

Globalisation of Sex and the Problematics of Gender Identities in Africa: From Human Rights to Women's Rights to Sexual Freedom

Four UN conferences on population and development, ICPD in Cairo, the 1995 Beijing Conference, the 1999 Five-year review of ICPD (ICPD+5) and the 2000 five-year review of the Beijing Conference (Beijing +5), witnessed the Catholic and Muslim religious right engaging in unprecedented cooperation to oppose and restrict women's right to control their bodies and sexuality (Ilkharacan 1999).

Behind globalisation lies the growing internationalisation of sexual rights and identities, women's movements, and increasing demands for basic equality. Behind it also is the escalation of new sexual orientations in many urban areas of Africa. Globalisation has allowed for the first time the development of an international gay and lesbian movement, now a reality in many parts of Africa. This self-consciousness has influenced scholars to re-examine homosexuality in Africa. However, in the process it has distorted the concept of woman-woman marriages in Africa and their intended purpose.

The normative presumption of nuclearity makes it very difficult for particular non-western family forms, such as woman-woman marriages, to be evaluated as anything but bizarre novelties. The assumption of universality has usually defined what is normal and natural both for research and therapy and has subtly influenced our thinking with regard to deviations from the norm as sick, perverse or immoral. Several features of western nuclear family ideology go to the root of its alleged functionality: the notions of monogamy and permanence, compulsory heterosexuality or opposite-sex relationships, and the perceived need for a father figure (see Njambi and O'Brien 1998).

Demographic transformations such as rising age at marriage and increasing levels of urban migration are playing a part in changing the nature of male-female relationships. Sexual relationships are being socially constructed as an appropriate expression of intimacy, but also as a statement about a particular kind of modern identity. Globalisation is widely viewed as one of the most powerful forces shaping the modern world and as a key idea explaining the transition of human society into the third millennium. People con-

sider globalisation a tidal wave sweeping over the world and profoundly influencing every aspect of our lives in all disciplines: politics, economics, law, social relations, and culture (Frisbee).

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Since the late twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, Africa has become tightly integrated into the global system. There has been a growing rights movement in a number of countries with regard specifically to marriage, sexual and reproductive health. One of the main vectors of these trends has been the women's rights groups often run by local and international NGOs. I intend to examine the role played by these organisations in the sexual identity and rights issues in Africa. The paper inter alia explores the politics of sexuality in writings of women in Africa. By reviewing literature from multiple disciplines, an attempt is made to delve into what it means to be male and female in modern African contexts; the different ways in which sexualities have been constructed, performed, resisted, transformed and transgressed; how tensions between tradition and modernity have played out in the arena of gender; and the ways in which postcolonial movements and institutions mobilise gender ideologies. First we examine the internalisation of reproductive and sexual rights and how the phenomenon has affected gender and sexual identities in Africa.

Internationalisation of rights and the re-shaping of African sexuality

Women's NGOs and transnational coalitions have been the central advocates of a politics of reproductive health and rights,

and to a somewhat lesser degree, of sexual health and rights.¹ During the 1990s these concepts became mainstreamed. With the exception of Africa, women's movements in the South began to mobilise around reproductive health and rights issues, and a framework firmly linking these issues to both development concerns and human rights emerged (see Corrêa and Petchesky 1994; Fried 1990; Garcia-Moreno and Claro 1994; Chen 1996; Silliman 1997). But this trend does not mean that concepts of reproductive and sexual health/rights have not been mainly a Western phenomenon. While it is true, according to Petchesky, that ideas are not the property of any one nation or culture, it is common knowledge that these ideas have originated from the West.

In addition, the 1980s saw the rise of women's groups in both the South and North which argued for a rethinking of international population initiatives based on reproductive health rather than fertility control. The result was a language of reproductive health which maintained a focus on medical intervention over systemic changes, and reinforced the construction of women solely in terms of their reproductive and gender roles (Corrêa and Reichmann 1994: 2; Finkle and Crane 1984). Women argued for a fundamental shift away from fertility regulation to the empowerment of women. They urged the need to explicitly recognise women's sexual and reproductive rights (Buss 1999). Thus, in the 1990s, sexual and reproductive rights became the subject of vigorous debates at the UN's world conferences, such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing. The Cairo Conference was a notable departure from its two predecessors in a number of ways. For one, it was a large international event, attracting in-

tense media coverage. Second, the Cairo Conference involved the participation of a large number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and particularly, feminist and women's groups from a range of geographic areas.

The Platform for Action, which was adopted by 189 delegations at the Beijing Women's Conference, reaffirmed the Cairo Programme's definition of reproductive health and advanced women's wider interests. Paragraph 96 states:

The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences (Nafis 1997).

It is therefore not surprising that, five years after the FWCW, sexual and reproductive rights were once again at the centre of the UN's 'Beijing Plus Five' progress review, held in New York between March and June 2000. Beijing Plus Five gathered 180 government delegations and over 2000 women's groups to discuss progress and obstacles in the way of the Beijing Platform for Action, and to decide on concrete steps to accelerate implementation (Girard 2000).

As in Beijing, debates quickly focussed on health and sexuality, and on women's roles in their communities and families. A few conservative governments, led by the Holy See, sought to insert into the final agreements a vision of women as mothers, to the exclusion of their other roles and aspirations. They also promoted amendments supporting their concept of the 'ideal' family – the nuclear family based on a man and woman united by marriage – and their children. North American right-wing groups actively lobbied for this agenda inside and outside the negotiating rooms. In March, the right-wing group 'Real Women of Canada' even obtained UN passes for thirty Franciscan monks, thus providing delegates with the curious spectacle of bearded 'Real Women' in cassocks and sandals wearing buttons that proclaimed the virtue of motherhood (Girard 2000).

Many government delegations, as well as women's groups, fought hard against these positions. They argued that the nuclear family is not the norm in many parts of the world, and that many families are neither safe, particularly for young girls, nor models of gender equality. They also pointed out that without full control of their sexuality and reproductive life, women cannot realise the full range of their human rights.

In Beijing, the issue of sexual orientation remained a sub-text in the discussion on sexual rights, since so many countries – particularly the African bloc – would have withdrawn their support for the language of sexual rights if the phrase had been explicitly interpreted as including freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Nevertheless, Paragraph 96, construed broadly, can be understood to allow this interpretation.

Furthermore, the international consensus has gone as far in its definition of reproductive health as to include a statement that 'people are able to have a safe and satisfying sex life' (Gaborone Ministry of Health 1994; Norr et al 1997; Bardsley 1995)

Sexual pleasure for its own sake, however, is not yet on the international agenda. HERA, one of the international NGOs which lobbied for the sexual rights terminology in Cairo and Beijing, had provided a definition of sexual rights that reached much further than simply protecting women from harm, and towards creating the conditions in which sexuality and sexual experience can be positive and pleasurable. Rather than seeking a commitment to sexual rights solely to avoid discrimination or prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, HERA argued that sexual rights are valuable in their own right. In their definition, 'Sexual rights are a fundamental element of human rights. They encompass the right to experience a pleasurable sexuality, which is essential in and of itself, and, at the same time, is a fundamental vehicle of communication and love between people. Sexual rights include the right to liberty and autonomy in the responsible exercise of sexuality'. This was further interpreted to include having satisfying sex with anyone, regardless of sex. This recognition provided an entry point for promoting action focussing specifically on the sexual dimension of sexual rights – on building a new culture of sexuality that allows an individual the right of choice, expression, and pleasure. No

wonder, in South Africa, there is full legal recognition of gay and lesbian identity, and gay and lesbian groups have mobilised around a human rights discourse (Christofides et al. 1999: 12). Recently, the economic discrimination faced by gay and lesbian people has been recognised, leading to attempts towards redistribution; for example, to grant same sex partners the same medical and life insurance benefits as heterosexual married people (Klugman 2000). This pattern of sexual rights talk has and is spreading throughout African countries and often causes devastating political responses. We now turn to discuss what the reaction so far has been.

Politics and competing sexual diversities

The widening of the rights debate and the opening of democratic space in Africa after the end of the Cold War has provided an opportunity for many Africans to renegotiate their sexualities in different ways. This development has often been supported by international rights movements in the West, but has been opposed by religious and political leaders. The issue of homosexuality has elicited deep and often extreme reactions in Africa.

Today, there is a huge presence of gays and lesbians in Kenya, Somalia, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa. In some countries, there has been fierce opposition to the liberalisation of sexual norms. For example, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) has reported that two women in Somalia were sentenced to death for such 'unnatural behaviour'.² In Egypt, three men accused of setting up a gay web site were charged with violating the Egyptian legal code, which penalises homosexual sex. And in the year 2002, the government began closing down bath-houses frequented by gays. In Zimbabwe, where President Robert Mugabe has compared homosexuality to bestiality and as 'worse than pigs and dogs', it has been reported that the offices of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) have been frequently raided by the police who have recovered pornographic magazines and made arrests for violating the Censorship and Entertainment Act (IGLHRC).

In Uganda, church leaders of the Uganda House of Bishops called on the government not to register a gay and lesbian group called Integrity Uganda. The

church group reportedly described the gay organisation as unbiblical and inhuman, and a church statement accused the gay organisation of serving as a front for US gays and lesbians to set up a base in Uganda.

In Namibia, President Sam Nujoma recently announced that 'the Republic of Namibia does not allow homosexuality or lesbianism here. Police are ordered to arrest you, deport you and imprison you'. Nujoma described homosexuality as 'against God's will' and called it 'the devil at work'. His statements follow those of Jerry Ekanjio, Namibia's Home Affairs Minister, who last year urged newly graduated police officers to 'eliminate gays and lesbians from the face of Namibia' (IGLHRC).

In contrast to its continental neighbours, South Africa has actually been a world leader in civil rights for gays and lesbians. After all, it was the first country to adopt a constitution that outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. But even in South Africa, the same problems do exist. For example, a recent marketing campaign to lure GLBT tourists sparked an outcry from religious groups, who reportedly held an assembly in Cape Town 'to pray for a sin-free city'. And on 11 April, Durban Mayor, Obed Mlaba, reportedly told a group of business leaders that Durban should stop comparing itself to the more cosmopolitan Cape Town – a city that 'can stay with its moffies and its gays' (cf. Hekma et al. 2001).

Lesbian and gay movements in Africa have acted both in defence of basic human rights and also as a powerful expression of sexual identity. As proponents of sexual liberation they have met with strong resistance. In Africa, these movements have been likened to the rights movements and multiparty politics and other institutions imposed by western powers from the early 1990s.

Atit Shah in her paper 'Mke si Mume' makes some interesting remarks when she writes about homosexuality in Kenya:

African leaders ranging from Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, to Robert Mugabe, current president of Zimbabwe, have claimed that sex between men is 'un-African' and only occurs on the continent as a result of pernicious Western influence. Daniel Arap Moi, the [current] Kenyan president, agrees saying 'Kenya has

no room or time for homosexuals and lesbians. Homosexuality is against African norms and traditions, and even in religion it is considered a great sin' (Shah 2003).

In 1999, BBC Online organised a poll on the question and here are some of the reactions. One Cal Anyae from the USA responded:

Homosexuality has no social redeeming value, and is a serious threat to the African culture. The acceptance of homosexuality in Africa will be the beginning of the end for African culture. I wish President Obasanjo of Nigeria will join the likes of Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Uganda to condemn this scourge.

And Bernard Mukwavi, a Ugandan living in Canada, had this to say:

I agree with the African leaders, who are condemning homosexuality in Africa. Traditionally Africans have looked forward to marrying the opposite sex and raising a family. Because of men's sinful nature, there are those who have experimented sex with people of the same sex, however, these are thought of as perverse people. The west has been very militant in trying to get Africans to accept homosexuality as an alternative life style. Who says the west should determine our life style anyway? Africans should be proud of their identity, instead of bending and dancing to the western tune in everything. We need to decide our own values and morals...

Western, especially North American gay culture, is spreading around the world and it is becoming one of the most popular export products. Recently in South Africa T-shirts were printed bearing the aphorism that 'It is modern to be gay'. By way of the media and sex tourism, men all over the world become acquainted with western gay lifestyles. Travel books and tourist guides help to create such an international gay culture. Unfortunately, this perception has led to some shallow conceptions of the nature of African sexuality in literary works, both historically and contemporary, as we shall see next.

African literature and alternative sexualities

In many cultures throughout the world, traditional sexualities are disappearing or

transforming as a result of the diffusion of modern western sexual identity constructions and the emergence of global gay and lesbian subcultures modelled on North American and European examples. It can be argued that a queer globalisation is taking place. In this section, I will seek to examine issues related to the interaction and confrontation between traditional sexualities and western sexual identity constructions in Africa.

The influence of HIV/AIDS studies in Africa and the re-emergence of an academic discourse have opened up numerous windows on the study of African sexuality, mostly by western scholars. Sexuality had been a neglected theme in most African scholarly literature. The 1990s witnessed initial attempts to come to terms with discussions of alternative sexualities in the context of African literary studies. Yet in my opinion, a thorough discussion of the complexities of the subject has still to take place. Recent scholars have argued that one of the most pervasive positions on homosexuality in Africa is that it is a foreign imposition and not an indigenous cultural practice (Desai 1997a). This claim is made despite the fact that there is little literature to suggest that homosexuality is a foreign imposition. There is almost no one who has written on the subject. But there is a growing literature in western scholarship to support the presence of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa. These studies have gone on to 'prove' that 'patterns of identity formation and indigenous cosmologies give lie to the notion that such sexualities were only the result of foreign cultural contact' (Gevisser and Cameron 1994). Indeed, as Desai writes, the evidence suggests that in many cases, homosexual behaviour, while not always explicitly discussed or identified as such in the larger public sphere, was often treated with more tolerance in pre-colonial times than in Africa after the colonial period (Desai 1997a).

It is true, however, that early writers in this area often chose to defend other indigenous practices such as polygamy that were looked down upon by the colonial authorities. But few authors in the early period of nationalism and independence came out openly in writing on issues such as homosexuality. In recent times the global media have represented African sexuality in a more problematic way, largely from a western point of view. It is important to dissect these stereotypes with care and to then dissociate them from

the larger cultural claims within which they are mobilised. Much more research needs to be done on the history of sexual practices in Africa, but with an understanding of the effects of modernity – technology, industrialisation, the growth of literacy, and the expansion of the public sphere – on the formulation of newer forms of sexual identity.

The publication of the book by Roscoe and Murray, *Boy-Wives and Female-Husbands*, and the claims concerning the presence and status of homosexuality in African cultures, have become central points of contention in debates among contemporary African and Africanists scholars worldwide. Some of those involved in the debate have even asserted that the original languages of Africa contained no words for gay or lesbian, therefore concluding that they did not exist. As the first work of its kind on the subject, *Boy-Wives and Female-Husbands* tries to show that same-sex relationships existed in Africa, and that there was a strong sexual element in these relationships.

The contributions to this volume unequivocally refute claims that African societies lacked homosexual patterns and had no words for those who desire their own sex. 'Evidence' of same-sex patterns has been reported or reviewed here for some fifty African societies. These societies are found 'within every region of the continent, and they represent every language family, social and kinship organization, and subsistence pattern'. Roscoe and Murray's book claims that there is a substantial evidence that same-sex practices and patterns were 'traditional' and 'indigenous'. While contact between Africans and non-Africans has sometimes influenced both groups' sexual patterns, there is no evidence that one group ever 'introduced' homosexuality where it had not existed before. In support of this claim, Atit Shah stated in her seminal paper that:

To the best of our knowledge, homosexuality in Kenya dates back as early as 1882. There have been many reports of men in the city of Ngambo, that distinguished themselves as gay by cross-dressing and they would derive their income from prostitution. In about the 1950s Godfrey Wilson studied Lamu, a town north of Mombasa and he described an occasion where boys dressed as women would perform stripteases and then pair off with older men from the audience.

Shanti goes on to weave women-women marriage into the debate:

The present society in Africa shuns same gender sex as 'un-African' and as an act that goes against the church. This idea of homosexuality being un-African is one of major controversy, where many aspects such as tradition and neo-colonialism come into play. Kenya has one of the fastest growing church populations in the world, and they are being pervaded by the influence of Christian doctrine opposed to homosexuality. African practices that were considered to be an abomination – such as the levirate, a practice in which widows would marry their deceased husband's brothers; female circumcision; woman-woman marriage; and homosexuality – were stamped out or driven underground.

She argues that historically there was homosexuality in Africa:

There used to exist traditions of homosexual behavior in Africa before the 'brainwashing' (Drucker) of the African people by the Christian missionaries. The missionaries called upon biblical references that proclaimed homosexuality was 'un-African'. This notion spread throughout Kenya not only to the lower and middle-class citizens but also to the well-educated rich inhabitants. Kenyan people had seemed to lose touch with old African traditional practices.

But is it true that homosexuality existed in the pre-colonial past? Citing from Murray and Roscoe Shanti writes:

The Swahili-speakers on the Kenyan coast provide an instance where reports of same-sex patterns are not only detailed but also have some historical depth. Same sex relationships have existed in Kenya for a long time, and seem to have begun in the port cities of Kenya, mainly Zanzibar and Mombasa, where trade is and has been prosperous and communicating with others is made possible. European reports of homosexuality in Mombasa and Zanzibar date to the nineteenth century, a time which dates back more than the leaders of the African nations would like.

We do not want to be misunderstood, we do not completely dismiss the notion of the presence of homosexuality in Africa

because we have not carried out substantial research to ascertain the true state of affairs. But we are opposed to the narrow manner in which this subject is defined by modern writers. For example, we do not agree when evidence of homosexuality is drawn from African literature.

Chris Dunton perceives evidence in such novels as Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and J.P. Clark's play *The Raft* which shows that homosexual relations between Africans and foreigners are seen to be exploitative and alienating to the African subjects. A similar characterisation of homosexuality as exploitation is evident in novels like Camara Laye's *A Dream of Africa* that depicts the life of African students in Europe. It is wrong to pick out evidence of homosexuality in African novels rather than in historical facts. This is what Gaurav does when he argues for example that:

When indigenous, traditionally sanctioned practices of homosexuality are represented, as they are in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (which represents a Zaki – the head of a traditional Muslim court – who in this case has a liking for boys), or Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song (Un chant ecarlate)* (which depicts an effeminate young man destined in the eyes of his neighbours to be a 'gor djiguene' ... In some cases, most noticeably in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Calixthe Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me (C'est le soleil qui m'abrulée)* male homosexuality and lesbian desire are associated in a complex way... (Desai 1997b)

It is true that such representations are given of what we may call 'situational homosexuality'. This concept is explained very well by Peter Fontaine in his recent article, where he argues that:

During the colonial period many European administrators came to Africa either unmarried or having left their families a long sea voyage away. Some had African female concubines or married local women, but there is ample evidence that a good number found the African males most appealing. A symbiotic and affectionate relationship sometimes developed in which a young African might live with, or be employed by, a European or receive school fees from him. Such African men seem to have been

bisexual and many later married and had children since the cultural requirement to do so was and is strong. Others, however, genuinely preferred male sexual partners and did not marry but would live in the small Euro-African Gay community which exists in most large African cities today, as it did during the colonial era (Fontaine 2004).

Another external source of influence on 'situational homosexuality' was the presence of relatively large numbers of missionaries. Fontaine continues:

The stimulus from this source has been both direct – a missionary and a local African become lovers, or indirect – a school is established with strict puritan morality which forbids contact with women except under the most stringent conditions. As a consequence some African students, especially in boarding schools, turn to each other. In high schools for girls, the female missionaries have a habit of making surprise visits to the girls' dormitories to enforce the rule that no more than one girl could sleep in a bed.

Finally he points to the third influence:

A more recent external stimulus to Gay experiences in Africa has been the rise of tourism and the increasing numbers of expatriate embassy personnel, development assistance personnel, volunteers and adventurers. Mass tourism in Kenya, Gambia and Senegal, for example, has made Gay male contacts more frequent, easier and, unfortunately, has also resulted in the inevitable rise of male hustlers.

As can be seen, the three situations do not explain the real definitions and origins of homosexuality in Africa at all. Like Fontaine we would like to conclude that, 'Unfortunately, I have no other information about Lesbianism in Africa' (ibid).

For one to get the real picture of existence of homosexuality in Africa, one must as I have indicated before rely on deep historical inquiry and analysis – no wonder even in the great majority of African literary representations homosexuality have been historically negative. It is also imperative that we must be careful of the global consciousness of alternative sexualities and the effects on the continent. Literary and cultural texts are beginning to show cultural production that is eager to portray positive images of alternative sexualities.

Globalisation has affected Africans not only economically, but also culturally. American TV and US news have affected the Kenyan youth regarding sexuality. The idea of being gay is being adopted by many of the Kenyan youth. 'Men having sex with men is not only common among young people, but fashionable'.

How about woman–woman marriages?

The development of gay and homosexual identities in Africa has given different meanings and interpretations to African sexuality; for instance, woman-woman marriage has been viewed as a sort of lesbian relationship, and recent scholarship in the area has continued to emphasise it. However, it should be noted from the outset that at least according to our research, no lesbian relationships existed in Kenya before early visitors came to the east coast of Africa.

A review of the literature on woman-woman marriages in African societies leads one to conclude that matters are not quite as some scholars have depicted. According to Njambi and O'Brien (1998) goals such as comfort, security, children, love, acceptability, wealth and above all peace in old age are central concerns of woman-woman marriages. The first real and fundamental desire is perhaps access to children. Sudarkasa suggests that the basis for woman-woman marriage, as with African marriages generally, is the desire 'to acquire rights over a woman's child-bearing capacity' (Sudarkasa 1986). Secondly, the rights over children are often linked to the relationship as a means of transferring property through inheritance. Krige concludes that woman-woman marriages were 'contracted to perpetuate the name and inherit the property of a man' (Krige 1974).

One could plausibly assert that women's 'barrenness' is an important push factor encouraging woman-woman marriages. In fact, one of the most popular general assumptions, as Burton points out, is that woman-woman marriages must involve women who are childless (Burton 1979). Evans-Pritchard's work on the Nuer suggests that almost exclusively it is 'barren' women who make such marriages (Evans-Pritchard 1945). Langley, writing on the Nandi, held that three types of women practised woman-woman marriage: those childless married women who are too old for childbearing, childless widows, or a childless wife unable to conceive. Njambi

and O'Brien cite Leakey's work, and assert that among the Gikuyu it is childless widows beyond childbearing age who marry women in order to continue their husband's lineage (Leakey 1938).

Woman-to-woman marriage is a predominantly African institution. This type of marriage may occur in different forms, and debates have emerged on the nature of sexual practices associated with the marriage. Blackwood (1984) argues that lesbian behaviour cannot be ruled out while others consider the marriage a non-sexual institution (O'Brien 1977). Evans-Pritchard (1951) observed that woman-to-woman marriage occurs among the Nuer where a female is barren. The barren woman will take a wife, hence becoming a cultural man, and also arrange for what Ramet calls a 'progenitor' for the wife so that 'she' becomes a father (Ramet 1990). Similar forms of marriage are mentioned by Gluckman (1970) among the Zulu of Natal and by Uchendu for the Igbo of Southern Nigeria. Uchendu in fact notes that his own mother married several wives (Uchendu 1965). Among the Lovedu, Krige invariably uses the term 'female husbands' to describe women who raise the bride-wealth. She suggested that a female husband can be a woman headman who marries into another headmanship of a district (Krige 1974).

The practice of woman-to-woman marriage among the Nandi of Kenya, as it has been described by Oboler (1980), is another interesting case. According to Oboler, a Nandi woman with no sons can use the cattle belonging to her 'house' to marry a wife of her own. The Nandi woman who takes a wife is then basically considered as a man. The woman ceases to have sexual intercourse with a man and even dresses like a man and so on.

Krige, a central figure in the woman-woman marriage literature, focuses her critique on the common presumption of opposite-sex partners as the basis for all marriage. She suggests that definitions of marriage, even when accounting for cross-cultural difference, tend to emphasise the male-female relationship as paramount. Some authors have attempted to incorporate woman-woman marriages into this universal presumption by suggesting, as does Riviere (1971) that the woman who initiates a marriage to a woman is playing the role of a man and can therefore be counted as a male. Riviere rejects the notion that woman-woman marriages

prove exceptions to the idea of opposite sex partners as the basis for marriage. Krige (1974) argues, however, that the woman she refers to as the 'female husband' has no necessary male characteristics: to count 'female husbands' as 'men' imposes a western assumption that 'husband' is automatically associated with maleness.

Even Stephen O. Murray appears not to be very clear what this institution entailed:

A number of southern and western African societies also had female husbands, though whether these husbands had sexual relations with their wives is unclear in what has been written. It seems that anthropologists studying the phenomenon did not ask that question (Murray).

Murray and Roscoe show us the enormous ignorance about same-sex sexuality in Africa while at the same time exposing that so much knowledge is still to be gained and so much confusion to be cleared up. The book's theoretical weakness is obvious in the chapter by Carrier and Murray that discusses women-women marriages. These types of marriages have been described by many authors, and the question that is forever asked is whether these marriages are also sexual unions. They are, to be clear, economic unions, having to do with the division of labour, and particularly with property rights, in which the female husband enjoys far greater social and economic autonomy than she knew when she was married to a man. Most often, but not always, such marriages occur after a woman is widowed and inherits the wealth of her husband. In the societies in which these marriages occur the distribution of this wealth is typically organised along gender lines.

As Niels Teunis writes, 'when a woman assumes the social role of a man, she maintains her former husband's wealth. It shows that gender roles are not always as fixed on biological sex as they are in, say, the United States' (Teunis 2000). For Carrier and Murray, the only question that matters is whether or not these married women have sex. Many authors on women-women marriages claim they do not. None of these authors have observed such sexual behaviour (which is impossible if it is not there), nor mention where these women actually sleep (shared beds?). Carrier and Murray imply that marriage partners make love. The prob-

lem here is that the women did not get married in order to have a sexual relationship. That does not mean that sex is impossible, and indeed we expect that in several cases, women charge their relationship erotically. But that is not the same as assuming that the marriages between two women exist as an expression of same-sex desire. If Gaudio's article opens the possibility that heterosexuality can be dissociated from marriage between men and women, then perhaps homosexuality can be dissociated from marriage between two women.

Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa, who compiled thirteen essays from a group of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists to discuss same-sex desire among women outside the West, attempted to explore female eroticism in such societies and cultures as India, Polynesia, Latin America, Native North America, and southern Africa. Again, they also dragged the woman-to-woman marriage issue into the whole debate under their title: 'Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures' which was considered by Deborah P. Amory as 'a landmark event in a number of different fields: lesbian and gay studies, women's studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies'. The book was considered as 'offering a compelling evidence against the "commonly accepted" notion that non-Western women are generally passive victims of male domination and compulsory heterosexuality' and that it 'dispels the idea that same-sex female desire is rooted in Western neo-imperialist culture'.

In Chacha's fieldwork, women in these relationships did not mention any sexual involvement with one another, and some told her that the relationship between them was like that of mother and daughter, and therefore it would simply be impossible to think of a sexual relationship. Many authors like Njambi and O'Brien and others would not completely rule out sexual contact between the women:

We agree... that this possibility has been too quickly dismissed by some authors, and suggest that the subject deserves more careful investigation... At best, given the ambiguity in this Gikuyu context, one might borrow Obbo's assertion regarding the Kamba of Kenya that while there may be no clear indication of sexual relations among women in these

marriages, we simply cannot dismiss the possibility. At the same time, we question the assumption that sexual contact is the only factor that determines whether one should be considered as 'homosexual' (Njami and O'Brien 1998)

It would be right to assume that while such relationships are based on socio-economic factors like access to land and other resources, one cannot ignore the close emotional ties experienced by these women. Mary Modupe Kolawole who shaped her own fashion of Womanism wrote:

... to the majority of ordinary Africans lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their world-view. It is not even an option to millions of African women and can therefore not be the solution as... many... Western or westernized women propose (Kolawole 1997).

Woman-to-woman marriage is not lesbianism. These marriages today are mainly contracted by independent women who have accumulated wealth and who seek to protect it against male relatives. According to Ruwezaura, such women take on the role of men and should be looked upon as 'female husbands'. Although wealth accumulation by women may be a factor accounting for the increased occurrence of woman-woman marriages, one should be careful not to underestimate the possibility of some African communities accumulating and controlling their wealth in their own right.

Among other changes, it appears also that family heads in Kuria have been more inclined to let their wives 'marry', even when the wives are young enough to have sons, or already have sons. The reason for this practice as already indicated may be because of the need for female labour accompanying the increased market-orientation of agricultural production.

Even today Kenyan law in particular does not recognise the existence of woman-woman marriage. However, it is upheld and protected by the local authorities as set out in the Chiefs Act. Powers are appended to the Kuria chiefs allowing them to solve all sorts of disputes arising in the process of transactions and practice of this kind of marriage.

Conclusion

Despite the ubiquity of sexual imagery in contemporary Western popular culture, most people in Africa regard sexuality to be a personal, private, and intimate topic and should be no one's business but their own. However, Globalisation has opened up this horizon and placed different meanings on sexual desires, practices, and politics across African cultures. The rise and proliferation of modern sexual identities, with an emphasis on reproductive and sexual rights based on lesbian, gay, and other nonconformist sexualities, is highly contested in African society. Perhaps it is misleading to view them in the same light as the wider global feminism and gay and lesbian movements.

Notes

1. Reproductive health is defined in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD POA) as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so.
2. See the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) website, <http://www.iglhrc.org/site/iglhrc/>. Its mission is to secure the full enjoyment of the human rights of all people and communities subject to discrimination or abuse on the basis of sexual orientation or expression, gender identity or expression, and/or HIV status. A US-based non-profit, non-governmental organisation, IGLHRC, carries out this mission through advocacy, documentation, coalition building, public education, and technical assistance.

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The Dark Shadow of Masculinities and Women's Emancipation Agenda

The specific objectives of the women's emancipation agenda that have more less remained recurrent include: abolishing illiteracy, making female life expectancy 65 years old globally, making it possible for women to be self sufficient, passing laws of equality to ensure a truly equitable socio-economic framework, launching public campaigns to abolish discrimination, and the adoption of national policies to abolish all obstacles women face. When one considers this list, it becomes abundantly clear that masculinities – especially in the hegemonic sense – are a dark shadow on these objectives.

Some argue that masculinities may be in crisis, as seen in the gay movement (Beynon 2002). While on the face of it, men are in power structurally and in theory, they are confronted by the possibility of disempowerment from working class women (Silberschmidt 2005). But overall, hegemonic masculinities, in the sense of men being socialised to dominate women, politically, socially and economically, remain very strong (cf. Izugbara 2005). For reasons of scope and quest for relevance I shall restrict my argument mainly to sub-Saharan Africa.

In many patriarchal societies in Africa (and these are very many indeed), educating a male child is more of a priority than educating a girl child. But amidst this, men still ascribe to what is evidently a stock phrase that says, 'when you edu-

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cate a woman, you educate the whole nation'. However, in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa effective measures for universal free primary education are on disheartening and shaky ground. Female birth mortality rates are still an important topic of concern in Africa. Despite the fact that women predominate in the process of production, men disproportionately own what the women overwhelmingly produce. Discrimination against women is still far from over, for example, in the work place in Kenya.

To the above list I add some aspects that are in tandem with our times, but were absent during the Nairobi Conference. With the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it is emerging that women are on the receiving end (Kiai et al., 2003: 14). Concerning information technology, the question of empowering women through information facilitation is at best in the preliminary stages. The future on this one still looks less bright because the gap between men and women in education, though not a gulf, is still uncomfortable enough.

I need not paint a very gloomy picture. It is true that since the Nairobi Conference

women have made remarkable strides in their emancipation agenda. Historically it is so that in Africa we have a first elected female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. Rwanda is noticeable in terms of empowering women in the government. The present Tanzanian government under President Kikwete has made history by appointing seven women ministers and ten deputy ministers. South Africa's record on empowering women in the government is also remarkable and so on.

Alongside this, ever since the advent of serious gender studies on the African continent about thirty years ago (Mama 2000), much has been done in many matters concerning women's emancipation. And there are a host of women organisations that have performed remarkably, for example, The African Women's Development and Communication Network, the Forum for African Women Educationists, the Association of African Women for Research and Development and so on. Here, it is instructive to note that CODESRIA has done what was expected of it and I am sure it will continue doing this through its Gender Institute that has been very active in many matters concerning women. For example, the following have been tackled: violence against women, gender and literature, and masculinities. This has indeed been striking because of the high calibre resource personnel and the rigorous laureate selection process that CODESRIA employs.