformulate the relationship among the two concepts as more dynamic and
fluid. Once defined the general framework of the dichotomy, I will take into account present-day discourses about sexuality in Kenyan society and schools, and move on the discussion toward if and how the dichotomy is present in such discourses, exploring to what degree it can be considered among the causes of the current difficulties of CSE (comprehensive sexuality education). Eventually, I will delve directly into the area of digital technologies, focusing mainly on how the inherent characteristics of digital devices produce a different kind of communication, and also a different understanding of the concepts of Tradition and Modernity. In conclusion I will compare the digital language resulted from my analysis with the theoretical project of an ecology of knowledges in order to evaluate the potentialities of digital communications in creating an epistemological system more open and friendly to different cultural values in sexual patterns.

1.4 State of Research

The research field of sexuality discourses in Africa (and Kenya particularly) is fairly extensive, and the great changes of the last decades have even increased the number of studies involved on the subject. However, not many of them directly address the Modernity/Traditions dichotomy and the consequences it has on the language, and even less consider the dimension of cross-cultural dialogue. One of the scientific article that most helped me in tracing the discursive framework in which sexuality education is carried out in secondary schools in Kenya is a critical analysis encompassing the multiple reasons why there is no real effective and/or comprehensive sexuality education (Estelle M. Sidze et al., 2017). Although the authors provide the readers with a wide sociological account of the difficulties of school-based curricula, and suggest also some reasons and possible interventions to improve the current situation, there is no reference to the epistemological dimension of such debates as an area of interest for academic discussions. They do consider conflicting identities between different social groups as cause of tensions (and thus of limiting the discourses), but do not question the fact that such tensions could be mitigated by a different way of managing those differences.

Similar arguments are showed in Muchiri’ scientific article regarding the latest changes in sexual behaviors and attitudes in Kenyan society. She affirms that taboos, myths and silences are the main cultural values on which discussion about sexuality is held, and are also the main causes of the disconnection between young people and their root communities that Kenya is registering in these days (Muchiri, 2015: 173). Her thesis is symptomatic of a critical (from my perspective) way to understand cultural values and sexuality: by putting the accent on the burden of cultural restrictions she is suggesting
that Kenyans are sharply divided in a competition for the affirmation of one set of values over the other, without any possible communication among the two sets.

The research published by Kinaro et al. in 2019 is even more controversial. The authors highlight the need for culturally sensitive strategies to foster Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH). I suggest that the controversy comes from the fact that their ideas of sensitiveness does not consist in producing approaches coherent (sensitive precisely) to the specificities of the local contexts – and the inherent ways of living sexuality – but rather in changing the local values, considered harmful, according to the ‘happy recipe’ of urbanization, education and technology (Kinaro, J.W. et al, 2019: 14), meaning basically that the solution for spreading healthy sexual behaviors is consequence of a modernisation of African culture.

However there are other scholars who emphasize on how the use of fixed categories in conversations about sex and sexuality is problematic. For example some of them contest the simplistic bifurcation between the two poles, variously glossed as “traditional” versus “modern”, “local” versus “global”, or “authentic” versus “false”, since it underscores the idea of African cultures as essentially traditional, and arguing instead that Africans, like everyone else, “have always been modern” (Kaler, 2015: 404). Kaler claims that the artificiality of these categories is problematic since it generates oppression and disempowerment for a certain type of people (e.g. women and gay people) and is an immensely strong source of knowledge in the way people conceptualize sexual life, (Kaler, 2015: 408).

The critique for an uncritical use of conceptions of tradition and modernity is also shared by Le Mat et al. To frame the subject only in the dimension of contradictions between traditional cultural values and liberal modern sexualities lacks a socio-historical approach, and fails to see the root causes of problems because of an attitude of “culture-blaming” that wrongly assumes a narrow causal relationship between culture and behavior (Le Mat, 2019: 209). It also bears a developmental, colonial perspective that instructs students to replace ‘bad’ culture with a ‘good’ one. But culture is not so much a ‘factor’ that can hamper or strengthen the delivery of CSE, but rather a fluid, changing reality that needs to be integrated and addressed in teaching sexuality and gender relations (Le Mat, 2019: 214).

In the same line Ahlberg et al. affirm that cultural, social, economic and political factors interact in complex ways to shape individual behaviors; yet culture is far too often singled out as the key target of intervention (Ahlberg et al., 2010: 1025). Quoting Farmer, the authors observe how culture alone does not explain suffering - or in our case the difficulties of an open discussion about sex – and insisting in focusing only on so-called “cultural barriers” may furnish an alibi for ignoring an analysis of the structural problems that negatively affect the subject (Ahlberg et al., 2010: 1034). I will analyze in depth the current researches on digital technologies and their potentialities in opening new and more inclusive spaces of discussion in the Fourth Chapter, since the scientific articles on the topic represent part of the source
material I will use to draw my conclusions. For now, I anticipate that much of the available literature stresses how difficult it is to single out a definite point of view regarding the changes Internet and mobile phones are producing in Kenyan society, and in discourses about sexuality in particular. In most cases the digital spaces are described as complex and paradoxical (M. van Heijningen, L. van Clief, 2017), for they present contradictory aspects: on one hand they do open the discussions and engage more actively people in conversation, thanks to the overcoming of stigmatization, including marginal subjects and topics, that feel empower to speak and exchange knowledges and experiences online (Daheer J, et al., 2017); at the same time the presence of multiple perspectives do not prevent from a form of disrespectful communication or cyber-bullying (Wiebesiek, 2015; Baelden et al, 2011).

1.5 Theoretical framework

Sexuality

As for the purposes of my research it is important to make clear the conceptual limits in which I will discuss the concept of sexuality. It is not my intent here to conduct an in-depth discussion of the numerous theories and studies that address social issues related to the sexual identity, since I am using this subject mainly as an example of the dynamics of cultural exchanges implied in its discourses. I am more precisely interested in the ways people talk about sex and sexuality in Kenya. My intent is to find out what such ways tell us about different cultural perspectives and the tensions between the concepts or ideas of tradition and modernity. Still, I would like to stress that I am addressing sexuality from the theoretical perspective of social construction, an approach used in social sciences that gained popularity at the end of the last century and that differs from the biological/biomedical model about sexuality (Nieto, 2003: 3). The central thesis is that sexuality and sexual identities are not given by natural norms, but are the result of a social production in which the society works as a ‘normative’ actor and the individual reacts to the social norms, negotiating these norms according to his/her individual identities and the specific local context in which she/he lives (Nieto, 2003: 5). An important reference point in this theory is Michel Foucault’s interpretation of human sexuality as a social phenomenon, shaped by the hierarchical order of dominant social norms and ideological discourses, but is also re-invented by individual actors (Nieto, 2003: 27).

Language

In the course of this thesis I will use the terms discourse and language as synonym to refer to what people say and think about sexuality and how they express their ideas. I am aware that there differences meanings related to these different words when used in academic writings: ‘discourse’ is mainly used in the version
Foucault gave of it, focusing on the power relationships in it, whereas the sociological understanding of ‘language’ focuses on the relationship between society and the set of symbols used by it. I have chosen to use both terms in the same way because taking into account the wide theories behind their distinctions would have taken an in-depth analysis of both, which was not the primary goal of this thesis. The idea behind is that language can be seen as a way of representing values and perspectives about aspects of life, among which sexuality. The analysis of Sexuality Education Curriculum and of the discussions about sexuality on social media is then a way to look at how people express their conceptualizations about sexuality. This approach to language is part of a tradition of study in the field of sociolinguistics, whose most famous figures were Sapir, Jakobson and Hymes, who fostered the studies of the discipline in the direction of the use of language as a manifestation of social and cultural life of human communities.

Language is thus intended as performance, a mode of speaking implying the action of the performer, the doing of the communicative phenomenon (Bauman, 1974: 290). The idea of language as a cultural activity fostered the development of ethnographic studies of speaking, that enabled anthropologists to describe and compare a number of aspect of social life and human behavior from the analysis of cultural ideas and practices expressed through conversation (Keating and Egbert, 2004: 188). According to recent theories in fact, local conceptions about the world are conveyed through conversational discourse, which is then on one hand a medium and on the other hand an activity itself, from whose investigation we can enrich our understanding of how people produce their identities, create imagined worlds and organize their experience (Keating and Egbert, 2004: 173). It is from this framework that I will explore and comment what the language used in schools and in the digital world can tell us about what people think about sexuality in Kenya.

Modernity as myth and Traditions as Inventions: deconstructing perspectives

I will now trace the theoretical background developed by post-colonial and post-modern studies in the last decades, that I consider as a relevant point of reference in the way I discuss and criticize the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition. Among the recent popular theories about Modernity we can find the criticism moved by the Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel against what he called “The Myth of Modernity”, consisting in the colonial narrative invented by metropolitan powers to justify the violent processes of domination since the XVI century. Its fundamental principle is that Modernity is a privilege of Modern Europe, that thus has the “civilizing mission” to export it everywhere, even if it involves the use of violence, because this is the only target of future for all societies of the world, but not all of them have “still” understood it (Dussel, 2000:49). Everything and everyone that are not Europe/West, are systematically and essentially excluded by the modern paradigm, and relegated to the inferior layer of tradition, that means irrationality, backwardness, underdeveloped. To liberate this oppressed people we need to point at the realization of a trans-modernity, which can only start with inclusion of the Others in
modernity. That means seeing making other cultures (but also genders, classes, ethnic groups, knowledge, etc.) as modern as the European one (Dussel, 2000: 50). The American anthropologist James Ferguson gave great contribution to the academic debate in pointing out how Modernity and Tradition are concepts that bear the burden of and are embedded in global inequalities, and the language of alternative modernities lacks a focus on them, since it suggests that everyone is modern. He agrees on the fact that there are no “before” and “after” societies history, we all share the space and time in the world, but, as I will also argue later, the goal is not to ‘bury’ the differences among traditional and modern aspects of our lives (those differences are still there and cannot be neglected), but rather to acknowledge their differences without putting them in competition or in hierarchical relationship (Ferguson, 2006: 78). Appadurai helps addressing Ferguson’s point of view when he affirms that we should consider account of modernity not as something already-made that just has to arrive (from above) to the people, but as a product that is constantly negotiated by people: he then stresses the idea of agency. His thesis is that understanding Modernity as a vernacular globalization avoids an essentialization and substantialization of culture, and allows us instead to grasp Modernity as made of no-ending negotiations between global and local for new identities that bring about cultural changes, which do not presuppose uniformity but led by international and inter-levels connections and dialogues; in his words: “if a global cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances” (Appadurai, 1996: 29). Multiple cultural processes are happening in our globalized era, and the center-periphery models fails to grasp the multiple overlapping forces shaping the global culture today (Appadurai, 1996: 43).

Hobsbawm’s theory of the invention of tradition is instead helpful in deconstructing the concept of Tradition. According to him the inventing of tradition relies on a mechanism including repetition, ritualization and formalization that create a false continuity with the past; the need to refer to the past is particularly important in moments of rapid social change that renders ‘old’ traditions unusable for the new social needs and purposes: this brings about a formalization of ‘new’ traditions, that is a process of adaptation of old uses in new conditions, where the reference to the past gives legitimacy to the new purposes (Hobsbawm, 1992: 5). As for my thesis, what is to bear in mind about Hobsbawm’s analysis of tradition, is that people are always in dialogue with the concepts of modernity and tradition – in fact a consequence of the idea of invented traditions is that the sharp distinction between tradition and modernity is itself invented – in the sense that certain cultural aspects are stressed or put aside according to the contingent needs of the context. Thus, there are no essential cultural practices with ancestral origin that stay immutable during decades or centuries, but there is a dynamic relation of communication between cultural values (were they ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’) and the people that live them.
The Ecology of Knowledges

An essential question to ask would be: how can we get to a condition of dialogue between different but equal cultural values? Can we recognize differences without implying hierarchies, but at the same time not fall into a problematic equality that hides the enduring economic and political axis? If we bring these questions down to the context of sexuality education among Kenyan adolescents, we can then ask ourselves: how it is possible to support their claim for on change in how sexuality is conceptualized and lived, but at the same time not enter into the old discourse of cultural development, but instead create a safe space for discussion of differences?

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006) tried to give an answer by transforming monocultural discourses into ecologies of knowledges: “Where scientific knowledge can dialogue with secular knowledge, with popular knowledge, with indigenous knowledge, with the knowledge of marginal urban populations, with peasant knowledge.” (de Sousa Santos, 2006: 26). He is not proposing an absolute relativism blind to differences, but a kind of epistemology that can include both scientific and indigenous knowledges, recognizing that one is appropriate “to go to the moon and the other to preserve biodiversity”, by which he claims that the value of knowledges depends on the context in which they are used; depending on who is talking, where he/she is, what he/she is saying, for what purposes he/she is talking, then he/she will rely on a different epistemological system (de Sousa Santos, 2006: 29). The original contribution DeSousa Santos gives us stands in his claim for a new way to relate to knowledges based on translation: this is the basic process to recognize the heterogeneity of the world and knowledges, and to include diversity without relativism or universalism; the multiplicity of our world makes it more and more difficult to separate sharply one cultural system from another, and this is why he supports the epistemological project of a plural system, or at least the construction of solid connections between different values and knowledges, in order to allow people to rely on different ideas and pick up different elements from each system, to use them according to the changing contingent situations (de Sousa Santos, 2006: 34). In the next chapter I will come back to his theory and relate it to my research questions.

1.6 Research Methods and Source Materials

The methodology used in developing my arguments was two-fold: critical reviews of the literature and interviews. In the second chapter I analyzed post-modern and post-colonial theories regarding the concepts of Modernity and Tradition. Through this analysis, I could see that although they struggled against the hierarchical relationship between the two poles - a heritage of colonial narratives - they still acknowledged the gap between them, preventing the possibility of real, positive communication. I also
selected more recent literature about the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition (selection based on number of academic quotations and adherence to the specific focuses of my research). In these, I could extract some attitudes of this supposed gap in contemporary discourses about sexuality in Africa and Kenya in particular, namely culture-blaming and monocultural knowledge. Here again, I found that cultural values are seen as root causes of unhealthy sexual behaviors and there is competition between Modern and Traditional perspectives, often assuming that one of them should take over the other.

Moving to the chapter describing Sexuality Education in secondary schools in Kenya, I first tried to trace the various narratives describing sexuality in Africa, from the colonial ones to the most recent and radical, in order to demonstrate how much the multiplicity and diversity of sexual imageries and behaviors have been obscured and reduced to unitary and homogenous representations. I then looked at different secondary sources (mainly scientific articles) which assess the quality of Sexuality Education Curricula and the problems they present, trying to compare them with the results of the previous chapter – that is, whether monocultural attitudes and culture-blaming could be identified as causes of those difficulties. What I found out is that although the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition is not often directly mentioned as a main reason of the difficulties reported in the communication in classes, the discourses about sexuality are affected by the lack of dialogue between different cultural values. Even if the terms “modern” and “tradition” are not used, the ‘language’ of school-based curricula is affected by the same idea of a polarized dualism, with no possibility of passing of knowledge or interactions between the two poles. I think it is possible to say that the ‘language’ based on dichotomies is not very helpful in teaching and learning about sexuality. In the fourth chapter I tried to examine if a new language could be found in digital technologies, and in order to do so I relied on both scientific articles and reports, and interviews with two experts in the field of digital platforms committed to the spread of knowledge among adolescents in Kenya. I analyzed the articles to provide the reader with a background about who, how, where, when, for what can actually access to the digital worlds. The interviews focused on defining the kind of language used in social media and mobile phones. From there we can try to determine to what extent the digital language is able to create a safer space to exchange different perspectives through constructive dialogue. Both the interviews have been made online (through Skype) and lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. They were held in English, which was not the mother tongue of the interviewer nor the interviewees and were recorded through a mobile phone. Later I did the transcription in accordance to the ethical committee’s rules for interviews (see Appendix).

I found my first interviewee thanks to the reading of an academic article regarding digital sexuality education, where the authors conducted a qualitative research on the role of present-day digital platforms in Kenya. I contacted them to ask about the platforms they analyzed and some contacts that could help me in my personal research; they suggested me some of them that were consistent with my objectives.
Eventually I could get in touch with two social media editors of two different platforms, *Love Matter Kenya* and *One2One*. The way I reported the conversations aimed at focusing on the most important passages (the full text is not present in the thesis) and let the respondents’ perspectives stand out. A first reason why I cut off part of the interviews is that it would be impossible to include them integrally because of their length; secondly, I structured the questions in an informal and colloquial way, in order to make the respondents feel free and comfortable in answering, which implies that in some parts of the interview (precisely the one I did not report) the topics discussed were not consistent with the arguments of my thesis. The two interviews I had bear some biases since I have asked two persons working in (and for) digital platforms to evaluate their potentialities. I then tried to strengthen my arguments by integrating the results of the interviews with the literature about digital education for sexual issues. Although there is not much research about the digital language and how it bridges different cultural perspectives. I could then notice that if the two sources concur on some topics, there are also some disagreements (I will come back to these in the designated chapter). For those reasons, the results were not univocal, and it would be arrogant to pretend to have definite and unassailable answers to my research questions; however, this did not prevent me to draw some conclusions. I did not delve into any kind of hermeneutical analysis of the content shared on the social medias, even if it might be a fruitful method for future researches. In the last section of the fourth chapter I came back to de Sousa Santos’ Ecology of knowledges and confronted it with the characteristics of the digital spaces, in order to point out to what extent the online worlds might be a place where to put his theory ‘in action’.
Chapter Two: The Modernity/Tradition Dichotomy

What I will do in this chapter is present briefly part of the most relevant meanings and analysis regarding the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition, from the colonial narratives to contemporary criticisms, arguing that even if most of the colonial assumptions have been overcome, the problematic imagined gap among ‘tradition and modernity’ is still part of academic language. I will go on to analyze critically some of the recent literature regarding discourses about sexuality in Africa and Kenya to show how this dichotomy affects the quality of the conversations, and contending that it actually does produce a knowledge based on monocultural attitudes and culture-blaming. The imagined irreconcilable gap between the two concepts tends to present them in a never-ending clash, where one of the two (depending on who is talking) is, more or less explicitly, suggested as ‘the better’ one, that should ‘take over’ the other. I want to clarify here that my concern is not about defending tradition over modernity or vice versa (in fact, my argument questions the possibility of ‘isolating’ one from the other), but rather defending the possibility of dialogue among them. In the end I will refer to the possibility of a new approach to Modernity and Tradition, following the theory of an Ecology of knowledges that favors systems of multiple situated knowledges and the dialogue among them.

2.1 The Modernity/Tradition dichotomy: from colonial legacies to present-day discourses

One central concept around which my research turns is that of Modernity. It is hard to find a comprehensive definition of it, since it is a thick notion with different and contradictory meanings. Here I am tackling it in its relational version to the concept of Tradition, looking at the epistemological dynamics between them. Modernity and Tradition, and the tension between these two concepts, have long been a central topic of anthropological discussions about culture and cultural differences. The meanings have changed during the decades due to the changes occurring inside the discipline itself, particularly after decolonization and the rise of post-colonial, de-colonial, post-modernist theories that questioned these terms and the colonial function they had. With an eye on the specific characteristics of each trend and author, it is possible to affirm that a shared critique carried out towards the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition consists in its implying a world division between the developed and the less developed, coinciding with colonial powers and the colonized regions, and consequently the idea of hierarchical relationship between the two concepts, often referred to as the West and the Rest. In the theoretical framework I have quoted Dussel, Ferguson and Appadurai, post-colonial and de-colonial theorists who struggled with the meanings implied in the dichotomy, underlining the colonial narrative embedded in it. In particular, they questioned the idea of a linear progress (both in temporal and mental
development) from traditional to modern societies. They all refused the ´dogma´ of modernization which they see as a synonym to westernization, as something that, sooner or later, will get everywhere (Dussel, 2000:49). Ferguson claims that Africa has been and still is stuck in the contradictions of “The Invention of Africa”, that means that the entire continent has been conceptualized as a space of traditional and simple societies, and this image has been frozen until contemporary times (Ferguson, 2006: 2). As a consequence, ´development´ has been imposed to Africa as unquestionable goal, as the only horizon toward which to go. Considering that ´development´ was used as synonym for ´modernization´, the rhetoric implied in this discourse was that Africa had to abandon its traditional (harmful, pre-capital, un-productive) practices and habits and adopt the modern (western) ones (Ferguson, 2006: 10).

What I am arguing here is that although the authors just mentioned had an important role in contrasting persisting colonial discourses and brought up crucial concepts that are (and must be) part of the theoretical framework for current researches in social sciences, the dichotomy of tradition and modernity is still a reference point. The language and meaning behind it have of course changed - from a moralistic-colonial developmental approach, to the attention to global inequalities and the defense of local values- but the idea of a clear distinction between the two concepts is part of our contemporary discourses. Whether it is a matter of defending traditional cultures from the threat of external (mostly western) influences, or a social demand for change and innovation, ´tradition and modernity´ as in academic and informal discourses are separated by a deep gap, and presented as a choice: either you go for one or the other. In the next section I will take into account the discourses on sexuality in particular, and consider which effects the dichotomy has on it.

2.2 Modernity/Tradition in Discourses about Sexuality

The presence of the binarism Modernity/tradition in the terms just described - a polarized binarism whose poles are in structural relation of clash - is part of the conversations about sexuality in African societies. In the following critical analysis of the most recent literature about those discourses, I will “extract” some concepts and arguments included in the reference to the dichotomy. I suggest that all these arguments limit and stop the discussions and leave out the interconnections between what are perceived as two irreconcilable poles.

2 Appadurai’s reflection on Modernity departs from the other two writers mentioned, in his stress on people’s agency in negotiating the global values and re-adapt them to the local contexts. But even in this case we can’t find the suggestion of a dynamic relationship between ‘tradition and modernity’, but rather between ‘global and local’. 
Tradition as a limit

One of the recurring topics stressed by different academic researchers regards the conceptualization of Tradition as a limit to a free, healthy way of living and of talking about sex and sexuality in Kenyan society. According to Kinaro et al., socio-cultural barriers represent one of the main reasons for the poorly qualitative delivery of knowledge about sexuality in Kenyan secondary schools. Early marriage, myths and misconceptions about sexual and physical needs and duties, fear of stigma, female genital mutilation - these are all aspects that influence, in a negative way, the utilization of Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) services and information (Kinaro et al., 2019: 7). The authors of the article present a thesis that is rather common in academic studies addressing contemporary social conditions and changes regarding expressions of sexuality: even if schools, government, civil society organization (NGOs in particular) would provide spaces to discuss and healthy sexual identities, socio-cultural values can hinder access to them (Kinaro et al., 2019: 3). They then claim that there is a need for culture specific strategies to change local values in favor of an improved communication on SRH issues; such changes have to include urbanization, education and technology (Kinaro, J.W. et al, 2019: 14). The article is controversial if analyzed critically: the authors seem to suggest that an ´happy recipe´ based on urbanization, education and technology will provide the changes needed to improve communication about sexuality. It becomes even more problematic if one considers the suggestion of the authors to develop alternative rites of passage, as many NGOs are actually doing, whose example should be followed by traditional communities (Kinaro et al., 2019: 11). Looking at this narrative we can find in it some of the elements of the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition; more specifically, the article profiles the clash between the two - traditions which limit quality and healthy sexual behaviors, and modernity as the target to which African communities will arrive by changing their cultural values with help of NGOs.

The academic writers that support and share these ideas look at traditions mainly as conservative speeches and taboos. For example, the long report written by ten experts in the field of sexuality education in Kenyan schools affirms that the cultural aspects are actually limiting a successful diffusion of knowledge about sex and sexuality, since taboos and traditional values make most people feel uncomfortable in addressing these topics (M. Sidze, 2017: 20). According to them, traditions bear with them many negative feeling and forces, from those shrouded in mystery and ‘shame’, to the lack of clear directives from the Ministry of Education which tells teachers on one hand to talk about sexuality, and on the other to avoid “sensitive” topics, like contraceptives (Muchiri, 2015: 173; Njue, et al., 2009: 173). Different needs and mentalities, from those of the young people, to the teachers, to religious communities and parents, constrain the qualitative implementation of sexuality education in schools, since teachers stand firm on methods based on fear and punishment (“abstain or you will die of AIDS” as the main slogan), discouraging people to participate, and students feel embarrassed in talking about sex and do not feel that
they are understood by the elderly generations (Njue, et al., 2009: 175). Between the lines, there is the argument of a generational gap between the cultural and social representations on sexuality of the adolescents and of the elder groups. This theme is addressed more directly by Prazak, in an article from 2000, but still significant in telling us how the distinction Modernity/Tradition is though in contemporary academic spaces. The dichotomy is in fact mentioned many times in the article, revealing also the clashing meanings associated with the two concepts. According to her, adolescents’ sexuality now unfolds in new realities to which older sexual norms do not really correspond (Prazak, 2000: 84). What is even more interesting for the purposes of my research is that the article suggests that modern schools represent potential new loci of information for younger generation: they are able to spread new values that replaced traditional contexts, and redefine ‘appropriate’ sexual practices (Prazak, 2000: 91). What we can draw from this is that for Prazak there is a clear distinction between modern and traditional ways of thinking and living sexuality. In conversations about sexuality in Kenya, younger people need to talk about it, in contrast with the elder’s groups. Moreover, the modern-young pulses are described as ‘more appropriate’ than the old ones and schools play a leading role in the process of defining what is modern and traditional. So I can see here that the dichotomy is actually part of discourses about sex and sexuality in school-based curricula: the language used by Prazak seems to point to Tradition as a limit, since it does not really reflect young people’s experiences or help them orientating their decision in sexual issues (see chapter three).

Fear of losing traditional values

Diametrically opposed to the arguments just mentioned is another topic often present in discourses about the contemporary state of sexuality conversations - the fear of losing African traditional values in front of an unavoidable expansion of globalization, identified mainly with western values. In this case, the clash ‘tradition/modernity’ is still central, but here Modernity represents a threat to Kenyan people and their cultures. The external influences are in fact described as not appropriate to the African social contexts, and the rhetoric of “the arrival of modernity” bears the threat of alienation and destruction of social system. We can find this picture well expressed in the following citation: “A major impact of the European colonial expansion and ensuing development discourse and practice is the near suffocation of the African cultural and moral systems in spite of which, the same African systems are represented as though they still are in their original form.” (Ahlberg, 2010: 107). Against the stigmatization of African cultures and systems as exotic and primitive, scholars claim as a defense against this outside attack that traditional values as polygyny and bride price payment are not at all harmful, but part of the African social fabric which has been eroded by external influences. In particular, the expanding cash economy (result of modern times) has been said to increase the vulnerability of women (Patti Shih, 2017: 1024).
This far I have outlined those elements constitutive of discourses about sexuality that actually make reference (explicitly or not) to the narrative of different, clashing modern and traditional values. Now I will argue that those aspects negatively affect the quality of conversation about sex, producing on the one hand a knowledge based on an attitude of culture-blaming and on the other a disposition toward a monocultural knowledge about sex. In both cases this configuration results in a reduction and an oversimplification of the reality, falling into a sterile discussion of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cultures, ignoring the contextual realities lived by people that should actually be the first field to be considered for an effective implementation of sexuality education.

**Culture blaming**

In the article by Le Mat et al., the authors address directly the problematic effects of an uncritical use of tradition and modernity in dealing with sexuality education, and affirm that the tensions between this dichotomy dominate the discourses about sexuality in Ethiopia\(^3\) (2019: 207). An important dimension of such tensions is the idea that there is a deep gap between the young people who ask for development and modernization and an ideal of free and liberal sexual practices, and the traditional cultural values that consider modernization as a negative aspect which increases sexual abuse and erodes traditional culture.

According to the authors, this is a simplified view of post-colonial and developing contexts. Research has largely not considered contextual interpretations of what sexual health means, and lacks a socio-historical approach to sexuality issues in Sub-Saharan African societies. In fact when culture or tradition is looked as the cause of negative sexual behaviors, the effect is an attitude of culture blaming – meaning that culture is blamed for persisting inappropriate practices and beliefs. This causal relationship wrongly moves the heart of the problem from a social, political, economic structural context to the cultural one; to make an example the authors argue that prostitution results from migration, job seeking, economic challenges and family pressure: it is a social matter, not a cultural one (Le Mat et al., 2019: 209). This kind of narrative belongs to a developmental approach to sexuality that tends to express fixed ideas of what is traditional or modern, reducing to the minimum any possible interactions between the values incorporated in both. Furthermore it offers as the only solution a dualistic horizon made of changing the ‘harmful’ traditions or rejecting the western influence. In both cases (modern or traditional) culture is then cataloged as good or bad culture, and throughout the paper the authors reveal that this binarism was predominant in ideas about how gender-based violence should be addressed (Le Mat et al., 2019: 211). The consequence is that culture is often used as an excuse not to intervene or to remain silent about violent behaviors. The conclusion to which the paper brings us is not to put aside the cultural dimension of discourses and practices about

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\(^3\) The article is in fact based on a qualitative ethnographic research in Ethiopia; without any intentions of ignoring the historical and social differences between Ethiopia and Kenya, it can still be meaningful to consider the thesis of Le Mat et al. since they rely on literature that comprehends different Sub-Saharan African countries.
sexuality but that the root causes of gender-based violence – and of sexual patterns in general - cannot be addressed by contesting culture alone; there is a need to go beyond categorical understandings of tradition/modernity in order to address the deeper underlying causes (Le Mat et al., 2019: 213).

Similar arguments are advanced by Patti Shih in her article about cultural change and structural drivers in Papua New Guinea⁴. She is in fact critical toward arguments that essentialize culture either as “harmful traditions” or as “insensitive modernity”, affirming that there is wide discrepancy between conceptual notions of culture, and the lived reality and complexity of structural drivers of risk in this community (Shih, 2017: 1025). She adds also how much those “fixed” traditions had actually changed over time, due mainly to an unparalleled economic growth. Despite the link between the breakdown of customs and the growing cash economy, behavioral change remains the primary target of prevention efforts, decontextualizing cultural practices from current and historical nuances of social and economic change, letting the discourse get stuck in an oversimplification of culture into rigid dichotomous categories such as ‘harmful or helpful’, ‘good or bad’ (Shih, 2017: 1033). In the conclusion she refers to Paul Farmer, saying: “culture does not explain suffering; it may at worst furnish an alibi.” (Shih, 2017: 1034).

Monocultural Knowledge

If culture-blaming is one of the negative effects produced by an uncritical use of the dichotomy modernity/tradition in the discourses about sexuality, there is another problematic issue implied in the developmental approach that presents modernisation as the only path to undertake. If one looks at such arguments from an epistemological point of view, it means that modernity is indicative of the “right” type of knowledge, as the only intellectual paradigm that has the right to express truths and norms about how to behave correctly. This is what Le Mat et al. had defined in terms of a monocultural sexuality, meaning that sexuality education obscures cultural differences and alienates students who identify with different sexual cultures or ideals (Le Mat, 2019: 211). In contrast to this, what they propose is a

“culturally sensitive sexuality education, that sensitizes and exposes students to conflicting (cultural) values and does not try to ‘resolve’ issues of cultural diversity in sexuality education but recognizes the fluid nature of culture, [and] encourages this dialogue between multiple (scientific, traditional, and gendered) meanings of sexuality and relationships, moving away from a mono-cultural sexuality education” (Le Mat, 2019: 215).

To conclude this section regarding the presence and effects of the Modernity/Tradition dichotomy in discourses about sexuality in african (Kenyan in particular) contexts, we can say that the two poles are significantly shaping the ideas and behaviors among people. My point is that this bifurcation is a tricky

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⁴ As for the previous article, the different context does not prevent to consider her thesis relevant to discourses in Kenya.
artificial simplification, since people negotiate and mix traditions and modernity according to their contingent needs. It can also oppress and disempower some social groups, blaming the marginalized people instead of the structural systematic problems; but for these same reasons it is also immensely important to analyze and demystify it, since it can reveal a lot about the way people think their sexual lives.

2.3 A new approach to Modernity and Tradition: bridging the dichotomy

In conclusion to this chapter, I want now to suggest that in order to produce a knowledge free from the attitudes of culture blaming and monocultural disposition, it is not necessary to abandon completely the concepts of Modernity and Tradition, but rather to re-formulate the relationship among the two as a more dynamic, one that can better reflect how people pick up elements from one and the other. In fact if we go looking into people’s experiences, they hardly ‘stand on the side’ of one against the other in an integral or radical way, but they locate themselves in middle-way positions, due to processes of change that produce actually new culture(s) (Narrewe, 2003: 4). When people get in touch with ideas of tradition and modernity they take a stand in the middle of them, which implies they make decisions and actively participate in ‘drawing’ (and moving) the boundaries among the two concepts, proving how flexible they actually are (Narrewe, 2003: 11).

Among the most interesting theoretical proposals that allows us to re-formulate the way we represent differences among cultures and values, I want to mention the “ecology of knowledges” of the Portuguese anthropologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. He affirms that the western modern epistemology⁵ is based on a kind of scientific rationality that produces knowledge through monocultural approaches, among which the monoculture of differences, which makes impossible thinking differences in values and cultures with equality, and put those differences in an unequal asymmetry of superior/inferior (de Sousa Santos, 2006: 24). The way out of this reasoning is to substitute ‘monocultures’ with ‘ecologies’, focusing first to the epistemological dimension of such dynamics, in order to move toward an ecology of knowledges, that would allow different knowledges -scientific, laic, popular, indigenous, rural, urban (and I would add traditional and modern)- to dialogue with each other, without implying that each of them has the same

⁵ De Sousa Santos moves his critique only against the western scientific episteme and modern science; his theory is in fact part of a project of decolonizing knowledge, in particular knowledge of the South that had been imposed the one of the Global North as the epistemological dimension of its imperialistic expansion. Here, I am instead using his approach considering that such monocultures are not exclusive of western way of thinking, but are active all over the world, and thus affect also non-western production of discourses, as in the case of the representations about sexuality in african and Kenyan society and school curricula. Furthermore he does not focus exclusively or mainly on the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition, but his arguments are useful to the purpose of presenting a theoretical framework able of bridging the gap between different values. In the last chapter I will come back to this theory in order to explore to what extent digital platforms can represent a ‘concrete’ space where such epistemological project could take place.
‘value’, but that each has some values that can be useful according to where and for what they are meant to be used, and by whom: “There is no doubt that to bring man or woman to the moon there is no better know-how than the scientific one; but if we want to preserve biodiversity, then modern science is not useful at all” (de Sousa Santos, 2006: 27). He is also aware of the difficulties involved in the creation of a general theory able to incorporate any diversity of our world, but even if an omni-comprehensive epistemology is not possible at the moment, we can still try to re-connect different knowledges in a different way, through processes of translation, that without destroying diversities can still find similarities and points of contacts among them (de Sousa Santos, 2006: 33). It is thanks to this process of translation that the common ground could be finally visible. The epistemological project of de Sousa Santos implies a recognition of knowledge as situated and socially constructed, a perspective that allows to evaluate it on the basis of its capacity for the fulfillment of certain tasks in social contexts drawn by particular processes (de Sousa Santos, 2007: 50).

The first great contribution to be considered here is the statement that every knowledge is situated, that implies that any kind of reasoning implying modernity or tradition as good or bad culture in essence is not feasible or sustainable; knowledge or culture cannot be evaluated in essence, through moralistic or ideological approach. Secondly, we need to open up the canon of knowledge by bringing together and fostering dialogues between different forms of knowledge. In the case of Boaventura this epistemological exercise is justified into a decolonial framework, as a fight for a global social justice that can include and recognize other forms of thinking than the hegemonic western European ones. I would like to add to this that it is not only a matter of emancipation and freedom, that are however crucial, but this counter-movement brings positive effects also from a pragmatic point of view: people’s need to know changes according from where they are, and what they want to do. So, returning to the arguments of the thesis, it is possible to conclude that a kind of language that privileges modern over tradition or the contrary, is not really helpful in general, because it misses the social concrete asset of the local realities. When we go back to it, we realize that this complexity cannot be found in the representations of dichotomies. There is than a need to bring knowledge to the ground level, and find a language coherent with people’s experiences in all their multiplicity, for which discourses stuck in dichotomies are not helpful. The point again is not throwing away modernity/tradition, but stop representing them as two separated poles, whose values are in a never-ending competition. Modern and traditional values have to be represented in communication, as they actually are in people’s experiences.
Chapter Three: Discussing Sexuality in Kenyan society and schools

In this chapter I will look more carefully into the current debates about sexuality in African and Kenyan societies, taking into account how the subject is represented in sexuality education school-based curricula, with the aim of developing further the critical analysis of the Modernity/Tradition dichotomy. Starting from a general observation of what is said about sex in Kenya today, I will move into an overview of the contents and general structure of Sexuality Education, highlighting the changes that have occurred in the last years and the challenges they present. In comparison to the last chapter, in which I considered how the dichotomy produces culture blaming, lack of attention for social and economic aspects and monocultural knowledge, here I will propose similar arguments, that is the idea of ‘Being Modern’ and ‘Being Traditional’ as two completely different ways of experiencing and thinking about sex is not coherent with what actually happen on the empirical ground; but here I will strengthen those previous arguments by looking at them from the perspective of the difficulties reported in teaching and learning about sexuality in secondary schools. By focusing on the language used in schools, I will suggest that there is a need to re-shape the language used to talk about sexual issues, in order to better respond to young people’s needs to get good information. In the next chapter I will continue the stream of this arguments, suggesting that Digital Platforms might be the ‘place’ where this new language could be created.

3.1 Multiplicity, Diversity and Sexuality in African societies

The field of ‘African sexuality’ seems to be characterized by an abundance of re-circulated ideas and conceptions, many of which date back to colonial imagery of the 19th century. Arnfred (2004: 59) has suggested that the colonial lines of thinking about sex in Africa come from the discourse of the ‘dark continent’ to be ‘tamed’ by the white man, and that such ideas still structure ways of seeing and understanding Africa. In colonial representations, sexuality was narrated as an adventure full of dangers, perils and fearful forces that a man has to confront (notice the man-centered perspective). This framework is of course infused by imperialism; metaphors of European expansion and male penetration are closely interwoven. Another typical feature presented in the colonial stories is the contrast between white and black women’s bodies - the first passive and a-passionate and the second threatening, primitive and highly sexualized (Arnfred, 2004: 64). The sexualized black woman’s body is thus a source of corruption, and sexuality is a dangerous enterprise that could even bring on death. Notice the connection between (mainly female) sexuality and sin and disease, the ideal of chastity as an emblem of civilization, and excessive and uncontrolled free sexuality as root of evil. Arnfred maintains that the western point of view regarding
issues related to African sexuality are still characterized by this cultural colonial baggage, resulting in images about it marked by ideas of ‘permissiveness’ and little control (2004: 69).

In order to counteract these distorting visions of African sexuality, scholars attempted to go beyond them by looking at it from the African side. One of the recurrent elements highlighted in this epistemological exercise is how sexuality in Africa is surrounded by a so-called “culture of silence”: most people prefer discretion and performative proceedings rather than discursive ones (Arnfred, 2004: 74). In general, it is possible to say that the language used to spread information about sexuality in African societies had undergone a change, shifting from the colonial narrative and its stigmatization of excessive and dangerous sexuality (it is interesting to notice in fact how much HIV/AIDS is part of contemporary discourses about sexuality) to the moralistic approach that affected such language with an imperative of silence. This so-called ‘culture of silence’ indicates a “socially accepted behavioral constraint” dictating “women’s reserve, modesty and discretion in sexual relations” (Arnfred, 2004: 73). Arnfred goes on in her article stressing that there are different types of silences, based on different principles, such as a performative way of structuring sexuality, rather than a discursive one, or the principle of discretion, that works as if as long as you do not talk about a certain sensitive sexual affairs, nobody has to take action against it. Implied in her arguments there are the topic of taboo and stigmatization, central axis structuring the way people think and live sexuality in many African societies (Kenya as well as I will show later). But it is however important to avoid reducing African Sexuality as only a “minefield” in which people struggle against rigid and overwhelming dogmas. This picture is surely part of the broader one I am trying to construct here, starting from the colonial narratives and going on through the concepts of silences, multiplicity and diversity. In this sense it is worth to mention Arnfred’s reference to the tensions going on in many African societies, regarding people’s fight to find a voice reflecting their sexual agency in the general debates, so pushing for opening up such debates by a de-stabilization of existing notions (Arnfred, 2004: 75).

The controversial nature of African discourses on sexuality has led some researchers to question the very concept of ‘African sexuality’ and to explore to what extent something like that really exists or has existed. Here I want to refer to the work of Jo Helle-Valle who pointed out that sexuality in Africa is not made of unitary practices or meanings but is highly linked to practical social contexts, so that we should rather talk about multiple sexualities living within each individual (2004: 195)6. The unrealistic ideal of ‘one culture’ (and thus ‘one sexuality’) comes from the Western illusion of wholeness and its unified way of thinking. Here again, discourses about sexuality in Africa seem to me to be negatively affected by Western

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6 The article is based on the author’s field work in Botswana but as she states herself “I know that the relevance of my arguments is much wider, partly because they are based on socio-cultural and economic mechanisms that can be found over most of Africa, and partly because they point to theoretical perspectives that have nothing to do with geography.”
perspectives. Helle-Valle comes particularly close to the main themes addressed in the present thesis when she focuses on the agency of people in mixing, reconciling conflicting socio-cultural elements of old, indigenous practices and ideologies with modern ones, an integration that happens at the personal level and involves frustrations and ambivalence. She concludes that ‘African sexuality’ is an infamous thesis, a product of Western eyes on discourses about sex in Africa which reduces the multiple and contradictory realities experienced by every member of society (Jo Helle-Valle, 2004: 206). Her thesis is relevant because she stresses the multiplicity of opinions, cultural values and practices in matters of sex, and how sexual cultural systems are diverse and porous rather than singular, that is one of my central arguments.

In 2013 Marc Epprecht, an international recognized academic authority in the field of African sexuality, published a collection of anthropological and sociological articles called Sexual Diversity. We can grasp from the title there are “silences and stereotypes about Africa as a place where highly restrictive and oppressive ideologies of heterosexual masculinity and femininity are often held up as state policy or immutable culture.” (Nyeck S.N., Epprecht M., 2013: 3). Already in the introduction he claims for the unsustainability of those simplistic constructions of homosexuality versus heterosexuality, modern versus traditional, Africa versus the West. His main thesis is that sexual diversity has been obscured during centuries due to a succession of artificial images that homogenized the discourses about sexuality, leaving out the ‘not normative’ and ‘the different’, like powerful woman or homosexuality. These images were different, from colonial representations of wildness and barbarism, to more recent African conservatism that rejected diversity as a form of western cultural expansion, as could be noticed in the expression of “homosexuality is un-African” or a threat from the West: but all these representations share a phenomenon of ‘freezing’ a multifaceted reality in single images, that suggested African sexuality as unitary, homogeneous. We can draw from his assumptions that the dichotomies Africa/Europe, traditional/modern, and moral/immoral were and are crucial part of the discourses of African sexuality (Epprecht M., 2013: 61). According to him a moment of rupture to this hegemonic narrative was the end of the apartheid in South Africa: this gave opportunities for many activists, artists, researchers to begin to also new questions about sexuality in all its diversity. It did not coincide with a deep change in the way or content of talks about sexuality, but started to shift the focus from a narrowed conceived sexual culture, to broader issues of global political economy: “Urbanization, migrant labour, new freedoms for women and youth, and class and ethnic formation gave rise to changes in sexuality along broadly common patterns.” (Epprecht M., 2013: 65).

Bearing in mind this conceptual framework and the way(s) sexuality was and is approached, we can now focus more on “what happens” when sexuality is discussed in schools in Africa and in Kenya in particular: who are the subjects involved, what they say, and in which terms.
3.2 Talking about Sexuality in Kenyan Society and Schools

It is useful to start with some data about how sexuality is described nowadays in Kenya: the legal age for sexual consent is 18, homosexuality is illegal, information about abortion is not readily available (anyway it is prohibited except in extraordinary circumstances, like risk to death), patriarchal values affect young people’s sexual perceptions, contraceptive usage is low, many adolescent girls’ first sexual experiences result from coercion and there are high rates of child marriage (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017: 25-26). Nationally, more than a third of adolescents (those aged 15–19), whether married or not, have had sexual intercourse (37% of females and 41% of males), and about one-fifth are currently sexually active. The median age at first intercourse is 18 for females and 17 for males, yet among 15–19-year-olds, 11% and 20% of each gender, respectively, initiated sex before age 15. About one-fifth of all adolescents in Kenya have begun childbearing (i.e., have had a live birth or are currently pregnant), and 59% of their births in the past five years were reported as unplanned. There is also evidence that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to severe complications from clandestine unsafe abortions. Only 49% and 58%, respectively, have comprehensive knowledge of HIV and AIDS. Female genital cutting persists as a traditional practice, despite being outlawed since 2011; nationally, 11% of adolescents have undergone this procedure (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017: 20; M. Sidze et al., 2017: 4). Different sources stress the rigidity of the norms that regulate sexual discussions in Kenya: it is unusual to discuss sexual matters in public, and silence is the norm for Kenyan families (van Heijningen and van Clief, 2017: 8; Muchiri, 2015: 173). Silences and stigma are very present aspects, and heteronormative behaviors or ideas are mainly excluded, marginalized and in some cases discriminated. Talking about sex is mostly seen as a taboo, and the gaps left by these silences open spaces to stereotypes and fake information (Muchiri, 2015: 175). According to Ahlberg et al., the narratives about sexuality in Kenyan contexts can be divided in a Christian moral discourse on one hand, based on fidelity and abstinence to avoid dangerous consequences (mainly diseases and death), with little reference to sexual pleasure, and the external (Western) influences, on the other, which stress the need for cultural change and liberalizing discussions about sex (Ahlberg et al., 2010: 107), that in many cases produce people’s counter-reactions of rejecting these ideas for being perceived as outside attacks against local values, that push people to stand in defense of the idea of ‘Africanness’, refusing new models of sexual behavior as “this is not African culture” (Ahlberg et al., 2010: 110).

Getting closer to what happens into Kenyan secondary schools, we should start from the fact that sexuality education in sub-Saharan Africa has long been a contested area, with some advocating that young people need comprehensive, up to-date information on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and others preferring these topics to remain secretive (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017: 23). From a
legislative point of view, the provision of sexuality education is supported by the 2004 Policy Framework for Education and Training and the 2013 Education Sector Policy on HIV and AIDS. Existing educational policies, however, are limited in scope (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 17). The main actors involved in curriculum development are the Ministry of Education through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, and it also considers input from various entities, including government ministries, religious groups, local and international NGOs, and local communities. The views and experiences of students—the intended beneficiaries—are excluded, and this is an issue that commonly arises in the development and design of sexuality education programs (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 18). An important aspect to be considered is that Sexuality Education is not a stand-alone, examinable subject but it is split in different subjects - Life skills, Christian religious education and Biology. Life skills is considered the most comprehensive one, and it is not examinable, because teachers are not supposed to assess what students actually learn.

Linda Waldman and Isabelle Amazon-Brown explore in their article the quality of sex education adolescents received at schools in eight sub-Saharan African countries, among which Kenya. They start from the assumption that the provision of these services to adolescents is not an easy issue, since it may clash with religious or cultural ideologies, that spread feeling of discomfort and reluctance in dealing with them, which makes sex education, often delivered in schools as part of a national curriculum, a highly contested area, which reflects political, moral and cultural debates (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017: 24). Although in 2013, Kenya, along with other African countries, affirmed its renewed political will to address SRHR (sexual reproductive health and rights) through fostering comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), contemporary researches and studies about the current state of school-based curricula highlight the low-quality and poor-effectiveness of them, protest for the absence of any real comprehensive sexuality education (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017: 26; Keogh, 2018: 1). International organizations like UNESCO and UNFPA had also stressed the need of improvements in these accounts as a target goal to be achieved as soon as possible. School is the primary context in which sex education takes place, and the information provided there is usually highly selective, primarily biological, and influenced by parents’ and religious groups’ ideas of what is appropriate. Harassment, embarrassing and fear are feelings linked to sex talk, shared by both teachers and students. This moralistic approach overlooks power dynamics and social norms and negatively influences young people’s sexual health (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017: 26).

3.2.1 Sexuality Education in the classroom

In an extensive study regarding the actual state of sexuality education policies and their implementation in Kenya, M. Sidze et al. analyze different relevant aspects - from the legal and policy environment to the topics discussed in classes, from the actors involved in curriculum development to the content and
structure of it and so on - of the discourses about how to teach and talk about sexuality in secondary schools in Kenya. In this paragraph I will rely on their findings to integrate the chapter with a closer perspective on how the Sexuality Education curriculum is organized and what actually happens in the classrooms. The study focuses on three geographically and ethnically diverse counties: Homa Bay, Mombasa and Nairobi (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 7). The number of hours dedicate to teaching Sexuality varies by county and there is also no fixed directive, but it depends on different variables for each school. The author made an estimation of 6 hours or more per term, according to teachers’ and students’ reports of the amount of time dedicated to teaching and learning topics related to sexuality. The main topics in these hours concern HIV/STI prevention, Sexual and Reproductive physiology, Values and interpersonal skills, Gender and SRH rights, Contraception and unintended pregnancy (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 26). The curriculum is structured according to a formal teaching method, so based on front lectures and talks, and uses of written materials (mainly textbooks). In some cases the national curriculum is also integrated by extra school activities, like drama classes, sports, music or clubs. More than a mere description, the study was meant to measure the comprehensiveness of sexuality education, considering the main obstacles preventing its concrete application, despite of the formal theoretical intentions of putting it into practice. There are indicators that suggest that sexuality education is not really effective and needs further improvements. The authors highlight the complexity of the different contexts in which adolescents in Kenya must navigate their sexual and reproductive lives, and stress that any general formulation about sex in Kenya should be aware of the differences at regional and gender level (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 5).

Among the most challenging barriers underlined by the authors, I want to recall here some: a first difficulty lies in the implementation of new policies, the absence of official legislation to enforce them, since the Ministry of Education did not express clearly the standard directives for educational strategies. Another problem related to governmental configurations is the centralization of education in Kenya; since budget allocation decisions are sometimes delayed, guidelines do not always filter down to the local level, and accountability for implementation is elusive (Keogh, 2018: 13). A decentralized approach to school-based sexuality education would allow to adapt programs to different contexts overcoming the “one-size-fits-all” curriculum that limits sexuality education relevance at local levels. This should include more consultation with young people (the prime beneficiaries of these programs), whose needs can also be diagnosed through local-level needs assessments (Keogh, 2018: 14). Most sources agree that a major challenge is to reconcile rights-based approaches that emphasize adolescents’ right to comprehensive SRH information and services with deeply rooted conservative approaches that stigmatize or denounce certain

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7 The topics are proposed in order of importance in terms of the most discussed topics, according to students and teachers’ perceptions.

8 The authors considered both data coming from health structures and institutions (for example medical complications due to unsafe abortions) and UNESCO and UNFPA’s review of sexuality education curricula in 2011.
aspects of SRH education. As a consequence of the abstinence approach, concepts and messages conveyed emphasize that having sexual relationships is dangerous or immoral for young people, that abortion is immoral, and that young people should avoid having sex before they are married; furthermore the way these messages were conveyed was described by most students as a fear-based one and with prescriptive tones (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 25). As for the pedagogical approach and the class environment Sidze et al. affirm that the curriculum emphasizes abstinence, lacks adequate basic information on contraceptives, condoms, sex and sexual health, excludes key topics such as reproduction, STIs, abortion, access to condoms and sexual health services, omits other social and contextual aspects, such as harassment and parental monitoring, and that prescriptive and fear-based teaching methods are normally used. Embarrassment was also a highly reported problem felt both by teachers and students. This weakness was also explained as lack of resources or materials: a lack of time, training or knowledge available for teachers, and inadequate funding for sexuality education curricula (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 36). A recurring argument of the article is the lack of coordination, not only at institutional level, but among all the actors involved in the process of teaching about sexuality: teachers, students, various stakeholders, and so on. There is also the problem of the multiplicity of opinions about how to build the curriculum up: some thought that sexuality education must include information on contraceptives and pregnancy prevention, while others insisted on the exclusion of ‘sensitive’ themes such as abortion, contraceptives and sexual orientation (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 20; Keogh, 2018: 7). What it is interesting is that if ‘irreconcilable’ differences in opinions and perspectives about appropriate sexuality are point out as an obstacle, there is no suggestion of how to create spaces of discussion among what is now perceived as distant, but could be bridged and combined together in “new” common culture, where differences are not simply blurred in the name of ‘we are all modern’ or of a blind acceptance of any value, but they are put in communication, although their clashes. I will now try to see to what extent the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition can be seen as one of the causes of the gaps described in these discourses, that, as already said in part, represent a challenge to the development of a qualitative sexuality education curriculum.

To conclude this paragraph I can highlight some characteristics of the language used in the classrooms for talking about sexuality: first there is no specific language for teaching about sexuality, as it can be seen by the fact that there is no specific subject and no professional figure teaching it. Secondly, students’ perspectives are not well considered in the developing of the themes to discuss in class, but the teaching happen according to a formal approach based mainly on front lectures. Third, teachers’ approaches are quite moralistic, based on ideas of what is ‘good’ and what is ‘appropriate’, that on one hand excludes many important topics from the conversations and on the other emphasizes competition between different ways of living sexuality, suggesting that one is better over the others. Eventually, the main topics discussed regard HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual physiology and biology: no mention is made on sex
as pleasure or as a human cultural activity, and just a little is said about gender and sexuality (homosexuality for example is seldom discussed).

3.3 Modernity/Tradition in Sexuality Education

In the previous sections I have argued that one of the reasons why contemporary Sexuality Education in schools is seen as ineffective is the lack of dialogue between different ideas and cultural values. What I will try to do now is to see whether and to what extent the dichotomy Modernity/tradition is among the causes of this (perceived) cultural gap. I must start from the fact that modernity/tradition is not often directly mentioned in the literature regarding sexuality education in schools, but the controversy is rather expressed in terms of right-based initiatives versus traditional conservative abstinence-promoting approach: however the framework is not too distance from the one I have described in the previous chapter, where I have argued that the reference to the dichotomy brings about attitudes of culture-blaming and monocultural knowledge, in fact both these latter attitudes can be found in the discourses presented here. More precisely, the discourses about sexuality are affected by the lack of dialogue between different cultural values, but the terms used to described different perspectives are not often those of ‘modern’ and ‘tradition’ but rather ‘progressive’ versus ‘conservative’; even if the words are not the same, there is still this idea of (let’s say) polarized dualism, with no possibility of passing of knowledge or interactions between the two poles. And this is one of the main problems of nowadays discourses about sexuality also in schools.

Abstinence and Progressive

In order to make a sort of comparison between the arguments related to Modernity/Tradition and those to Abstinence/Progressive, as pointed out by Sidze et al., I will focus on the meanings behind these second two poles, and see whether there is a discourse of development from traditional to modern behind them. When we look at teaching abstinence as a value, it is both ineffective and also violent somehow since it causes fear and discomfort and that is (also) due to an opposition of religious groups, parents and local communities (2017: 42). Again, tradition is not mentioned directly, but there is the idea that the cultural values of these people limit their understanding and therefore the quality of speeches of sex education. We could say that there is a veil of culture blaming here: it is like saying that the reason why those people behave in inappropriate way, sexually talking, is due to their ‘wrong’ cultural values. In addition, intercultural dialogue is not at all mentioned as a perspective to overcome the obstacle: either it is done as the elders say, or the young are satisfied; what I can argue is that this aut-aut is not a faithful representation of the factual reality. It is difficult to locate individuals within a single system of thought: different systems are in fact in communication, there is a passage of values, idea and habits from one to
the other, and individuals themselves negotiate with these values and decide which values to embody or which particular sexual behavior to follow according to the changing context they experience. For example: if we consider a young boy moving from countryside to urban center, we can argue that his imagery of sexuality will change, without making a tabula rasa, he will bring his knowledge with him, and combine it with the new one coming from the new situation. The main problem is that this negotiation is not mirrored in the discourses or in the curriculum. Therefore the consequences of referring to Modernity/Tradition as described before can still be found. Discursive representations on sexuality try to solidify reality, which is actually more fluid; in doing so, cultural characteristics are essentialized, denying the continuous processes of change and adaptation that they actually take place. Moreover, when they affirm that “rights-based initiatives are often challenged by traditional and conservative abstinence-promoting perspectives.” (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 46) they seem to align themselves with the problematic image of the polarized dualism, in which the two extremes of the picture are described as essentially different, with no possibility of communication among them. So on one hand silences dominate discourses about sexuality in Kenya, on the other when people actually talk, the instruments for conversation are limited: there is no official space, no funding, no time or training, it is not even a proper subject. A consequence of these limits that we could call structural or primary, the quality of sexuality education is mainly translated as “abstain!”. The article concludes with the explicit recognition of the absence of an emotionally safe space for students to explore sensitive topics regarding sexuality, and the lack of a reliable and effective comprehensive curricula in Kenyan secondary schools. The way forward is listed in a series of points, pointing at an appropriate coordination and synergy among the different government agencies, making sexuality education a subject that would also be compulsory and examinable, use of alternative sources, an aspect particularly relevant from my perspective since what I will argue later is precisely if and how digital platforms can be an alternative space for the creation of a different, more inclusive and fluid language (M. Sidze et al., 2017: 48). I will return to this last factor in the next chapter. For now I will try to define in what ways Modernity/Tradition is affecting conversations about sexuality. I have already said that even if it is not expressed in those terms, the heart of the issue is the same: differences in values are thought as irreconcilable and this essentialization takes away part of the story, that of the subjects, of the people who ‘talk/negotiate’ with these differences, and mix them according to the contextual needs. Reality is much more complex: neither Modernity/Tradition nor other dichotomies are really helpful in representing it.

So what I am finding here is that there is a tendency of representing sexuality (both in general discourses and at schools) as unitary, homogeneous, normative sexual behaviors, that is actually a problem because it is not coherent with what happens in reality, where experiences are much more heterogenous and multiple, made of different pieces taken from various systems of ideas and values, and combined together
to respond to specific needs aroused by the different contexts. This lack of coherence prevents then people, and young in particular, to get a kind of knowledge that is actually useful, that can talk to them with a familiar language, and consequently prevent them to put in practice this knowledge. This problem is not entirely due to the presence of the modernity/tradition dichotomy, since as we have seen is not among the most referred issues: it still is into this problematic dynamics but together with a number of other imagined polarization; here I mentioned the abstinence/progressive one, and later I will get into the young/old, urban/rural, middle/lower classes. The central problem stands in the attitude of polarizing, that transform differences into conflicts: modernity/tradition shapes and is shaped by this attitude, but does not explained it all.

**Positioning**

The authors of a comparative study among sexual relationships and violence in Kenya, Ghana and Mozambique get to similar conclusions: the central result of their research is the that misrepresentation of the complexity of contemporary African communities in matters related to sexuality can be linked to the use of Modernity/Tradition dichotomy, which neglects the reality of a standing-in-between tradition and modernity (Parkes et al., 2016: 157). They start analyzing and challenging the most popular narratives about modernisation, distinguish in particular among two opposite interpretations: on one hand economic development, the growth of rights discourses described as leading to reductions in gender violence, and more freedom in choosing sexual behaviors, on the other modernisation as increasing inequalities and gender violence. In both cases they highlight the tendency to pit tradition against modernity, defending one cultural system over another depending on who is talking.

“but the depictions of tradition or modernity give little attention to the heterogeneity of postcolonial contexts, in which indigenous and modernizing forces are interwoven in complex ways. […] There is therefore a need to move beyond the tradition-modernity dichotomy, and to build a conceptual vocabulary that enables us to explore the dynamics of [embodying sexuality] in diverse contexts criss-crossed by multiple discourses and social conditions” (Parkes et al., 2016: 160).

A second important argument is that even though such an imagined distinction is not reliable, it is however deployed in a various place of production of discourses, from research studies, to educational curricula and to the social agents themselves. The reason they provide to explain this phenomena stands in the concept of *positioning*, used in poststructuralism to describe the dynamics between discourses and production of subjectivity: when applying this conceptual tool in their analytical study they recognize on one hand how the interviewees positioned themselves within multiple discursive sites, thus overcoming the dichotomy, but at the same time they had clear in mind the distinction modern-traditional (Parkes et al., 2016: 164). According to the authors this contradiction of putting into play this distinction is a
discursive strategy - that of *positioning* - through which people claim for a subjectivity that is far from rural (felt like victim) and from the old generations (felt as out of step); to think themselves as ‘being sexually modern’ is an identarian assertion, saying “we are active, new agents who want change” (Parkes et al., 2016: 170). What this says however is that once again reality is far more complex: modernity/tradition is just one ‘slice’ of a wider binarism, that comprehends multiple oppositions that are also generational (young/old), spatial (urban/rural), temporal (past/future), and socio-economic (middle-upper/lower classes): the deep gap represented in scientific articles or school curricula is a fictitious one. It does not reflect the fluidity of experiences where these values are much closer than this dualism implies.

This is not to say that there are no differences at all, but rather that long held sexual norms co-exist with modernizing discourses, and people seek *midway positions* along a tradition-modernity continuum. If school programs, part of academic research and social agents themselves use this polarized language, the topic of next chapter is whether and how digital platforms use a different language, more accommodating to various differences in values, and therefore capable of giving a more truthful image of the ways of living sexuality.

*Alternative stances to talk about sexuality*

A step forward could then be to ask ourselves which kind of approach could better accommodate the heterogeneity of sexual life realities. This was exactly the focus of Jude Mukoro’s article, in which the author compares three different ways of teaching sexuality in contemporary Nigeria⁹, concluding that the best mean of fostering culturally sensitive sexuality education should look at an open-cultural stance. As in the other study, the paper develops from the definition of sexual culture as an “assemblage of meanings, conceptualizations and practices around sex, which is held, shared, lived, communicated, negotiated and even contested within a community.” (Mukoro, 2017: 499). The research question is then, how and if it is possible to “translate” this multiple sexual culture(s) into a sexuality education curriculum that avoids simple easy-cut responses and are instead able to critically engage and reflect on the diversity of sexual culture(s): the answer suggested is that we need a ‘culturally sensitive sexuality education’, defined as a form of sexuality education that is responsive to culture (Mukoro, 2017: 503).

The next argument is that there are three different ways of putting into practice this ideal: monocultural, multicultural and intercultural forms. As for the first case the limit highlighted consists in giving students views about sex and sexuality only within the terms of a single culture, either from liberal or conservative perspective, with high risks of ethnocentrism and cultural biases, as well as silences and denigration of minority adolescents. I would add that a monocultural approach prevents dialogue, and so falls into a logic

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⁹ As said for previous studies focused on other countries than Kenya, the arguments exposed are of interest even though the different contexts.
of hierarchical asymmetry between what is consider appropriate and the rest, all categorized as just wrong. Instead a multicultural stance aspires to be as inclusive as possible, meeting positions and needs of possibly everyone, despite the differences; yet, this comprehensive incorporation acts also as a weakness: it is in fact hardly imaginable to translate into a concrete, practical curriculum the hundreds sexual cultures, as it would be so bulky to leave no room for the coverage of other subjects (Mukoro, 2017: 504).

A second, maybe even more dangerous, complication lies in the way sexual cultural differences may be represented: the risk is ending up doing little more than reinforce stereotypes about marginalized groups. Again there would be no real bridging of differences, despite the intention of inclusion, overwhelmed by a resulting message that would sound something like “… and then there are these other groups that eat this or that, dance like this or sing special songs when….”, producing an ethnographic account guilty of exoticize differences, and so creating distance rather than filling the gaps. The intercultural stance conveys the idea that people can have more than one identity at the same time and that these are not necessarily in opposition to each other, and all cultures are presented in an equal way. In this case the doubts come from the risk of falling into a dangerous nihilism, accepting any kind of sexual cultural values, without any critical understanding of them, getting to the paradox of becoming insensitive to every sexual culture (Mukoro, 2017: 506). A fourth approach, the open-cultural stance on sex education, is proposed as the one in which differences in values can fit, and be welcomed within a discourse able to recognize them without blurring them: instead of resolving differences, which it is no always possible or desirable, it sensitizes students to conflicts, teaching about them and so giving them the competences to navigate and thrive within them.

The conclusion of the article consists in a suggested and hypothetical methodology to achieve a sex cultural intelligence, starting from a monocultural step, passing through the others and finally get to the open-cultural step. This argument is not logically incorrect, but I may argue that it does not take into consideration that such changes in educational curricula would probably need years, especially due to the centralized asset of education in Kenya, and would also likely meet the opposition of those communities that are not eager to create dialogue with other perspectives. Furthermore, given the specific sexual cultural context of Kenya as described previously, with the high presence of taboo, the lack of training of teachers in matters related to sexuality and the ambiguous directives of the ministry of education, it is not easy to imagine how or when these changes could be carried out. However the kind of language idealized in the open-cultural approach is something interesting under the eyes of my research questions; what I will try to understand is what kind of language is used in digital platforms, or if not, if we can reasonably imagine an easier adoption of it in digital platform rather than in school-based curricula.
Chapter Four: Digital Services for Sexuality Education

In the previous chapters I have analyzed the discourses regarding sexuality in general and Sexuality Education in secondary schools in Kenya in particular, arguing that the latter can be seen as an example of the limits of a ‘language’ based on a polarization of cultural differences that excludes the possibility of dialogue among different perspectives and presents them in a relation of conflict and competition. I have explored to what extent this ‘language’ results from the presence of the Modernity/tradition dichotomy in such discourses. My point is that on one hand the dichotomy is present in representations about sexuality, but on the other, it is not the main cause of those limits, but it is embedded with many other dichotomies - young/old, urban/rural, progressive/abstinence – and together with other (political, economic, social) constraints, they challenge the effective delivery of knowledge about sexuality among adolescents, who need a more fluid ‘language’ coherent with their experiences.

The present chapter focuses on how the digital platforms used in Kenya talk about sexuality. My purpose is to explore to what extent they provide a place where a new ‘language’ is developed - one that can combine cultural differences and encourages a dialogue which is responsive to and inclusive of young people’s point of views. I will rely on both scientific articles and on interviews I had with social media editors from Kenya to give the readers a general background about the uses and access to internet and technology in the country - who can access to it, and for what it is used. I will then move on to how they are used for talking about sex and sex education - what content is given, who is the target audience, what happens when adolescents talk about sex online. I will try to highlight the peculiar characteristics of digital devices, and compare the representations these latter provide with the ones produced in schools. Eventually, I will refer to the theory of the Ecology of knowledges and the open-cultural stance to see whether these approaches are considered in digital environments for learning. I want to stress here that I do not mean to present digital platforms as omni-comprehensive solutions to the difficulties of the contemporary discourses about sexuality in Kenya. I merely want to suggest that the kind of ‘language’ used in the online world can relate to young people’s need to know about sexuality due to the inclusive dialogue it provides. It overcomes the problematic dynamic of competition between modern and traditional perspectives about sex and better grasps the total fluidity of sexual life.

4.1 Access to Internet and Mobile Phones

It is not easy to establish precisely how many people have real access to internet and digital devices in Kenya. Statistics and official data show in fact different numbers and perspectives, from those who present internet as the great change of the last years, that opens up new possibilities for many Kenyan citizens, to the more pessimistic ones who actually see it as a privilege of few people, increasing the social divisions.
Looking at it from a global perspective, we see that African youth are the least connected: 67% of young people in developing countries use internet and only 30% in Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Age, gender, geographical location, level of education or socio-economic status affect the opportunity to ‘get online’. According to the UNESCO data, in Africa internet access seems to be reserved for a minority (around 60% of African youth are not online; UNESCO 2020). The digital gender gap is also growing, as it reinforces inequalities in the level of education between men and women. Local sources provide a different account of the spread and increase of internet in Kenya, affirming that the growth of Internet and mobile phones usage has been exponential, and became basic means of communication for most Kenyans, affordable to the lower strata of the population and used as a mechanism for greater participation of these groups in the development process (Ndung’u, Waema, 2011: 110). Their data show that internet users had undergone a growth of 358.5 percent from the previous year (2009). If on one hand they suggest that economic status and geographical location did not strongly matter in the diffusion of internet, they also affirm that income, education level and the available infrastructure around the household determined the technology adopted with internet users predominantly based in major urban areas. For example mobile phones had a penetration of 50.8 percent while the internet had a penetration of 15.2 percent, and rural mobile phone household subscription was higher than electricity availability indicating that households in rural areas had devised ways of charging their mobile phones either using solar panels or car batteries. This means that there was no difference between mobile phones usage in rural areas and urban areas, but there was for internet. They affirm that the new technologies enable knowledge access, accumulation, and dissemination, facilitates knowledge accumulation, and stress that educational purposes were among the main reasons of using of internet (Ndung’u, Waema, 2011: 115). But saying that internet has become the main platform for learning is not synonym of a qualitative information: digital technology can give false information (Ndung’u, Waema, 2011: 117). This last point was also stressed by M. van Heijningen and L. van Clief who described online spaces as both ‘safe’ places to share very personal experiences and at the same time very risky ones. They started their analysis from the assumption that Social media has become an integral part of everyday life for young people throughout the world, and Kenya in particular had registered a high internet penetration rate of 68.4 per cent with 11 per cent of the population using Facebook, a percentage that has been steadily increasing over the past five years with the spread of mobile phone use (M. van Heijningen, L. van Clief, 2017: 8). These data are shared also by an UNESCO publication examining the dissemination of ICT, information and communication technologies, which attests that the spread of mobile telephony market has seen huge expansion in the african continent, where the number of mobile phone holders (650 million) is today more than the United States and Europe (2015: 30), although they also highlight there are major disparities between countries and regions, excluding in particular the poorest populations. As for the internet penetration they recognize that if on one hand the
level of access to cable Internet in sub-Saharan Africa is still low in absolute terms, it is growing at a considerably faster rate than in other regions in the world (2015: 38). In their evaluation of ICT for economic and social development, the study shows positive data with regard to the Millennium Development Goals, among which achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality, improve maternal health and combat HIV/AIDS; m-Health and m-Education are underlined as primary areas of success of using digital and technological solutions, since mobile phones make possible to reach a huge public, everywhere and at any time, including isolated populations and those hitherto excluded from the formal educational system (street children, children with disabilities etc.), reason why they encourage the integration of ICT into teaching (2015:44).

As already said, it is difficult to determinate exact numbers, and it might be better to find a balance between the different perspectives. Research on mobile usage in lower income countries demonstrates that access to technology is not a case of ‘have’ or ‘have not’, but is often transient, changeable and with diverse ownership, borrower ship and sharing practices. (UNESCO, 2020: 11). In general it is possible to say that the use of internet and mobile phones introduced radical changes (both in positive and negative terms) for those who can access to it, that are mainly young people living in the cities.

4.2 Digital spaces for Sexuality education

A common opinion among the experts and observers of the activities on Facebook related to Sexuality Education is that the social media helped to increase the spread of information and knowledge about sex in Kenya society, regardless of whether the knowledge is right or wrong. In some cases the knowledge had empowered the users to know more about ones’ sexuality, while in others it enhanced episodes of cyberbullying or it has led to unsafe approaches to sex, for example increasing prostitution (Mpiima et al. 2017: 107). In general, social media are said to be increasingly used as a tool for engaging people about sex and relationships, as well as making the information easily accessible, since there is less social stigma attached to obtaining information through semi-anonymous communication, though it does not prevent the possibility of online harassment (van Heijningen and L. van Clief, 2017: 8; Katzer et al.: 2009). This ambivalence makes “online spaces as inherently complex and paradoxical” as affirmed by van Heijningen and L. van Clief, 2017, scholars committed in evaluations about social medias for sexuality education, who argue that the main characteristic of social media is that they are an open space - exactly the reason why administrators cannot make it completely ‘safe’ (2017: 9). In fact this ‘openness’ is positive since it makes it more inclusive, allowing even those with marginalized identities to speak and make their voices heard; but it is this inclusion itself that also makes it problematic because with lots of diverse perspectives is often difficult to maintain respectful communication. Still, in recent years there have been positive
changes in this sense, since Facebook in particular has been successful in linking online profiles to real-world identities. Furthermore, even if the different opinions can sometimes lead to controversies, the fact that it is possible to include people in different contexts and views can increase the communicative dynamics, in comparison to schools where there is mostly no dialogue at all. Facebook and the new media platforms provide a space of information-sharing where people connect with others, and share opinions, find people who listen, share information and are actively engaged in discussions: in doing so they exchange experiences and ideas. However, challenges are still very evident, in particular with regard to the quality of knowledge. There is a lot of misinformation, and negative or pornographic content is also exchanged as part of peer-to-peer communication. Furthermore, some researchers report a lack of understanding of the specific contexts and the cultural differences lived by the young people, whose perspectives and needs are still not fully considered by sexual health organizations that work both offline and online (van Heijningen and L. van Clief, 2017: 17). An UNESCO report of 2020 also stresses the need to make more efforts to build online safe places to talk about sexual issues, and integrate them with a focus on quality and content within each context, so that local specificities will not be neglected, otherwise it may not be appropriate, safe or effective to deliver sensitive information through these means (2020: 14). According to their data digital services for sexuality education have the capacity to reach populations missed by other forms of education, so it confirms what said above regarding digital spaces as valuable sources of information for marginalized subjects that are normally excluded by other discourses about sexuality. For example, LGBTQI+ people, thanks to anonymity, can find answers to questions that otherwise will hardly be asked in a classroom or, even less, at home (2020: 8). In fact, analysis of digital interventions in lower and middle-income countries found that mobile phones were used to encourage youth to seek health services and to transmit SRH information to them to increase their knowledge and promote positive health behaviors, that was particularly valuable for young people living in traditionally conservative societies where sexuality and reproductive health remain highly stigmatized subjects. In conclusion, digital spaces are radical new spaces of democratic information sharing but digital divides persist both in access to and use of technologies and this has important implications for the use of digital technologies in education, and sexuality education in particular, whose difficulties in implementation at schools cannot be overcome simply through bringing in technology (UNESCO, 2020: 29).

4.3 The digital ‘language’ for sexuality

Turning from the general framework regarding the use of internet and digital platforms for spreading information about sexuality, I now want to analyze more specifically the kind of language used in them in the light of what just said: if at the moment there is a gap in communication between rigid language of sexuality education curricula and the young people’s need for a language closer to their experiences, could
digital platforms be the place to develop a new different language\textsuperscript{10} able to combine differences, without attitudes of culture blaming or monocultural knowledge? In order to find an answer to this question I interviewed the social media editor of “Love Matters Kenya” a project started in India in 2011 and spread to many other countries, among which China, Egypt, and Kenya. It aims at spreading blush-free effective communication about love, sex, and relationships to young people between the ages of 18 to 35. It was launched by RNW Media, a center of expertise that builds digital communities for social change, using online media to engage young people in sensitive and often-taboo subjects. I first asked the editor about the current situation of discourses about sexuality in Kenyan society and secondary schools, and her answers were mostly in line with what I have said in the previous chapter. She confirmed that despite the efforts there is no comprehensive sexuality education available in Kenyan curriculum, and thus young people mostly learn about sexuality through informal conversations with peers and friends. She also stressed that there is a lot of fake news going around, which leads to a big social problem since many young girls end up dying very young because they did not get the right information (in particular for issues related to abortion). We then entered talked about the use of internet as a place where to find information, and I asked her in particular who can access internet and what ‘happens’ once they are on-line – that is, what do they look for? Her answer:

“At the moment a lot of young people are using internet, that is a place where they can find information; but this is not the same for rural areas where they highly rely on secondary information. What happens is that they just search on google, just random searches, “how to have good sex”, “first time sex”, “how to get rid of a pregnancy” or “why am I feeling like this with my period or is it normal to experience such thing. They have no specific source to rely on because many organizations are assuming that these young people are not having sex, so they do not provide that info directly to them. It is like this because the conversations surrounding sex in our society are considered taboo. Therefore, teachers and parents find it hard to talk about sex to younger people because they assume these ‘children’ are too young to have sex.”

From her words I can underline how the subjects that rely on internet for knowledge about sexuality are mostly adolescents from the cities, and that even on the world web there is no recognized, legitimate voice that talks about sexuality starting from their experiences. It is interesting to notice that she mentioned taboos and the neglect of young people’s sexual life as a problem afflicting also the online world, not only conversations in schools or at home. So even if anonymity is a crucial characteristic of digital language, which allows more open discussions, it does not entirely explain this openness. I wanted to understand if she could identify some other elements fostering dialogue on digital platforms, in particular in relation to

\textsuperscript{10} I use the word language according to the conceptual framework I elaborated in the Introduction, which means as a way of talking, not as the kind of language spoken (like English or Swahili).
the way different values are ‘treated’ online. In order to do so I first asked her about the Modernity/Tradition dichotomy and the social distinctions she associates to it. Her answer:

“There is a clear distinction between what is modern and what is traditional when it comes to sexuality and sexual identity in Kenya; however, this distinction is split across social class. Those in middle- and upper-class status tend to have a more modern understanding while those in the lower class have a more traditional approach when it comes to sexuality. This distinction is evident because of the financial status and access to technology and internet.”

Therefore, Modernity/tradition is part of a greater system of oppositional views, and each dichotomy’s poles are linked to the others: modernity/tradition, middle/lower classes, access to internet/taboo, urban/rural spaces, young/old generations. From here one can see how the discourse on internet is not free from distinctions in values, but what is actually different is the way the relationship between such values is shaped. I asked her why she mentions the dichotomy in the context of “Love Matters Kenya” and what they say, she answered that

“I mention it because it is one of the discussions we tend to have before we recreate our content. We do understand that distinction because we target youth in general, so we understand the differences between those who have certain view of sexuality and those who have others and we try encompass the all audience and please everyone from each side. We just put our mindset asking, what would someone in a rural setting will think when see this content, and how would be modifies in a way that would still show a modern mindset but not overwhelm their traditional mindset. Because we target Kenyan youth from all backgrounds and different classes, we tend to accommodate both concepts. Even though we have a modern type of message on sexuality, we find a way to make those with traditional concepts feel welcomed and not feel like their way of thinking towards sexuality is dismissed.”

The fact that she referred to the idea of encompass everyone and accommodate both concepts implies that they consider the possibility of the compatibility of different values in a single language, that used on their and others’ digital platforms. So I can conclude that the relationship they promote between the differences is different from the one implied in Sexuality education in schools and in Kenyan society in general. I had showed previously that the dichotomic language these latter ones use promote competition between different ideas of living sexuality (either modernity over tradition or the contrary); from the information got by the interviews I can instead affirm that digital platforms encourage an inclusive dialogue, where differences are not translated in terms of better/worse, appropriate/not appropriate, but are treated with equal respect, thanks to a language that is closer to the adolescents: not dogmatic, less rigid, coherent with
their perspectives and experiences. When I asked her how she would describe the language they used on their platform she said that

“We speak in a language that the target audience is using. The information shared is very fluid and informal. We tend to use language that resonates with our audience and evokes conversations. We don’t come to them as teachers or telling them “do this, do that”, we use a different language. Our method based on principles of honest, open, friendly, and non-judgmental of conveying the message has allowed our audience to open up about their thoughts on taboo-related topics; whether positive or negative, we encourage the dialogue.”

I asked her to specify what she meant by positive or negative dialogue and she said:

“I’ll give you an example about LGBTI content. That’s another taboo topic in our country context and if we put out that content, we will have negative comments but when we do see positive comments, than we see the changes are on in our audience and also be able to measure our work and its quality.”

I want now to report the conversation I had with the Senior Technical officer for digital solution of One2One, a youth hotline providing free information on HIV and AIDS, sexuality, sexual reproductive health and rights in Kenya. I asked more specific questions about the communicative strategies implied on the One2One hot line and its social media dimensions. One2One is associated with LVCT Health, a Kenyan non-governmental and not-for-profit organization registered in 2001, that has large following in the country. They are carrying out a digital operation by building multiple digital platforms to communicate with adolescents. One2One’s activities are sparse between a call enter, to which young people have free access in Kenya, that allows them to do calls or send SMSs. Secondly, they have digital social media pages, for example a Facebook page, which has 64,000 young people involved in conversations and online chats, as well as Twitter and Instagram ones. Third, they use podcasts and blogs to spread information and give them services (mainly counselling). He affirmed that the digital operation they are designing is part of a great social change in the way sexual issues are now addressed in Kenya, creating new credible sources to get factual information, meaning a kind of information to which young people can rely and trust. I asked him to describe me who are the young people that refer to One2One and what happens once the communication is set. From the metrics they do on the social media they know that majority of the adolescent are male (66% precisely), coming from urban areas, with an average age between 16-24. They have no data as for the social classes, but they assume that if they have a smartphone, they (or their family) earn something. The technical officer also affirmed that there is a lot of work to do in order to include the vulnerable subjects – for example females coming from lower social strata, in particular from rural areas, who face many challenges to get to their platforms — but they are promoting
secondary digital projects to integrate these subjects in the digital ecological system. As for what dynamics are activated when they get in touch with the adolescents he distinguished between the website, the hotline, and the social media platforms. In the first case the young people register on the app and give consent to receive information by SMS, that they receive automatically on their phones. They can also reply to the messages asking for more information. Instagram and Twitter instead are used to send general messages for sexual health promotional purposes. When I asked him what makes this knowledge different from the other ones (for example what is said at schools or at home) he answered:

“We are listening to them for years since 2006, and we try to respond through a pleasurable language to them without accusing them without being judgmental or being partisan. We are not pro or con anyone, we try to share a neutral content that respond to them. And we also have thousands of feedbacks about how we had helped them.”

Following his argument, I asked him to what extent and how they are following a policy of inclusion in the developing of their platforms and the knowledge they share on them, and he responded:

“Digital projects are more democratic places because we just want to give them information and services about how to behave in health way, we do not want to impose a perspective over the other but we respect everyone and try to answer to everyone. Multiplicity is welcomed and different perspectives are represented in our language. We only respond to them technically, in a way that is not intimidating them or putting them off. They have more power to ask more questions.”

I asked him if they had particular strategies for empowering the adolescents to speak, and he replied:

“What I have learnt over the years is that in social media platforms not many people talk, but on calls they are more active, because they are directly listened by a psychologist or another figure that is there for them, individually. The way you respond to them is crucial, or they will run away. You have to be very sensitive and sometimes use a coded language.”

Later I came more directly into the topic of the ‘contradictions’ between the purposes of encouraging dialogue and the inclusive policy, with the social conflicts due to ‘clashing’ values as for sexual behaviors and ideas. I wanted first to understand how One2One deals with the perceived social divisions between those people who respect silences and taboos and those who want to open up the debates about sexuality. His answer was that:

“I have been part of that debate, that has been there for years, and my discussion is that: what is the point of establishing what is deviation and what the norm? If You are disseminating the content according to one of those directions, you are not looking at sexuality as key factor, and you lost the focus on the
integration and support for the vulnerable. I should be able to take care of almost everyone who is in danger or risk, from homosexuals to young women: we need a message that takes care of all of them. our main goal is to give them services that help them, and we have to consider a content which they can access according to their education. So for me the answer is no, we do not need to consider this division.”

Comparing his answer with that of the first respondent (I refer to her very first answer I reported) we can notice that if he acknowledges the existence of different perspectives about sexuality, he does not see them as something to be included in the debates, but rather to be left out of the discussions. I continued the conversation:

So you talk with people with very different problems and questions: do you have specific strategies to deal with differences?

“We have been considered and awarded as one of the most inclusive organizations, which make our audience very different. So we follow a policy an inclusive policy as main goal. To do so we don’t consider sexual orientation as a factor, for example, for me the goal is to deliver the service, in the best way, so we have to understand their specific questions. This is our work. To do so sometimes we rely on some professional figures, for example psychologists in the hot line: they can respond to the clients’ issues better, because they are trained to understand who they are.”

Does this attempt to encompass everyone generate conflicts and/or arguments in the conversations on the social media pages?

“A lot! Initially there were even more discussions, especially for issues regarding sexual identity. But it is also a positive debate; in the last years there had been media campaigns to make this theme closer more familiar (creating memes for example). Sometimes it goes into bullying, but our principles are very clear: this is not allowed. When they pass the border, we intervene asking to remove the comments or modify the content. In our social media strategies we have steps on how to respond to these crises. This helps us to know what to do at what time. We collaborate also with other organizations to best manage these situations. But we don’t limit their freedom of expression. They express themselves as long as they respect each other. We give them space to talk to each other, but the psychologists work as moderators, that look at what they say and how they speak to each other. We control the kind of information they share: I can make an intervention, but not attacking them, but trying to be as objective as possible, trying to let them understand why we intervene. but even if conflicts happen, there is still positive communication. The dialogue between different perspectives is more common.”

What challenges you are now facing to improve the delivery of knowledge about sexuality?
“I think one of the biggest challenges we experience now in Kenya is the language. We have almost 42 dialects in our country. We also have slangs. So it is becoming quite hard sometime even to understand what they ask for. And it is problematic because if they feel to be not understood, for example if we ask to repeat what they asked, they shy off completely. Secondly, we are finding that there is a lot of digital and phone diffusion among young people, and we try to translate contents and knowledge in these worlds, but this is still quite a challenge. We are changing the digital frameworks and the world of digital solutions because they represent great opportunity for expanding our job, but it is an expansive work. Also to the maintenance of the devices, but this does not stop us. if you consider the number of reached people it is completely worthwhile because the number is impressive. The other element that is becoming a real issue is that of cyberbullying. It is quite critical when you are developing digital ecosystem as a solution.”

What are your aspirations or hopes for the future of digital platforms involved in sexuality education?

“To expand the public e-health ecosystem, where young people can access: right service at the right time by the right person. Using digital solutions make it easier: I don’t have to go the hospital to get a contraceptive, I don’t have to go to do the que in a pharmacy to learn about menstruation, I can learn it through a digital solution; I don’t have to get pregnant if I am a young girl or get the HIV, because I didn’t know how to behave healthy. An e-health care system helps to make the goals of a sexual health care more easily to achieved at young ages. I am looking forward to having a digital ecosystem that supports young people.”

From my conversations with the two digital experts I could understand that talking about sexuality in today Kenya is a very complex matter, bigger than the issue of Modernity/Tradition. Many dynamics are embedded in such discourses, from generational to economic, cultural and so on. In general there is a “multi-form” social and discursive gap between a rigid language, that tends to polarize the differences in ideas and behaviors about sexuality, that does not mirror the negotiations and mix people do between different values, and the need for a new, fluid language able to provide people with the instruments to navigate in a changing reality of hybrid experiences. To what extent this language could be found on internet is not an easy matter. Some of its characteristics seem to answer positively to the question (anonymity, inclusion, active participation, dialogue), and both respondents underlined how digital platforms provide a no-judgmental language, able to listen and respond coherently to young people, which makes it a more appropriate tool to reach them. The interviews give us a picture of digital platforms as democratic spaces for discussions, to which more people can access (even those who are normally excluded by official discourses, such as LGBTI), and this allows the interaction between multiple points of views, something that does not happen in schools or at home, where differences are rather put in competition. Online world’s language instead seems to follow the idea of a compatibility of differences,
which does not mean that it blurs or negate them, putting everything on the same level: to behave modern is different than to behave traditionally, but what is new in this language is that those differences are put in an inclusive dialogue of both/and, rather than either/or, and this helps both to grasp better the fluid reality of sexual life and to prevent ‘reading’ cultural differences in terms of conflict and competition. The dialogical nature of this language permits also to open up the discussions, and shed light on what is in between the either/or. Anyway both respondents recognize that there are still deep challenges and difficulties to be faced: stigma is not out of the on-line world, where “negative dialogue” and episodes of cyber-bullying continue to happen, and the internet’s inclusiveness and democratic nature do not avoid exclusions of poorest sectors of the society.

If we turn back to the recent literature discussing the quality and effectiveness of the knowledge about sexuality spread on the digital world, I already said that although the complex and paradoxical configuration of social medias, it also shares some of the arguments of the respondents in describing digital language as more open, and democratic, empowering people to speak, which brings as a consequence a multiple and various content about sex (van Heijningen and L. van Clief, 2017: 10). What I am interested in now is to understand to what extent this multiplicity also promotes dialogue between them. There are not many studies dealing with the issue of exploring communicative dynamics in conversations about sexuality online: most of them focus on the fact that people do talk, so that digital platforms increase the number of subjects and topics discussed. The interviews added to this a qualitative analysis of the online debates: on digital platforms there is not only ‘more content’ on sexuality going around, but the quality of the content itself is improved, since they described the digital language as able of listening to the young people’s voices, in so being more effective in the delivery of knowledge. I suggest then the academic researches should consider more this latter aspect of the digital language about sexuality, which in many cases is overlooked.

However there are some studies that confirm in part the results I am drawing here. One of them is the article written by Lisa Wiebesiek (2015), where she analyses a cellular telephone-based social networking platform called Mxit, spread in South Africa since 2014, free to download, and inexpensive to use, where young people read stories about various topics, among which sexual issues (2015: 108). Even if she does not enter into the topic of dichotomies and dialogue, the article is interesting for me because she focuses on the kind of language of the users, evolved in response to the use of the digital technology, that she calls Textspeak (made of acronyms, abbreviations, and non-standard orthograph), that could be compared to the informal language used in the digital platforms to talk about sex. She argues that the use of this digital language is positive, because it means that the users interact with the texts they find online, that they read, understand and respond to them, so also question the content given (2015: 111). What she says then is that digital platforms stimulate young people to engage with the information they receive, making the
discussions highly interactive, so in comparison to other means of conversation the digital ones create participatory spaces and enable the agency of the users. Complementary to the article just quoted, I want to report some of the arguments of Joel Windle and Bárbara Bravo Pires Ferreira (2019). Even in this case I had to read in between the lines to find themes to which refer to question/comment further my points, since it does not face directly the topics of sexuality education, but it rather provides an analysis of the creation of hybrids cultures on social networks. It is in fact a digital ethnography of a Brazilian Facebook page created in 2013, focused on Afro-American culture and music (2019: 142). It looks at the interaction between different languages (English and Brazilian in particular) used on the page, and affirms that the colloquial and informal nature of the social network allows the users to overcome the 'classical' linguistic hierarchies (that depict English as the 'good' Language and Brazilian as that of the favela), and to bring both languages closer to their identities, adapting and exchanges meanings, words of both (2019: 145). In this case as well, Facebook (and the online world in general) is suggested as a place fostering the agency of the participants, in particular in creating hybrid and transgressive communication, remixing meanings within the context of the group (2019: 146). These arguments seem then to confirm my thesis of digital platforms as places for creation of new ‘language’ able to combine and bridge differences as for sexual issues.

Another relevant study evaluating an online discussion platforms about HIV/AIDS for students of the University of the Western Cape in South Africa shows strong evidences that the anonymity and interactivity of the digital space promoted the creation of a social learning environment where old and new ideas were considered, students acquired new knowledge and learnt to esteem varying views on the subjects of discussion, instigating them to reflect on HIV/AIDS in a different way eventually (Baelden et al, 2011: 166). Based on interviews with the students using the platforms, the authors highlight how the discussion forum helped them to listen to their peers and share their perspectives and attitudes; some of the answers of the respondents pointed explicitly to their appreciation of logging in and hearing something new and different (Baelden et al, 2011: 173). Still, the reference to these articles should not give the impression that digital platforms are smooth solutions to the complex problematics affecting discourses about sexuality. But from the results drawn from the interviews and articles I can say that digital platforms seem to increase young people’s awareness of the existence of diverging views, and so their willingness to confront with other ideas. It is a hard to answer in clear and definitive terms whether or not digital platforms allow young people to bridge perspective and promote respectful attitudes: analysis of online conversations during long times, interviews with users would be needed to have better answers. However I have highlighted some elements that make us reasonably suppose that such positive approach to dialogue is actually going on in digital spaces; not only multiple and diverse content from and for different subjects is there available, but the fact of not being judged for their ideas about sexuality let us think that it
promotes a non-judgmental attitude among its users as well. In the following pages I will address my last research question regarding the kind of language developed on internet and its relationship with the epistemological project of the “ecology of knowledges”. The dialogue between different systems of knowledges is a priority of this theory, thus looking if digital platforms present sufficient characteristics to affirm that such theory could be implemented in them, can be a way to strengthen my point.

4.4 Digital platforms: Ecology of knowledges and open-cultural space?

From the interviews and the scientific articles just analyzed, I had already traced some answers to my research questions. First of all, the results seem to suggest that young people do rely on internet and digital platforms to talk about sexuality: they are considered sources of knowledges, and good alternatives to the official discourses in schools. In order to better define what kind of knowledge they actually share I have looked closer at the language used to talk about sex in digital platforms, and I can say that it is different from the one used in schools or at home: ‘informal, fluid, open, comprehensive’ - these words were often quoted as the main characteristics of sexual discourses on internet. So it is possible to affirm that Digital Platforms are spaces where a new language can be and is already produced. I have also asked myself at the beginning of my study whether such new language could combine and bridge different values: taking into consideration its inherent characteristics can help in addressing this question. This language is in fact described as more in line with adolescents’ experiences, since they can talk and have conversations about their doubts, they are actively participating in discussions, something different from what happens in schools’ classrooms, where sexuality education is taught with a rigid approach that does not make the students feel free to ask questions or get actively involved in the lectures. I have also highlighted how the students can find information more appropriate to their daily sexual life on internet, given its attention to the local specificities - even in this case differently from school-based curriculum, for its standardized content and the centralized configuration of the Kenya educational system itself, as I have outlined in the third chapter. Inclusion of marginal and marginalized subjects was also pointed out as a consequence of sex talks on social medias, which thanks to anonymity permit adolescents to touch sensitive topics normally excluded by formal, official debates, and thus to overcome taboo, which makes the online world more open to talk about sexual diversity and heteronormative behaviors. This last point brings out the heart of the issue, that is if this inclusion of differences means that the different values are combined in a single but multiple discourse that welcome heterogenous perspectives without putting them in competition. Again, it is not easy to give a definitive answer to it. If we look at the intentions of the social media managers I have talked with, their arguments suggest that yes, their aim is to “encompass everyone” and “encourage dialogue” between people from different contexts, and it is the same answer if we consider the characteristics of digital devices quoted in the scientific articles before, that as more
democratic spaces promote sharing and exchanges of knowledges. Consequently to these assumptions, digital platforms seem to be actually able to present differences in ideas, values, behaviors about sexuality in a relationship of communication rather than competition, a quality absent from the representations of school curricula, that tend instead to separate values, creating gaps and fixed dichotomies that lead to a lack of coherence with reality and to ineffective delivery of knowledges to the young people.

I want to return to the perspective of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in order to strengthen these last arguments, by comparing his theory of the ecology of knowledges with the digital spaces. In particular I will take into consideration some peculiar elements he suggests that could foster the shift from monocultural attitudes to the ecology and try to see to what extent they can be found in the production of knowledge in digital platforms. In the theoretical framework for example I described the process of translation, as the possibility to pick up a concept from one epistemological system and translate it into another one, respecting the different epistemic context of this latter. This would allow to build connections between the systems of knowledges, and create a dialogue from which we could all benefit: the separation does not welcome the factual multiplicity of the world, and put differences in terms of hierarchies (better/worse, superior/inferior). This aspect is something that we could see mirrored in the inclusive dialogue promoted online; for example when she said “we just put our mindset asking, what would someone in a rural setting will think when see this content, and how would be modifies in a way that would still show a modern mindset but not overwhelm their traditional mindset.” there is implied the idea of modifying (or translating) the language in order to please different mindsets. This aspect is linked to a second crucial point of de Sousa Santos’ theory, which regards the idea of situated knowledges. It conveys the message that all forms of knowledges are partial and situated and no one of them can serve to grasp all aspects of all states of affairs and to inform all practices; moreover each one bears “its own criteria of rigor and validity that operate credibly in social practices” (Nunes, 2009: 106). With this last statement he suggests a pragmatic approach to knowledge that treats all the knowledges existing in the world in an equal environment, anchoring the reflection on them in their local situated context of use. The ecology of knowledges thus implies bringing them to the ground level, in order to ‘be used’ in coherence with the needs of the specific local context, so that their value and appropriateness are given by their capacity to answer local specificities, and not by essential ideas of ‘how it ought to be’. To do so you must look and pay attention to who are the subjects in need of information, where they are, for what they need it, and so on. If we compare this idea to the knowledge produced on internet, we can say that the attention showed in listening to their audience and give appropriate information to them, in accordance to the specific local context in which the users operate, tell us that it is possible to trace a close link between how digital platforms convey messages about sexuality to the adolescents, and the kind of production of knowledge imagined by the Sousa Santos. According to the respondents’ answers and the articles afore mentioned,
social media editors and experts work answering directly to the questions aroused by the direct experiences of the users – a typical situation would be that subject A lives X experience and report it on a Facebook page to ask some information about it, and then get a specific answer, elaborated according to his/her experience – and both the respondents highlight their commitment to listen to and understand their audience’s problems. Their primary goal is to give adolescents a knowledge they can first understand and then use, and in order to do so they follow a logic that is at the core of de Sousa Santos’ theory, that is the connection between the information and the recognition of context in which it has to be used (so the awareness of who is asking for the information, from where, to do what and so on). Consequently, I can affirm that digital spaces aim at producing a knowledge about sexuality that is rooted in the experience of the young people. On the other hand we must consider that we are talking about an online world, or virtual one, so the gap with real one is something that should not be underestimated; users/social editors and managers do not meet, do not look at each other, cannot see exactly what is happening in reality. However the characteristics just mentioned (openness, dialogue, diversity, inclusion) seem to suggest that digital platforms are a promising field for the application of the open cultural stance described in the third chapter, teaching adolescents how to navigate in a complex and multiple sexual realities, and being sensitive to different perspectives about sexuality.

I can also recognize that even if contrasts and conflicts are not of course out of the online spaces, the lack of a moralistic or ideological intention in delivering information to their audience facilitate the co-existence of the diverse forms of knowledge, without putting them in competition, creating hierarchies or judging them or imposing one way of thinking over another, all attitudes that I have reported as consequences of the culture blaming approach present in the Sexuality Education curriculum. The inclusion of the marginalized subjects was also mentioned as a peculiar aspect of digital platforms’ discussions on sexuality, and in which I see another point of contact with the ecology of knowledges. We have seen in fact how the language used on social media and mobile phones empower adolescents and subaltern subjects to speak, and in de Sousa Santos’ theory there is the aim of being on the side of the subaltern and the oppressed, by ‘rescuing’ their knowledges (put aside by hegemonic epistemologies, mainly the scientific western one) and fostering the recognition of the diversity of forms of knowledge (Nunes, 2009: 111).

In general then it is possible to say that even if digital platforms are not a finished case of application of an ecology of knowledges, they are closer to the epistemological ideal elaborated by de Sousa Santos than the sexuality education curricula in secondary schools, although there is still work to do to improve them. Indeed, what I just said is not an attempt to present Digital Platforms as the solution to all the problems and challenges affecting the production and diffusion of discourses about sex and sexuality. They are not a few and not easily untangled. Research stressed that young people’s point of views should be better
included, and that attention to the specific local contexts is still missing as well as a more structured organization and coordination among the digital spaces and the offline institutions. The inclusion of marginalized people is a positive signal, but does not mean that internet is not part of the increasing social divide in terms of gender and place of residence (urban/rural). Furthermore, there is no way to see in what way the knowledge achieved online by the adolescents actually works, how it is put in practice: no research had explored in what way digital platforms change sexual attitude and behaviors.

What would be of a great contribution to the field of digital platforms for sexuality education is to ask the adolescents themselves how they see what they think about sexuality education on internet: we need to make their voices heard.
Conclusions

The original intention from which I started to develop my thesis was to carry out a critical analysis of the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition, looking at what effects it has on discourses and what meanings and logics are implied in the two concepts. My idea was not to defend Tradition over Modernity or the contrary, but rather to explore what kind of relationship is thought between them. When I referred to discourse/language/discussions, I meant to view this as a way of speaking, a performance through which people express their understandings of a particular reality. By looking at the inclusion of the dichotomy in discourses, I aimed to ‘pull out’ how people represent the interaction between ‘modern and traditional’ cultural values. To begin with, I read some of the most relevant post-colonial and post-modern theories – namely, those of Dussel, Ferguson, Appadurai and Hobsbawm. From these, I could highlight that the dichotomy includes the assumption of a deep conceptual gap between Modernity and Tradition: they are represented as separated and the differences between them are irreconcilable. I wanted then to address what dynamics this gap produces on conversations among people, and I chose Sexuality Education in Kenya as the discourse in which to explore these dynamics, due both to the ‘richness’ of this field from an academic point of view, since it is attracting more and more anthropological and sociological researches, and due to the great social changes occurring in this field these days. When I connected the dichotomy to general discourses about sexuality I could see that the gap affect the discussions about sexuality in complex and quite problematic ways: the recent literature underlined how the use of fixed categories of Tradition/Modernity brings about an attitude of culture blaming and the production of monocultural knowledge. It involves the essentialization of reality and culture, loses the focus on the specific context, and suggests a relationship of competition between the two concepts, due to the tendency of affirming one over the other. So the conclusion of this first section was that the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition fails to grasp the fluidity of experiences regarding sexual life lived by the people in Kenya, since it ‘freezes’ reality in a dualism that does not reveal how people negotiate, question, adapt Tradition and Modernity, locating themselves in middle-ways positions between them, rather than standing for one over the other.

In bringing those findings up I did not intend to negate the existence of differences between being or acting according to modern or traditional standards, but to criticize the idea – implied when relying on dichotomies – that there cannot be any dialogue between them, a critique motivated by the fact that in reality people ‘do have a dialogue’ with them: they mix the categories, change and move from one to another depending on their contingent needs. I therefore suggested a different approach to Tradition and Modernity that could bridge the gap and reformulate their relationship as more dynamic and fluid. I found this in de Sousa Santos theory of the Ecology of knowledges a positive model for shaping that approach.
Santos recognizes the need to build connections between different epistemological systems, and the awareness of the ‘situated’ nature of knowledge itself, whose usefulness and value depend on the context: who is asking for information, from where, for what and so on.

In the third chapter I tried to link the results just mentioned to the difficulties of implementing the Sexuality Education Curriculum in Kenya reported by the literature. Indeed, its lack of effective communication towards the adolescents made me reflect on a possible causal connection between this problem and a language based on a mechanism of distancing different perspectives and values about sexuality. Through a source criticism of recent scientific articles, I first traced the general background on what is said about sex in secondary schools in Kenya, and then explored to what extent the dichotomy Modernity/Tradition affects such discourses. I could find that many complex dynamics (from social to economic to cultural and political) explain the current state of such discourses; even though it is not possible to point to this specific dichotomy as the main single reason why the problems of Sexuality Education Curriculum, it is however part of the multiple problematic variables that should be considered. Together with a highly tabooed and silenced attitude toward conversation about sexuality and the lack of an official educational legislation orienting schools’ activities and other elements, I could recognize a highly rigid and dogmatic language, not able to welcome different points of view about sexuality, as a great limit to the delivery of knowledge about sexuality to adolescents. In the analysis of extensive researches on the quality and effectiveness of Sexuality Education curriculum in Kenya, I could find the same problematic consequences of using the dichotomy to talk about sex that I draw in the second chapter: the former fails to mirror the multiple realities lived by the young people because of a moralistic approach in defining the standard sexual behaviors which reduces the diversity of sexual world to the minimum, and represents it as unitary and homogenous in which the different positions are described as opposite with no possibility of communication among them. In doing so it misses addressing the real problems and experiences of the young people. As a way out this situation I argued that there is a need to re-shape the language used to talk about sexual issues, in order to better respond to young people’s needs to get good information.

With these assumptions I continued to the final chapter where I tried to explore to what extent digital platforms might provide the spaces where a different language is or could be produced, a language based on a different understanding of sexual issues, less dogmatic and moralistic and more open to the dialogue between different perspectives. Thanks to my conversations with two experts in the field of digital sexuality education, and the critical analysis of recent scientific researches dealing with the potentialities of the online world for educational purposes, I could compare what (and how) is said about sexuality in digital spaces with the debates in secondary schools, so as to highlight the differences between the languages used in both fields. The first finding regarded in fact the acknowledgment of such differences:
the digital language appears to be more open, fluid, comprehensive, all characteristics that allow the inclusion of multiple points of view regarding how to deal with sexual issues. The attention to local specificities, the lack of a judgmental approach, the attention paid to understand the audience and its necessities mark the conversations about sexuality on digital platforms, which, as a consequence, are preferred by adolescents, who feel more empowered and free to talk.

The second step I took was to understand if the presence of multiple perspective was also a sign of more respectful communication between them. I turned back to the issues of the dichotomies, recognizing that this included not only the Modernity/Tradition one, but many others too (such as urban/rural, young/old, middle/lower classes). What I found here addresses consistently the objectives of my thesis, and answered the two last research questions: digital platforms do represent a space where a new approach to sexual issues is growing and present a number of characteristics that let us hope for the construction of a positive model of discussing different cultural values. Diverse understandings of sexuality are in fact welcomed in the digital language, without implying a hierarchical relationship between them or trying to impose the ‘right, appropriate’ way of thinking and living sexuality over the other. Even if this does not mean that digital spaces are free from negative episodes of cyberbullying or harassment, they foster a more inclusive dialogue between differences, overcoming the attitude of either/or and opting for a both/and approach. Anonymity, interactivity and social participation, inclusion of marginal subjects and topics create a social learning environment where knowledges are accessed, diffused and exchanged more easily, making adolescents conscious of the multiplicity of sexual realities and giving them the means to navigate this in a fluid and complex world.

Finally, I tried to compare the elements of this digital system with de Sousa Santos’ “ecology of knowledges”. As I said, I had it in mind as a theoretical project that could help in the construction of connections and respectful dialogue between different values and knowledges. What I wanted to find out by including this epistemological proposal in my analysis was whether and to what extent digital platforms could be a space where to put it into practice, so creating a positive environment of multiple situated knowledges. To do so I took into account some elements suggested by de Sousa Santos as fundamental in building up the ecology - namely the process of translation, the pragmatical understating of knowledges as situated ones, and the inclusion of diversity – and I could see that to some extents they were present in the approach to sexuality designed on the online world, letting us think that they do represent a fertile field for the implementation of an ecology of knowledges.

These positive results did not seem to cover the whole analysis needed to give a definite answer to my last research question: there is much more work to do, in particular I hope future researches get closer to the adolescents and listen directly to their voices, something I unfortunately was not able to do. The fact
that current investigations miss in general targeting young people make also difficult to assess in solid
terms the concrete results of learning about sexuality through digital platforms or what kind of behavioral
changes they actually produce. Furthermore, it is important to stress once again that I suggested the digital
spaces as a promising field for discussions about sexuality, but this optimistic view is closely related to
the single issue of bridging the gap and spreading inclusive dialogue between different cultural values,
which as we have seen is just one of the numerous and complex variables affecting current discourses. It
is not then my intention to present online services as ‘the’ solution to all the difficulties of such discourses,
nor to neglect the difficulties they have themselves. But being conscious of these limits to my arguments,
I might suggest they can still add some interesting content to the present state of research.

Even if the link between digital world and the epistemological project of de Sousa Santos drawn by my
findings appears more as a ‘timid assumption’, it does open a new space for future research, that I could
not find in the literature. Secondly, I put the accent on the need to address the language used in secondary
schools as one of the reasons why of the ineffectiveness of sexuality education curriculum, an aspect that
is often overlooked by present-day investigations too. Moreover, I questioned the existence of sharp social
distinctions between people with different points of view about sexual issues, and thus I criticized those
researches that bear this idea, and in particular those that stick with the dichotomies. In contrast I suggested
that the reality is much more fluid; people change constantly from different positions, mix different values
and move the ‘boundaries’ among them depending on the changing context they live in.
References


Appendix

The Research Ethics Committee
Dalarna University
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Ethical advice on the project "Talking about sexuality with Kenyan adolescents"

Dalarna University's research ethical committee would hereby like to report that we do not have any objections against Flaminia Rinaldi's MA-project 'Talking about sexuality with Kenyan adolescents', supervised by Judith Narrowe. We note that personal data will be collected in the form of interviews, but that no interview questions, or the purpose of the project, would imply collecting sensitive personal data. The plan to protect collected personal data is sufficient. Still, we would like to call for care if any sensitive personal data, like political opinions, religious convictions or the sexual habits of the interviewees, would be collected inadvertently. Sections of recordings containing sensitive personal data must not be transcribed and, furthermore, deleted as soon as possible.

It is important to underline that this ethical advice is only valid for this project as a student project on Dalarna university (not as a research project) and that we base the review on research-ethical customs and data protection legislation within Sweden, where the collecting of data is performed. It is also important to note that the General Data Protection Regulation apply to students, while the Swedish Ethical Review Act does not apply. Dalarna University's ethical committee has an advisory function.

Furthermore, while the information is collected from Kenya, Kenyan research-ethical guidelines might apply as well. More information on that may be found here: https://research-portal.nacosti.go.ke/. We cannot assist further on foreign research-ethical guidelines, but assume that the supervisor and the applicant will familiarize themselves with Kenyan regulations and act accordingly.

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