

SEXUALITY EMERGES IN AFRICA

Epprecht, M (2008) **Heterosexual Africa? The history of an idea from the age of exploration to the age of AIDS.** (New African Histories Series edited by Allman, J & Isaacman, A.) Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press; Athens: Ohio University Press. ISBN 978-1-86914-157-8 pbk. Pages xiii + 231.

Steyn, M and van Zyl, M (eds) (2009) **The prize and the price: Shaping sexualities in South Africa.** Cape Town: HSRC Press. ISBN 978-0-7969-2239-7 pbk. Pages viii + 416.

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Sexuality has, in South Africa and more widely in Africa emerged as an important issue of debate and discussion. In South Africa sexuality emerged as one of the main axes of discussion and contention after the fall of apartheid. As Deborah Posel (2005: 125) wrote, “one of the most striking features of the post-apartheid era has been the politicization of sexuality”. For Posel (2005) the emergence of sexuality as an open area of debate and contention in post-apartheid South Africa (rather than remaining a marginal discourse, regulated by the state and contested at the margins) embodied many of the anxieties of the new South Africa, and threatened the moral and political order: as the nation was born, so it was being undermined through sex and HIV.

More broadly, southern Africa remains globally the region hardest hit by the HIV epidemic; all seven countries with adult HIV-prevalence over 15% are in the region. The failure of billions of dollars to reshape the epidemic in any meaningful way – although increasingly at least people living with HIV are now able to access anti-retroviral treatment – has led to a focus on new ways of thinking about sexuality and the contradictory processes at work around HIV. On the one hand the HIV epidemic has opened up new spaces for talking and thinking about sexuality, on the other hand, it has allowed for the resurgence in conservative and patriarchal forms of social control that aim to control women’s and young people’s sexuality.

This can be seen most clearly in countries such as Uganda where these contradictory tendencies are most explicitly at work. One tendency is towards the opening up of new forms of language and willingness to talk about sex and sexuality – a key factor, some have suggested, leading to the decline in HIV-prevalence in previous years (Low-Beer and Stoneburner, 2003). But the counter tendency is also evident, with Uganda’s

increasingly conservative and moralistic framing of HIV/AIDS and sexuality, inspired by the conservative American government of George W Bush and the funding channelled to evangelical faith-based organizations in Uganda (de Waal, 2006). More recently this backlash has also focused on homosexuality and has enabled an attempt by Uganda to strengthen its anti-homosexuality laws. Such processes of engendering new forms of sexuality and repressing forms of sexuality are at once global and local and show the complex terrain in which sexuality is constructed and regulated.

The two books reviewed here, **Heterosexual Africa? The history of an idea from the age of exploration to the age of AIDS**, and **The prize and the price: Shaping sexualities in South Africa**, sit within this contradictory space, demonstrating how sexuality, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic have both allowed a greater focus on sexuality, particularly non-heterosexual forms, and also how this epidemic has led to an attempt to re-impose “traditional” understandings of sexuality.

Heterosexual Africa, is a encompassing review of how same-sex-sexualities have become written out of the history of Africa and in turn how this has allowed it to become labelled “unAfrican” and understudied within the HIV/AIDS response. Epprecht approaches this question from the starting point of HIV/AIDS research. Since the first cases of HIV/AIDS were discovered in Africa, the overwhelming focus has been on the heterosexual transmission of HIV. The silence on non-heterosexual identities and practices is not, at least within the field of HIV/AIDS, homophobia (directly) at work, Epprecht argues, but a more complex phenomenon about how African sexuality has been stereotyped and how homosexuality has literally been written out of the history of Africa. Epprecht’s book explores the ways this has been made possible and his five chapters cover a lot of material, specifically exploring how forms of theoretical knowledge over the years have contributed to the exclusion of same-sex practices.

Epprecht’s second chapter, *The ethnography of African straightness*, is particularly rewarding. In it he details how anthropologists, closely linked to the colonial regimes from where they came, and intent on linking their “knowledge” of Africa to what they saw, worked to erase homosexuality in their documents. Drawing on Foucault, Epprecht argues that the ways of understanding African sexuality imposed on Africa by anthropologists reflected a need to enforce notions of a hierarchy of races: while Arabic races had become decadent and could therefore be “corrupted” by homosexuality, Africans, uncivilized and closer to nature had not yet become “contaminated” and therefore could only demonstrate heterosexuality. Indeed this also linked to the colonial missionaries understanding of the “noble savages” which offered a space to reshape Africans towards some form of bourgeois European culture. “The absence of overt homosexual relationships may in fact have been missionaries’ and administrators’ one straw of hope for reshaping African sexuality toward their ideal of the civilized.” (p41). Epprecht outlines how this initial silence continued throughout the majority of research into sexuality in Africa.

However, Africa was and always will be a changing continent. As urbanization increased and the economy restructured, same-sex practices started to become particularly visible to outsiders, in mines, prisons and so forth, and increasingly difficult to ignore. Yet, this is what researchers and public health officials of the time did. They chose, whether through outright homophobia or concerns about raising a public

scandal about the imperial project back home in Europe, to avoid or ignore discussing same-sex sexualities in Africa.

Heterosexual Africa? continues to trace how homosexuality remained a marginal concern to the response to HIV/AIDS, through a series of silences and failures to ask the “correct” questions. As a significant amount of this research built on the previous ethnographic literature it was not entirely unsurprising that homosexuality never featured strongly in discussions, particularly after the WHO suggested that in Africa the main mode of transmission was almost certainly heterosexual. This is slowly being corrected as men-who-have-sex-with-men (msm) has been identified as a significant issue in the region, but remains a marginal concern for the majority of HIV/AIDS researchers.

While the majority of Epprecht’s book focuses on the erasure of homosexuality in Africa, he devotes one chapter and sections of others to outline where this has and is being challenged. Drawing on books and films, he outlines the growing body of African work around homosexualities in the continent, demonstrating the varied nature of sexuality across the African continent.

Steyn and van Zyl’s edited collection **The prize and the price** provides a vivid illustration of the ways in which sexuality as a theoretical concept is being deployed to cast new light on social processes, particularly gender inequality and how gender inequality intersects with other inequalities such as race and class. With a preface by Marc Epprecht who highlights the need to start to query the heterosexist underpinnings of much research, this edited collection provides an interesting and illuminating review of some of the new ways in which sexuality is being constructed in South Africa.

The chapters are of varied quality. Some of the standout chapters include Pattman and Bhana’s chapter on black South African schoolgirls’ sexuality, Niehaus’ research on male-male sex, and Artz on violence against women. The chapter by Pattman and Bhana explores how race and sexuality intersect in school girls’ identities. Most significantly is the way in which “sexuality became a focal point for [the learners] through which they contested the racism which permeated their everyday lives” (p35). While sexuality is at once liberating – it allowed them to contest the control of their parents – and allowing sexuality to be drawn on as one “resource” for these learners who often had few other resources, and yet their use of sexuality at the same time reproduced gendered and racial norms and inequalities.

Niehaus in his chapter of male-male sex in compounds, prisons and at home, is critical in emphasizing that non-heterosexual forms of sexual contact are common and normal within South Africa. Specifically Niehaus argues that rather than seeing male-male sex as either “contingent”, that is, occurring because of the lack of sexually available women, or situated outside of other forms of identity, male-male sexuality should be seen as located within the broader forms of masculinity, and are therefore simply novel contexts in which men renegotiate masculinity in their sexual practices. By outlining male-male sex in three contexts, he identifies how contextually specific features lead to the reshaping of masculinities and thereby sexual practices and how this reproduces gender inequalities and violence. Critically, Niehaus also contests the imposition of

sexual identities such as homosexuality and gay, by suggesting these labels do not capture the forms of sexual practices that he describes.

While the previous two chapters discussed tend to emphasize more “positive” forms of sexuality, in the sense of sexuality as agency and uncovering non-heterosexualities, the chapter by Artz, *The weather watchers*, reminds the reader that sexuality is not always a positive space. Focusing on gender-based violence Artz outlines how it plays a role in social control and restricting women’s sexuality. Gender-based violence and particularly rape, play a significant role in limiting women’s ability both to move freely and participate in social life, and engage in forms of sexuality of their choosing. While Artz does not make the link, the continuing issue of “corrective rape” in South Africa of women who identify as lesbian, or transgender, is another form of men’s attempts to limit and control women’s sexuality and ensure that those women who step “out-of-line” are punished. Sexuality here becomes an arena of control and an attempt to reinforce patriarchy.

Collectively these two books contribute important arguments and ideas to the current debates around sexuality and HIV/AIDS in the region. The first area of importance is around the need to have a theoretically located understanding of sexuality and behaviour if we are to understand people’s intentions and actions more comprehensively and therefore be able to respond in ways that support people to take control of their sexual health and expand their freedom. Too often research in the field of HIV/AIDS remains atheoretical. This leads to descriptive studies that do little more than describe people’s behaviour, without exploring the reasons why people act in the way that they do. Such theoretically denuded work leads to interventions that “miss the mark” often leading to the reinforcement, rather than the challenging of social relationships. Both **Heterosexual Africa?** and **The prize and the price** offer theoretically thoughtful and readable accounts of sexuality that enable readers to start to consider not only how people act, but also to understand the wider social, political and economic forces that shape and limit their options and decisions.

The second important contribution these two books make is they start to outline, in their various ways, the forces shaping and regulating sexuality in South Africa, and Africa more widely. Following the work of Ann McClintock’s (1995 - **Imperial Leather**), which outlined the central role of colonialism in the development of sexuality and gender, these two books both identify how forces such as colonialism, the nation-state, the economy and so forth, control and regulate people’s sexuality. Critically this brings such discussions into grounded and empirical examples of the contemporary day.

The final significant contribution these two books make is their focus on non-normative sexualities as an important object of concern and relevance in Africa. Epprecht provides the “backdrop” to this, through his exploration of what homosexuality has been erased from contemporary scholarship and research, particularly around HIV/AIDS, and points to spaces where this has been contested. While Steyn and van Zyl’s collected work offers up a range of chapters on understanding non-heterosexual sexualities in contemporary South Africa and the central role of the state in enabling this to be an open discussion.

Both these books are of merit and are worth reading by a diverse readership, ranging from students interested in exploring the theoretical concerns of sexuality, through to HIV/AIDS researchers to whom sexuality is often very narrowly conceived. Indeed these books offer some thoughtful ways in which sexuality can be located in research and practice.

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