PRIOR TO THE 1980S, HISTORIANS OF AFRICA rarely paid explicit attention to sexuality, a topic generally presumed to belong more appropriately to anthropology or psychology. Moreover, when the topic did come up, authors across the disciplines commonly assumed or asserted an African (“native,” customary, tribal, or premodern) sexuality, in the singular and in implicit timelessness. With the advent of HIV/AIDS, however, and following trends in international scholarship that saw a proliferation of close empirical case studies that employed (and extended) Foucauldian and postcolonial theory, this began to change dramatically. Much of the thinking about HIV/AIDS since the 1990s, notably, has stressed the long-term impacts of colonialism, racism, and male migrant labor that underpin the pandemic and that help to explain striking regional disparities. Indeed, the new scholarship argues that ahistorical readings of scientific data, let alone of ethnography or the other social sciences, have actually contributed to the HIV/AIDS crisis by unwittingly promoting colonial-era stereotypes, simplifications, and calumnies against African cultures. Medical anthropologists thus now routinely acknowledge the importance of historical change, context, and specificity to their research on sexual health.¹

Several problems remain, however, that are quickly apparent both in studies about African sexualities and in the ways that Africa is represented or engaged (or not) in global sexuality studies. Comparative, and even national, histories of HIV/AIDS remain rare. Same-sex sexuality is still largely overlooked in these, and even in texts aimed directly at sexual healthcare professionals. Attempts to counter that blind spot have tended to rely heavily on the exhumation of colonial ethnographies, forensic evidence, and missionary diatribes, with limited effectiveness. The evident fact that so many of the leading researchers in the field are non-African also introduces concerns, most obviously about language, epistemology, and cultural-insider secrets. In some cases, this has provoked sharply defensive reactions from African leaders and intellectuals. The latter have been particularly galled when

Thank you to Margot Canaday for inviting me to participate in this forum, and to colleagues on the original panel whose insights have enriched my understanding of the field. Meticulous reading by the anonymous reviewers and editors facilitated this article. The research was principally funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada).

Western researchers’ emphasis on culture distracts from the far more significant drivers of sexual ill-health on the continent: economic crisis and the collapse of healthcare systems. That this crisis—and the related collapse of tertiary education and independent African research capacities—was exacerbated by neoliberal policies promoted by the West since the 1970s makes Western “advice” about sexual health and sexuality research even harder to accept. Accusations of racism or Western feminist and gay imperialism consequently continue to dampen the more controversial aspects of historical sexuality research in many African countries.2

Ostensibly global queer theory and histories of sexuality, for their part, commonly disregard or tokenize African evidence and scholarship. For example, in nearly two decades, the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* published but three articles and two book reviews on Africa south of the Sahara; Leila J. Rupp mentions Africa once in passing in her call for a global history of same-sex sexuality. In other cases, attempts to include Africa involve extrapolation from local cultures in specific historical contexts to the whole of the continent over vast swaths of time. Gilbert Herdt, for an influential example, sketches a general outline of same-sex sexuality in Africa with reference to four studies from across the continent extending from precolonial to contemporary periods. Such ambition may feed into the stereotype of Africa as a country, rather than an extremely diverse region that arguably encompasses large parts of the Americas.3

The ongoing devastation wrought in Africa by postcolonial interventions and habits of thinking and consumption in the global North is meanwhile typically unacknowledged as pertinent to global sexuality theory. As Ghanaian scholar/activist Takyiwaa Manuh cogently argues, “abstract, surreal and narcissistic theorizings on dreams, bodies and other individualistic projects,” coming out of the United States in particular, often appear oblivious to the relationships between wealth (and sexual pleasure) in the global North and immiseration (and sexual ill-health) in Africa. For some African critics, even the concept of “gender” is an insidious form of Western imperialism linked to ideas about modernity and progress. Not only do gendered binaries and related ideas about individual sexual identity and desire misrepresent African societies, in this view, but they shore up primitivist or pathologized constructions of Africanness in the West. Feminist, queer, and postcolonial discourses that do not radically challenge such constructions are hence colonizing in their effects, however much they may protest otherwise.4

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4 Takyiwaa Manuh, “Doing Gender Work in Ghana,” in Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and
These problems are potentially paralyzing, and indeed, relative to other regions of the world, historical research on sexualities in Africa is clearly underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the research climate is improving, as can be seen in the increasing volume and sophistication of the scholarship. In part this improvement is a response to the simple observation that lack of research and excessive timidity are more problematic than occasional academic missteps or unintentionally colonizing overstatements. Timidity, whether in the form of polite euphemisms or self-censorship in deference to local taboos, has demonstrably failed to reverse the spread of HIV or to deter gender-based violence, including homophobia. The latter actually appears to be on the rise in many African countries, as vocal independent women and sexual minorities become scapegoats for a variety of social and political ills. A consensus is thus emerging across academic disciplines and in the policy and activist spheres that sensitive and encompassing histories of sexualities in Africa both need to be done and can be done, even in places where official rhetoric often seems implacably hostile.5

All of this makes it a propitious moment to review the history of writing about sexuality in Africa, and the changing ways that sexuality has been treated in the historiography. It is possible for historical research to be “decolonized” of ideas and practices inherited from the past, and a transnational approach to history can help to achieve that goal. Indeed, with mass migrations, imposed, often arbitrary colonial and subsequently national borders, common experiences of the invention and manipulation of tribal identities and racial capitalism from beyond those borders, the diffusion of world and millennialist religions, pan-Africanist and “African socialist” political ideals, and intellectual cultures nourished in and often beholden to disparate imperial or neocolonial centers, African history would seem ill-suited to anything other than a transnational approach. Such an approach needs to be flexible, as Margot Canaday argues in her introduction to this forum, eschewing artificial borders and academic or linguistic silos created by different colonial/national conventions, yet respecting (and interrogating) borders where they have in fact acquired cultural meaning. Transnational historical research on sexuality could in that way offer insights into hidden struggles, tensions, and interconnections between local spirituality and world religions such as Islam and Pentecostalism; national, ethnic, and diasporic identities; class formation; and even the many aspects of globalization as currently manifest in Africa. This would be of immediate interest to Africans and Africanists, particularly where it strengthens the effectiveness of the various education and other interventions in the struggles against sexual ill-health and gender-

based violence. But it could also contribute to enriching global sexuality studies more broadly. It could, for example, encourage scholars worldwide to reflect upon and address hidden assumptions about Africa and Africanness or race and modernity that are discreetly embedded in their analysis or research choices. As such, it could counter lingering tendencies of Eurocentrism or “Westo-centrism” in the field, and temper a seeming naïveté or disinterest in the role of global inequalities in the construction of sexualities worldwide.

Writing about sexuality in Africa south of the Sahara first appeared in the fourteenth century with the scandalized observations of Malian mores by the Muslim traveler Ibn Batutta. Thereafter, a steadily growing number of non-Africans (including slavers, explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials) gave their accounts. Through to the mid-twentieth century, this writing was overwhelmingly dominated by white male authors who tended to characterize Africans as essentially heterosexual and promiscuous, either portraying this essence as deeply pathological and dangerous (for example, “Black Peril”) or, conversely, extolling its virtues in opposition to various other Others (such as prudish Europeans and decadent Arabs). They accounted for the posited differences between Africans and other peoples in the world through structural functionalist explanations or exotic influences that denied desire, creativity, or complex emotions to ostensibly primitive, taboo-encrusted, or close-to-nature Africans. And they understated or outright ignored African women’s agency in sexual decision-making. History was generally left out of the discussion unless it involved interaction with Europeans, usually as either edifying or corrupting influences upon Africans.6

Taken together, this literature amounted to a compelling moral argument in favor of Islamic conquest/holy war (jihads) or European colonialism, that is, the use of violence to impose idealized outside values upon Africans. For example, moral arguments in favor of education for women and their protection from exploitation by men underpinned the jihads that swept across the Sahel in the early nineteenth century.7 Many subsequent accounts by European authors stressed what they perceived as African women’s subservience and easy sexual availability to men (prima

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6 These tendencies are demonstrated in hundreds of accounts in many different colonial languages, ably analyzed in Rudi C. Bleys, The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750–1918 (New York, 1995); and Daniel Vangroenweghe, Sida et sexualité en Afrique (Anvers, 2000). I should acknowledge here that the historiography in French, Portuguese, Arabic, and other languages will mostly be discussed only indirectly in this article, while noting Becker’s observation about how underdeveloped the scholarship in French is compared to English (Becker, “Introduction,” in Becker et al., Vivre et penser le sida en Afrique, 22). I acknowledge as well that the Sahara is a misleading cut-off line to the region. Some scholars, notably Cheikh Anta Diop, have tried to bridge it with claims of cultural continuities between Black Africa, ancient Egypt, and the wider classical world. Given the extremely tenuous nature of his evidence, I will mostly adhere to the dominant convention. Due cautions on generalizing about the whole continent—and even south of the Sahara only—and whole historical periods are well-articulated by Frederick Cooper, Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History (Berkeley, Calif., 2005); and Philip W. Setel, A Plague of Paradoxes: AIDS, Culture, and Demography in Northern Tanzania (Chicago, 1999).

7 See the poetry and polemics of female scholars of the period such as Asma’u bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi, discussed in Jean Boyd and Murray Last, “The Role of Women as ‘Agents Religieux’ in Sokoto,” Canadian Journal of African Studies 19, no. 2 (1985): 283–300.
facie evidence: polygyny, as well as pre- and extramarital sexuality), African men’s cruel intolerance of female autonomy and pleasure (“female circumcision”), and Africans’ lack of sexual modesty and guilt (naked breasts, writhing dances). African men’s “indolence”—a commonly used term—arose in this view from their supposedly untrammeled access to and exploitation of female sexuality. One way to get the men to work for Europeans in bad jobs for low pay was to cut them off from the ancient sexual moral economy, by force, by law, and by shaming as necessary. The moral argument was frequently buttressed by the use of scientific-sounding language that somewhat obscured the colonizing intent, including under the rubric of “ethnopsychiatry” in the 1930s to 1950s.8

Historians of Africa—all writing as amateurs prior to the 1950s—for the most part neither questioned these presumptions and prescriptions nor regarded sexuality as a legitimate topic of investigation. Real History involved the search for kings and empires. Key exceptions were those cases in which prominent African leaders so blatantly violated norms that their actions necessitated attempted explanation. Among these was Shaka, the founder of the Zulu nation in the early nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1920s, historians used Freudian concepts to account for Shaka’s supposed megalomania and obsession with other people’s sexuality, locating his distemper first in an undersized penis and then in latent or repressed homosexuality. Another notorious case was that of Mwanga, the kabaka (king) of the Baganda people from 1884 to 1899, whose cruel and arbitrary rule was pinned on his reputed corruption to bisexuality by Arab traders. As for the “Amazons” (a brigade of female warriors in the Fon kingdom of Dahomey from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century), as well as the relatively widely observed practice of woman-woman marriage, only a single speculative exception allowed for the possibility of an erotic element in these women’s relationships. Elsewhere, structural-functionalist explanations of the practice prevailed, emphasizing the role of woman-woman marriage as a rational strategy to cement heterosexual kinship ties.9

Africans who began to publish in line with Western standards of professional scholarship had to contend with paternalism and censorship by their Western, often missionary mentors. Nonetheless, by the 1920 and 1930s, African authors had begun to roundly criticize bigoted judgments by Europeans about African sexual morality. In the early days, this commonly took the form of romanticized hetero-patriarchal traditions. Subsequent anticolonial and anti-apartheid struggles also gave rise to a narrative of “traditional sexuality” in which a hearty yet wholesome heterosexual appetite stood in proud opposition to the dominant, emasculating colonial discourse. Ironically, African nationalist claims about African sexuality often drew uncritically

8 For further development of this argument, see Marc Epprecht, Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS (Athens, Ohio, 2008).
upon Western authors for substantiation. Anicet Kashamura, for one example promoted by the United Nations, depicts an idyll of guilt-free love and sex play on the shores of Lake Victoria/Nyanza largely by reference to the sweeping, lurid overview of the entire continent over all time by the Italian Egyptologist Boris de Rachewiltz.10

Political decolonization outside of southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s opened the door for feminist scholars to begin tackling such androcentric, homogenizing, or polemical treatments of “the African” in the scholarship. While this research was driven largely by Western scholars and couched in reference to Western theories, strong, mutual, and enduring collaborations between Western and African feminists were struck in this period. Much of their project through the 1970s was intended (and in many ways succeeded) as a corrective, recovering African women as historical actors disaggregated from the generic, implicitly male “native.” A strong theme to emerge was that efforts to control or reshape African gender relations and sexuality to suit colonial and capitalist interests were central to state formation. Large-scale transnational migration and policy collaboration across (and between) vast colonial empires featured in much of this history.11

Female prostitution was by far the most visible manifestation of changing sexualities under colonialism, rued almost universally, including by the men who partook of it. Female prostitution also raised sharp questions about the colonial and developmentalist narratives both of progress and of African women’s passivity or victimhood. Janet Bujra’s pioneering study of Muslim women on the Swahili coast, for example, demonstrated a striking gap between customary/colonial expectations of female subordination to men and de facto female sexual entrepreneurship and autonomy. In the context of “progress” characterized by structural racism and sexism, some types of prostitution actually offered a relatively dignified household strategy.12

The stereotype of African promiscuity also attracted critical scrutiny from feminist historians. Diana Jeater, for an important example, used the lens of Foucault’s work to show how promiscuous and/or transaction sex among Africans in colonial Zimbabwe was not, as frequently claimed, inherent to African culture. Rather, it was “discoursed” into existence over decades of debate and public fulminations by white settlers against Africans’ mooted immorality or perversity. These arose in large part out of the imperative to regulate the flow of cheap migrant labor. Intrusive legislation such as the Native Adultery Ordinance, for example, sought to protect local African


11 Among several helpful discussions of the early historiography of women and gender in Africa are Iris Berger and E. Frances White, Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History (Bloomington, Ind., 1999); Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nankanyike Musisi, eds., Women in African Colonial Histories (Bloomington, Ind., 2002); and Nomboniso Gasa, ed., Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers/basus ‘imbokodo, bawel ‘imilambo (Cape Town, 2007).

men from having to compete with immigrants for women. Those debates were also often a proxy expression of sexual tensions between settler men and women over interracial sex.\(^\text{13}\)

Closely related to prostitution, and the subject of much anxiety over fertility, was the spread of sexually transmitted infections. Colonial regimes had admittedly helped to create the conditions under which such diseases and infertility flourished. But the colonialists also exaggerated and exploited the health and social crises for their own political advantage. Science was thus deployed in ways that justified punitive, moralistic interventions that frequently worsened the sexual health conditions of Africans, not least of all through enforced urban racial segregation and strict controls on women’s mobility. In a powerful example of such abuse of science, Lynette Jackson details efforts by the Southern Rhodesian state to control syphilis by subjecting African women entering towns to compulsory vaginal examinations. The suppression of discreet traditional herbal methods of abortion, to give another example, contributed to the current situation of tens of thousands of female deaths due to botched illegal operations every year. Yet Africans could also exploit gaps or tensions between state policy, rhetoric, and science on such issues. As Nancy Rose Hunt has explored in her studies of Belgian colonialism, Africans manipulated colonial anxieties about polygyny and infertility in order to refashion sexual mores in accordance with their preferences in the rapidly changing urban milieux of the mid-twentieth century. Amy Kaler discerned similar hidden struggles around contraception for African women in the midst of an anticolonial struggle.\(^\text{14}\)

“Female circumcision” or female genital cutting (FGC) also inspired numerous sensitive studies aimed at historicizing African women’s and girls’ agency, along with sometimes heated debates about the appropriateness of feminist interventions in Africa.\(^\text{15}\) One of the key findings to emerge from this research is that an assumed ancient custom has in fact been quite mutable over time. Astrid Nypan’s examination of the revival of ritual genital cutting among Meru girls in Tanzania in the 1980s,


\(^{15}\) FGC, along with the technically specific terms “excision” and “infibulation,” is now generally preferred over either the somewhat benign-sounding “circumcision” or the judgmental “female genital mutilation” (FGM). FGM “modification” may be another way to capture the wide range of practices, some of which women experience (and advocate to Western researchers) as strongly erotic. See Brigitte Bagno and Esmeralda Mariano, “Elongation of the Labia Minora and Use of Vaginal Products to Enhance Eroticism: Can These Practices Be Considered FGM?” *Finnish Journal of Ethnicity and Migration* 3, no. 2 (2008): 42–53. An important example of African nationalist polemic on the topic is Obioma Nnaemeka, “If Female Circumcision Didn’t Exist, Western Feminists Would Invent It,” in Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development across Cultures* (London, 2001), 171–189.
for example, showed young girls returning to the practice often in direct violation of their mothers’ wishes and after decades of relatively successful policies by the state to eradicate it. Nypan argued that economic crisis made girls desperate to secure a husband with a job or land by whatever means possible, including invoking “neo-traditional” notions of beauty and female sexual passivity. Lynn Thomas and Janice Boddy also analyzed clumsy colonial and missionary efforts to suppress FGC—and African responses to them—with similarly troubling implications for present top-down strategies for its eradication.16

Yet for all their brio in tackling formerly taboo or controversial topics, feminist and other social historians rarely questioned one pervasive stereotype about sexuality in Africa. All of the research noted above started from the assumption that homosexuality was not a significant issue. The topic began to enter into the discussion only in the 1970s, as neo-Marxist historians sought to sharpen their critique of colonialism, apartheid, and capitalism. Charles van Onselen pioneered the critique with the argument that male-male sexuality and bestiality in the mine compounds of colonial Zimbabwe had been tacitly condoned and exploited by the mine companies from as early as the 1910s and 1920s. In subsequent studies, he characterized homosexual criminal gangs in early-twentieth-century Johannesburg as similarly derivative from the dehumanizing context created by racial capitalism. The analysis resonated with, and provided a new way to articulate anger against, the racist system.17

A dramatic shift in tone in this regard came in 1985 with the publication by American anthropologist Judith Gay of a study of lesbian-like relationships in rural Lesotho. She linked these relationships to the history of large-scale male absence due to migrant labor and apartheid. More important factors, however, were the development of girls’ boarding schools and the popularization of notions around heterosexual romantic love. “Mummy-baby” relationships were thus not a corruption of supposed real Africanness and heterosexual dignity, as many earlier treatments of homosexuality had implied. Rather, they were a positive and homegrown way for girls to experiment with the new ideas about sexuality and to prepare for marriage without putting their health, reputation, and family resources at risk by engaging in premarital courtship or sex with boys.18

Modern Western presumptions about sexual orientation and gay identity were further disrupted by other studies of the migrant labor system in southern Africa that followed soon after. T. Dunbar Moodie and Patrick Harries, notably, focused upon a phenomenon that missionaries had campaigned against since the 1900s—so-called


mine marriage in the industrial compounds. These temporary male-male unions often served (and were often self-consciously intended by the men themselves) to strengthen traditional marriage with women back in the rural areas. That is, “boy wives” allowed the men to avoid costly and potentially unhealthy relationships with female prostitutes, hence to be able, eventually, to retire as “real men” ruling over successful rural homesteads. The demise of the system, in Moodie’s analysis, could be linked to broad changes in the political economy of the region in the 1970s, including the rise of African liberation movements and trade unions, rural impoverishment, and women’s influx to the cities.19

These academic studies coincided with a small explosion of writing and filmmaking by and about self-identified black lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in Africa. Often celebratory, this coming out in text and onscreen was partly a response to gay liberation in the West and to the momentum generated by broad-based anti-apartheid struggles. It also reflected a reaction to the rise of political, often racialized homophobia in the region, beginning with Winnie Mandela’s notorious defense strategy in her 1991 trial for kidnapping, when she cast blame on an alleged white homosexual. Historical content in these activist-inclined productions rarely extended much farther back in time than living memory. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron’s tour de force Defiant Desire, for example, has but a single chapter focused on the 1950s, and is otherwise concerned mostly with the 1980s on. The first significant effort to ground indigenous African homosexualities in the more distant past mainly involved republication or translations of old ethnographies.20

African women scholars also joined the debates in the 1980s, often forcefully distancing themselves from Western feminists and their purported obsessions with the clitoris, orgasms, and lesbians. As with masculinist African nationalism, the more extreme expressions of so-called African motherism or womanism proffered an essentialized and static inversion of the colonial imaginary. African women’s sexual identity was typically defined in this literature in terms of reproduction and motherhood, often in sweeping terms drawn from tenuous, decontextualized linguistic evidence. Intrusions of contradictory historical or sociological argument prompted some sharp defensive reactions. Nigerian sociologist Ifi Amadiume, notably, lambasted African American lesbians for daring to co-opt woman-woman marriage in Africa to their political agenda. Her language was strong enough (“prejudiced,” “offensive”) that, together with her status as a cultural insider, it worked to ward Western feminists away from the topic. Indeed, more than a decade passed before an


effective challenge to the dogma was floated. In that incisive study, Basotho women revealed how they conceived “sex” in such a narrow, penis-focused sense that they were able to engage in a wide range of lesbian-like practices without for a moment doubting their heterosexuality.\footnote{Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London, 1987), 7–9; Kendall, “‘When a Woman Loves a Woman’ in Lesotho: Love, Sex, and the (Western) Construction of Homophobia,” in Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, 223–241.}

That said, African intellectuals did push back against homophobic or heterosexist allegories. An erotically charged article by Zackie Achmat criticized white scholars such as van Onselen and Moodie who suppressed evidence of male-male desire among African men or gave it a functionalist spin in their analyses of it. Achmat urged a new generation of African scholars to be bold in seeking evidence of the diversity of sensual desire, creativity, and playfulness among Africans in the past. Several African feminists also advocated for research that would challenge silences and stereotypes about female sexuality. The take-up has been noticeably slow to arrive, but a turning point may have come in 2005. That year saw the publication of a collection of interviews of women who have sex with women in East and Southern Africa. Although they are ethnographic in approach, history is widely acknowledged in the women’s accounts. One study, for example, suggested that ethnic domination by the strongly evangelized or Westernized Ovambo over the more traditionalist (gender-bending) Damara people partially explains the rise of political homophobia in Namibia in the post-independence era.\footnote{Zackie Achmat, “‘Apostles of Civilised Vice’: ‘Immoral Practices’ and ‘Unnatural Vice’ in South African Prisons and Compounds, 1890–1920,” *Social Dynamics* 19, no. 2 (1993): 92–110. See also Patricia McFadden, “Sex, Sexuality, and the Problem of AIDS in Africa,” in Ruth Meena, ed., *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues* (Harare, 1992), 157–195. Important realizations of such research include Unoma N. Azuah, “The Emerging Lesbian Voice in Nigerian Feminist Literature,” in Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski, eds., *Body, Sexuality, and Gender* (Amsterdam, 2005), 129–141; Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Maureen Ngozi Eke, eds., *Gender and Sexuality in African Literature and Film* (Trenton, N.J., 2007), 239–250; and Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, eds., *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa* (Johannesburg, 2005).}

Feminism also provided an important intellectual strand to a growing field in the late 1990s: “critical men’s studies,” or gendered writing on men in Africa. The analysis here was often self-consciously political: if we can understand the making of men in the past, we can imagine ways to unmake those aspects of masculinity that fuel sexual ill-health or violence in the present. Important studies linked specific constructions of masculine sexuality to high rates of HIV. They revealed, for example, rigidly gendered homosexual relationships in prison, subcultures of heterosexual conquest and consumerism, sex tourism catering to European women, and sex “play” among male street children that provided stark lifelong lessons in homophobia, misogyny, and racism.\footnote{Key works here include Robert Morrell, “Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 605–630; Morrell, ed., *Changing Men in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 2001); Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, eds., *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H., 2003); and Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, eds., *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, 2005). Among many remarkable case studies are Sasha Gear and Kindiza Ngubeni, *Daai Ding: Sex, Sexual Violence, and Coercion in Men’s Prisons* (Braamfontein, 2002); Chris Lockhart, “Kunyenga, ‘Real Sex,’ and Survival: Assessing the Risk of HIV Infection among Urban Street Boys in Tanzania,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2002): 294–311; and George Paul Mieu, “‘Mombasa Morans’: Em-
are commonly affected by debilitating sexual insecurity arising from economic or structural marginality. Men’s vulnerability or disempowerment has also been linked to women’s metaphysical power, a kind of power that gains cachet as confidence in the modern economy or biomedical science crumbles. Allison Goebel, for example, shows how rural Shona men fear and are sometimes restrained in their sexual infidelities by so-called husband-taming herbs. Witches, vampires, mermaids, and tokoloshis (imps) also feature prominently in people’s sexual decision-making in a number of close studies. The attempt to trace the effects of these unseen creatures back in time is not intended to revive old stereotypes of African superstitiousness, but rather to problematize the often misplaced confidence in Western or rational analytic models.24

If mermaids are difficult to concretize, the methodological challenges of reconstructing the precolonial are equally daunting. Archaeology in much of Africa is highly enigmatic, while oral history is heavily affected by “paraliterate feedback” or the internalization of colonial values by African informants. Nonetheless, there have been several successful efforts using “cognitive archaeology,” oral history, historical linguistics, and other innovative methods. Traces of African sexualities are also revealed in documents arising from the Dutch trade with Asia, the Catholic Inquisition in Iberia and the Americas, and the transatlantic slave trade stretching back several hundred years. The work of J. Lorand Matory is especially noteworthy in that regard, not only for its long historical view and transnational scope (Nigeria, Brazil, the Caribbean, the United States), but also for its critique of the strand of “post-gender,” heteronormative scholarship represented by Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí.25

A final tendency to note in the research is that the transition from ethnographic to historical studies of sexuality occurred first in Anglophone southern Africa, which still tends to predominate in the production of knowledge and theorization about African sexualities in history. Several factors have contributed to this regional and linguistic imbalance, likely including the favorable climate (meteorologically speaking) for researchers from North America and northern Europe, whence came the thrust of new thinking about sexuality. Another kind of climate (economic malaise, wars, and political repression in West, Central, and former Portuguese Africa) has enjoined many Francophone and Lusophone scholars to seek employment in the United States and Anglophone Canada, where, by career necessity, they have tended to publish in English. The fact that rates of HIV/AIDS are so much higher in South-

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ern Africa than elsewhere has added urgency to the research topic in that region. Moreover, South Africa in particular, for all the difficulties of transformation under structural adjustment conditions, still boasts the best-endowed and most internationally well-connected university system on the continent, with several academic journals and research councils strongly committed to sexuality studies.  

Fundamentally, however, the geographical and linguistic imbalance can be traced back to large-scale white settlement and the direct transposition of Dutch and English legal structures to the region. This resulted in a rich documentation of efforts to police sexuality dating back to the late seventeenth century. Indeed, for all the manifest horrors of South African and later Rhodesian racism, those regimes created outstanding archives that provided the first solid foothold for researchers to uncover sexual secrets from the past. Southern Africa’s relatively dense tradition of radical social history has also encouraged “edgy” research linked to a wide range of anti-oppression struggle inspired by or allied to such initiatives as the History Workshop in England. Hence, whereas isolated studies of sexuality by French or Swiss scholars in West Africa in the 1970s tended to disappear quickly into obscurity, South Africa’s vibrant civil society encompassed feminist and gay rights activism that saw the history of sexuality as a tool to promote democratic transition.

Whatever the factors, the regional imbalance is starting to change as a new generation of scholars in other parts of the continent pick up the research leads. Evidence of secretive homosexuality or bisexuality has begun to trickle in from West and Central Africa, for example, where intense stigma and denial had previously largely precluded it. It reveals male homosexual conduct hidden under cover of heterosexual marriage and girlfriends in Cameroon, plus networks of men who have sex with men in Mali and Senegal. The establishment of the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre in 2003, which offers scholarships to researchers from around the continent and has sponsored a series of workshops in Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, and the founding of the International Resource Network in 2007 have provided a fillip to the investigation of topics that were hitherto taboo and perceived to be disreputable or unscholarly.

Much of this new research is presentist or sociological in focus; however, histories are strongly implicit (viz., subcultures of men who have sex with men are homegrown rather than imported, while homophobic intolerance has been exacerbated by “mod-

26 See, for example, Feminist Africa (Cape Town) and Agenda (Durban), plus Graeme Reid and Liz Walker, guest eds., Sex and Secrecy, Special Issue, Culture, Health and Sexuality 7, no. 3 (2005); Deevia Bhana, Robert Morrell, Jeff Hearn, and Relebohile Moletsane, guest eds., Sexualities in Southern Africa, Special Issue, Sexualities 10, no. 2 (2007); and Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl, eds., The Price and the Price: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa (Pretoria, 2009).

27 An example of such activist scholarship is Robert Colman’s play After Nines!, derived from an oral history project and performed in Johannesburg in 1998 (script available at http://mask.org.za and at the continent’s only Gay and Lesbian Archives, University of Witwatersrand).

ern” influences such as structural adjustment and evangelical Christianity). One of the first monographs to query the topic in explicitly historical terms addresses the latter point, revealing relatively relaxed attitudes among the Igbo toward sexual difference in the early twentieth century. This is in such sharp contradiction to the current political rhetoric in Nigeria that it suggests a similar kind of cultural transfer of homophobia from Christian missionaries that has been found in Southern Africa.29

Research from the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa indicates some striking differences with the rest of the continent. According to Jarrod Hayes’s provocative analysis of Maghrebian anticolonial literature, for example, resistance to homophobic and Orientalist French colonial ideology in the arts did not follow the “macho” pattern found in much of the rest of Africa. Rather, it included a cultivated homosexual aesthetic among important Magrebian nationalist intellectuals and artists, a “queer anti-imperialism” whereby homosexual characters repudiate the colonialists and their local collaborators.30 But the new research has also started to erode the sometimes hermetic-seeming analytic seal that runs across the Sahara. An important achievement in that regard was the translation and exegesis of the memoirs of Egyptian soldier and administrator Ibrahim Fawzi. His reflections on sexual immorality in the Sudan provide insight into the early successes of the Mahdist (“Islamic fundamentalist”) jihad of the 1880s. New studies of FGC similarly destabilize assumptions about the timelessness or essential Africanness of the custom. Casamance women, for example, have embraced genital cutting as a form of political resistance to the centralizing power of the Senegalese state and to the indignities of modern representations of female sexuality. From Sudan, Janice Boddy observed the contradictory influence of Wahabist Islam and the inflation of bride-prices caused by local male migrant labor in Saudi Arabia. The men who traveled were more opposed to FGC than those who remained at home. The tendency to “blame Arabs” for sexual corruption or oppression of women—a common trope in African nationalist literature—is also overturned in Hayes’s discussion of a novel by Algerian Rachid Boudjedra. There it is black migrant laborers who scandalize Arab villagers by engaging in male-male sexual relations.31

The history of writing about sexuality in Africa since the 1970s reveals several continuities: the preponderance of English-language research with a high density of Southern African topics; close, mutually enriching conversations about methodology

29 Stephanie Newell, The Forger’s Tale: The Search for Odeziaku (Athens, Ohio, 2006).
30 Jarrod Hayes, Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb (Chicago, 2000).
across disciplinary lines, particularly history and anthropology; and the predominance of Western and Southern African scholars in the production of knowledge. That noted, however, departures from this past can be discerned, particularly since the late 1990s. They include the explosion in quantity of frank, bold, and politically imaginative studies; a willingness to tackle formerly taboo (or assumed to be taboo) topics; more even geographical and cultural coverage that extends farther back in time than the easily accessible colonial era; a growing literature (empirical and theoretical) in French; and fuller participation in the research by African scholars theorizing their work with reference to other African intellectuals (rather than, for example, Foucault). Some familiar dichotomies, categories, periodizations, and polemical positions have been undermined in the process, including homosexuality (singular) versus heterosexuality; precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial; Africa north and south of the Sahara; and Africa and “the West.”

New findings about the history of African sexualities have been possible in part because of new sources and more sensitive research methods. In earlier times, the only sources regarded as legitimate and more or less reliable were senior men, often with white male experts preferred over Africans for authoritative knowledge. Now researchers are tracking down not just African women and girls, but also members of sexual minorities to gather oral histories or to unravel hitherto secret argots. Their ability to uncover such secrets through more “empowering” interview techniques and through collaborative relationships between cultural insiders and outsiders suggests that Africans’ presumed paralyzing fear of taboos or inability to talk about sexuality may have been exaggerated in previous accounts. Indeed, new studies coming out of the struggle against HIV/AIDS are revealing such practices as anal sex and male-male prostitution. Researchers have also turned to unconventional documentary sources such as letters to the editor in the popular media, poetry, fiction, prison graffiti, and film. Material culture, particularly as expressed in the form of clothing, has also been analyzed for the ways that sexuality was constructed and constrained over time. Sexualized fashions, most notoriously in anti-miniskirt campaigns, often unfolded in close relation to class and national identity formation.

The new research fundamentally challenges many of the assumptions and prescriptions of the old. It includes the finding that Africans were not as naive about same-sex sexuality and non-normative practices as was once asserted; that someone can be proudly out in a non-normative way such as gay or lesbian yet at the same time desire to marry and have children; that female desire and sexual autonomy existed even within strongly hetero-patriarchal customs and institutions; that Africans’ decision-making about sexual relationships cannot be explained simply by structures and functions but also involves such ephemeral issues as intimacy, love, spirituality, and self-doubt, including masculine self-doubt; and that plurality and historical context need to be emphasized in any analysis. Indeed, the new research has made it impossible for any serious scholar in the future to use the phrase “African sexuality” or “African custom” in the singular. The new research also calls attention

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to how an un-reflexive choice of words and homogenizing or Eurocentric concepts may unintentionally insinuate moral judgments about people’s sexuality that then occlude efforts to develop effective education initiatives or health policy.

None of the above is to suggest that there has been linear progress toward more sophisticated, non-colonial scholarship. Moreover, huge gaps remain, and potentially rich sources lie almost untouched. Indigenous African-language novels, television shows, advertisements, and other mass media, for example, remain largely unexplored for their allusions to sexual secrets or discrepancies between sexual ideals and actual sexual practices. Electronic networks linking far-flung diasporic communities constitute another rich archive.

Sensitive transnational excavation and analysis of the history of sexualities will do more than better inform us about African history in general and our understanding of present-day frustrations in addressing such specific problems as sexual ill-health and gender-based violence in Africa. It could also act, in Eileen Boris’s term, as a “corrective” to global feminist or queer theory that tokenizes studies from Africa or that unknowingly replicates racist narratives about Africa in isolation from global structures and transnational movements or ideas. Indeed, the history of sexualities in Africa sheds light on how inequalities in the global political economy underpin the production of knowledge and frame desire far beyond the physical borders of Africa. Thus historicizing and otherwise disrupting simplistic narratives about African sexualities could have a ripple effect on sexuality studies quite broadly. As global sexuality studies start to acknowledge African scholarship more seriously, a more truly decolonized field can be imagined.


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