



WIKO: A COMMUNITY OF STRANGERS IN
A HOSPITABLE HOME
BASILE NDJIO

Basile Ndjio is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Douala. He has held several visiting fellowships and professorships in prestigious academic and research institutions including: the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa, the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, LSE, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, University College London, Harvard University, Leiden University, and Freie Universität Berlin, among others. Basile Ndjio trained in sociology and anthropology at the University of Yaoundé and the University of Amsterdam and has published on urban popular culture; Chinese sex labour migration; migration and diasporic conditions; and African queer studies. His most recent works include: “Transnational Chinese Beautyscapes: Ghetto Glamour and Fake Beauty in Abidjan” (*Africa Spectrum*, 2024); “In the name of the (God)father: The unnameable name” (*Ethnography*, 2024); “Coronavirus, Imagined Location and Disenchanted Home in Africa” (*Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 2023); “Rhizomic authoritarianism: power, biopolitics and transnational authoritarian practices in Cameroon” (*Globalizations*, 2024); *Fashioning the Afropolis: Histories, Materialities and Aesthetic Practices* (co-edited with Kerstin Pinther and Kristin Kastner, Bloomsbury, 2022). He has just completed a monograph on sexual politics in Central Africa (under review with Cambridge University Press). – Address: Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Letters and Social Science, University of Douala, Ange Raphael, 3132 Douala, Cameroon. E-mail: bndjio@yahoo.com.

First of all, I was delighted to be a Fellow at Wiko, as the fellowship provided me the opportunity to learn the German language, one of the first most significant mediums in

which Cameroon's colonial history was scripted or documented in the late 19th century, thus serving as an essential linguistic instrument for any researcher seeking to access the country's colonial past. More importantly, I came to this world-renowned research institute with high expectations of finding here a secure haven, and particularly a space of intellectual freedom, enabling me to pursue in total liberty an independent research on same-sex sexuality, a subject typically considered taboo in Cameroon, my country of origin, where I have faced many administrative pressures over the past two decades, due to my unconventional scholarship and research interests.

My initial plan was to work on a project titled "Inhospitable medicine: homosexuality, medical discrimination, and the precarious life in Cameroon." This proposal addressed the problem of medical violence and discrimination based on stereotyped sexual and gender identity, which had become a crucial issue in most public medical institutions in Cameroon. The research particularly focused on the moralizing rhetoric and the stigmatizing attitude of the medical personnel towards self-identified or suspected LGBTIQ patients. My main goal was to provide some insights into the complex way in which Cameroon's medical order has been dealing with patients with nonconforming sexual and gender identities since the country's adoption of anti-homosexual legislation in 1965.

But my reading of several seminal works highlighting the anti-homosexual rhetoric of some colonial missionaries and ethnologists, such the British Baptist missionary Alfred Saker (1814–1880) and the famous German explorer, traveller, and ethnologist Günther Tessmann (1884–1969), as well as the exploration of German colonial archives in some museums in Berlin and Potsdam, caused me to switch my heuristic interest towards the history of knowledge production on same-sex sexuality and unconventional sexual and gender identity in Cameroon. I presented the preliminary findings of this new research during a highly debated Colloquium on June 17, 2025. The study entitled "Same-sex sexuality in Cameroon: Complex history, dynamic knowledge production, and ambivalent epistemologies" had three main objectives: (1) examine the evolution of knowledge production regarding same-sex sexuality, illustrating the fluidity of discourses and narratives surrounding homosexuality, as well as the complexity in the management of non-conventional sexual and gender identities in Cameroon; (2) elucidate how homosexuality has been established as an object of discourse and a domain of knowledge production since the 19th century; (3) scrutinize the way in which a specific imagination, representation, problematisation, and rationalisation of homosexuality has been constructed over the past century.

The study concluded with several observations and remarks: firstly, many pre-colonial African societies were sexually democratic and homo-tolerant long before the West's new-found "sexual democracy" (Éric Fassin, *L'inversion de la question homosexuelle*). Secondly, the phenomenon typically characterized by many Western media and observers as "African homophobia" arises from both Western colonial epistemology ("colonial library") and postcolonial nationalist re-invention of African sexuality. Thirdly, contemporary "homophobic" and "homo-intolerant" African regimes are legitimate successors of the Western colonial power and missionary order. Fourthly, "primitive" African societies acknowledged homosexual rights long before the decriminalization of same-sex relations in many purportedly progressive Western societies in the 1990s. Finally, the same Westerners who indoctrinated Africans to despise homosexuality under the guise of civilisation are now, in a paternalistic manner, instructing them to embrace homosexuality in the name of modernity and human rights.

In many respects, my stay at Wiko has been intellectually productive. Indeed, during my ten-month residency at this prestigious research institution, I finished a book manuscript on the political management of queer identity in Cameroon, which is expected to be published by Cambridge University Press. In addition, I initiated and made significant progress on a new editorial project concerning the emergence of novel forms of sexual connections and relationships in contemporary Central Africa. Moreover, I have completed and submitted three peer-reviewed articles for publication on diverse topics, including political treason, contemporary urban African music, and the interplay between homosexuality and power. Furthermore, I contributed to a collective work, *Textures of Power: Central Africa in the Long Twentieth Century*, edited by Florence Bernault, Benoît Henriët and Emery Kalema (2025), with a paper addressing homosexuality and power dynamics in postcolonial Cameroon.

In other respects, I was both culturally and intellectually active during my residency at Wiko. For example, I engaged in numerous cultural and intellectual events hosted at Wiko or organized by various academic or cultural institutions based in Berlin and elsewhere. This included: seminars and public lectures at the Humboldt Forum, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), the Freie Universität Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Technische Universität Berlin, the Centre Marc Bloch, the University of Basel, the University of Amsterdam, etc. I also actively participated in the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) in Prague from June 24 to 28, 2025, where I co-convoked a panel on the Chinese informal economy in Africa with a colleague from the University of Lagos, Nigeria.

At Wiko I was at home and I felt a sense of belonging, particularly at the Villa Walther, one of the Institute's Fellow residences, which my Co-Fellows and I usually referred to as our home. This experience of home has transformed from an initial sense of alienation and disenfranchisement to one of familiarity and attachment. Indeed, upon relocating to Wiko in August 2024, I initially perceived this locale as what Freud would term an *unheimlicher Ort* (uncanny place), not as a haunted site that evokes dread or anxiety, but rather as a place that simultaneously appears strangely familiar and familiarly strange.

This suggests that I was initially affected by the eeriness of this location, which triggered in me a sense of alienation due to Wiko's disturbing ambivalence between familiarity and strangeness, or between the perception of a homey place and the experience of an unhomey space. One reason this location was particularly conducive to uncanny disturbances, or possessed an uncanny nature, was its troubling status as a "Fellows' institution." In the academic tradition, a "Fellow" often embodies a contemporary figure of the intellectual *xenos* or stranger, typically regarded as the foreign guest of a local academic or research institution. Thus, it is tempting to interpret Wiko and its various Fellows' houses as what Karl Marx would term a "house of a *stranger*."

This term refers to a specific location designated solely for *xenos* who do not belong to the national imagined community, or for strangers who cannot view themselves as the "master of the house" because they dwell in a house that is above all a *maison de l'autre*. In addition, the "house of a stranger" denotes a locale that creates a link between habitation and estrangement, while dramatizing a sense of dislocation and alienation among its foreign inhabitants. This is because a Fellows' house primarily appears as a site of otherness and estrangement, existing or functioning solely in relation to its foreign or "other" Fellows. Furthermore, as it is intended solely as a *case de passage* or a transient accommodation for foreign guests, the house of strangers is frequently perceived as a "non-home," rendering the sentiment "home, sweet home" inapplicable, as individuals seldom experience the warmth of a true home in such a "space of flows," which has been established at the expense of the "space of places" (Manuel Castells, *The Informational City*).

Following Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida has emphasised that the issue of the *étranger* (foreigner or stranger) is intrinsically linked to the question of hospitality, asserting that the rights of foreigners are inextricably connected to their right to hospitality. If the initially unwelcoming nature of Wiko's Fellows' houses did not evoke feelings of homesickness and nostalgia, and if over the past ten months I have managed to bridge the gap between homelessness and belonging, transitioning to a more homey perception of

my current living space, and if, like many of my fellow residents, I have come to regard my Wiko's Fellows' house as my "home," despite my legal, ethnic, and racial status as both a *Fremder* (stranger) and an *Ausländer* (foreigner), it is primarily because the Institute proved to be a venue for what Derrida would call an "absolute hospitality," which requires that we "give place to" foreigners, "let them come, ... let them arrive, and take place in the place [we] offer them" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality*). This indicates that the warmth, cordiality, and friendliness I enjoyed as a Fellow were instrumental in my gradual shift from *oikophobia* (fear of home) to *oikophilia* (affection for a specific place). The Institute also facilitated its foreign Fellows' acclimatisation to the unsettling and unfamiliar environment of the Fellows' houses through a comprehensive practice of hospitality.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Wiko's caring and compassionate management, as well as the "invisible" men and women of the support staff, whose dedication and assistance have fostered an environment of conviviality, familiarity, and camaraderie for all of us. Absent the diligent efforts of the administrative staff, cleaners, technicians, librarians, and cooks, life at Wiko would have been markedly different. I also extend my gratitude to them for ensuring that each of their *hôtes* (guests) felt like the *maître de céans* (master of the house), even in an environment that was not his or her own.

During my stay at Wiko, I have discerned that a genuine gift of hospitality is an act of generosity perceived by the Fellow or "guest." This transforms a stranger into a friend, an allochthon into an autochthon, albeit temporarily. Furthermore, true hospitality entails converting an uncanny and inhospitable dwelling into a welcoming home for the strangers and uprooted individuals who are away from home. This is how Wiko ultimately presented itself to me.