

The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa



A Synthesis of Literature

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Abstract. **The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Synthesis of Literature.** The study of sexuality is largely underdeveloped in sub-Saharan Africa and few scholars have demonstrable interest and focus in this area. Yet, sexuality is at the core of our existence and is central to the socio-economic and development challenges confronted in sub-Saharan Africa. The lack of professional research capacity in SSA has become more evident with the escalating HIV/AIDS epidemic. The failure to deal with the disease has highlighted limitations of the extensive social science research being carried out on the continent to strengthen programs that advocate change in sexual behavior. The near exclusive focus on behavior change (mainly in terms of number and type of sexual partners and condom use) has limited fuller understanding of sexuality and how it is conceptualized and applied in various societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Our purpose in this paper is, thus, to examine the state of knowledge regarding sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa.

key words: Africa, feminism, sexuality, conceptualisation, socio-cultural institutions

Introduction¹

The study of sexuality is largely underdeveloped in sub-Saharan Africa and few scholars have demonstrable interest and focus in this area. Yet,

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The African Gender Institute's (AGI) curriculum work group meeting report for the year 2003 gives an indication of some of the realities involved in undertaking a review such as ours. The report discusses the challenges faced during the preparation of a review essay and a bibliography focusing on sexuality, culture, and identity in Africa. The report indicates that the difficulties encountered during this first attempt were partly due to an overlooked need to map out what is 'do-able' within a review paper's scope, thus

'provid[ing] a framework for navigating through the literature.' Furthermore, it concludes that 'base-line thinking needs to be grounded in existing African thought regarding sexuality' (AGI, 2003).

It is in this spirit that the current review has been conducted, taking the aforementioned recommendations as its point of departure.

Review Methodology

The World Health organization has recently defined sexuality as:

a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of bio-

logical, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical and religious and spiritual factors (WHO Draft working definition, October 2002).

Whether the above well-cited definition of sexuality encapsulates, or even properly identifies, the different aspects of sexuality for the SSA region is debatable.² Nonetheless, one might consider it as more relevant to the setting we are concerned with here than several earlier, less complex iterations. This paper, thus, relies on the above definition of sexuality and attempts to address several of its facets.

The literature examined for this review was largely derived from articles available on JSTOR (Journal Storage: The Scholarly Journal Archive)³. Using the key words ‘sexuality and sub-Saharan Africa,’ we conducted a search that generated close to 700 articles from a wide array of journals, in disciplines such as population studies, anthropology, and feminist studies. Our literature search also extended to the HINARI database, as well as to the World Wide Web. Using a list of key words related to the subject of sexuality (including sexual behavior, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexuality), coupled with the term ‘sub-Saharan Africa,’ we located several articles that were not available on JSTOR. The vast majority of the articles retrieved from HINARI and the Web revolved around reproductive health issues in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ This was also the case for JSTOR, although the latter did provide several multi-disciplinary articles which examined sexuality issues in SSA outside the realm of reproductive health.

² Another comprehensive definition of sexuality is provided by Dixon-Mueller (1993: 273), who views sexuality as a ‘comprehensive concept that encompasses the physical capacity for sexual arousal and pleasure (libido) as well as personalized and shared social meanings attached to sexual behavior and the formation of sexual and gender identities. As a biological concept transposed by culture, sexuality becomes a social product.’

³ We readily acknowledge the biased selection of papers available through a source like JSTOR, useful as it is. We did note somewhat of a bias in favor of natural science and US/European publications.

⁴ As a result, we deliberately chose to focus on other, less-studied aspects of sexuality in this review.

Our search was opportunistic, an additional way – necessarily so, in our opinion. As scholars resident in sub-Saharan Africa, access to sexuality-related literature posed intermittent challenges.⁵ Thus, any readily available books on sexuality, as well as relevant ‘grey’ literature also formed a part of our review. Drawing on sexuality data from our respective fields of expertise (in Language, Literacy, and Culture, and Demography, respectively), we also included texts we were aware of that examined our topic of interest. Lastly, this review has benefited from a small number of important books (ranging from the recently published to the very old).

To facilitate our navigation through the literature, we have relied upon the World Health Organization’s definition of sexuality, attempting to address each of its segments (as well as other topics relevant to SSA). We examined over one hundred articles related to these segments.⁶

Our examination revealed an undeniable tension in the emergent body of sexuality literature – an opposition between ‘empirical data gathering and hypothesis testing and postmodern, postpositivist constructionist scholarship/science’ (Okami & Pendleton 1994: 90). The essentialist approach is regarded as limited in its ability to unravel the social logic and realities in which sexuality is deeply embedded, or what Treichler (1991, p. 51) describes as the ‘complicated signifying systems where language, behavioral practices, cultural institutions, and self identification regularly produce contradictions.’ A social constructionist view has been increasingly upheld (see, for example, Population Council, 2001; Kim-Puri, 2005; Heald, 2003) in a bid to redress what are seen as imbalances

⁵ As an example of this, a major African source on sexuality issues to which we did not have access (apart from the one article which a contributing author made available online) is the South African feminist journal, *Agenda* – a publication that has been participating in this discussion years ahead of many other African sources.

⁶ Our JSTOR search using the key words ‘sexuality’ and ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ generated over 700 articles, some of which were more relevant to our purposes than others. We selected various articles that touched on the key segments we address in this paper. Our review is, thus, by no means exhaustive.

caused by the theoretical assumption of homogenization that has historically informed understandings of sexuality in Africa.

Social constructionism⁷, however, faces its own limitations as well. In their fight against ethnocentrism, its proponents have been known to occasionally perpetuate the latter, ‘treating culture-specific categories as though they were shared cross-culturally’ (Okami & Pendleton 1994: 87). Ideally, a social constructionist approach would go beyond a mere focus on cultural influence to situate local beliefs within their appropriate historical, social, and cultural contexts (*ibid.*). An additional challenge arises with this approach, which embodies anthropological methods. Much of the research bordering on sexuality has been both agency-sponsored and short-term – an urgent response to HIV/AIDS (Heald, 2003) and other reproductive health problems. The ‘thick description’ which derives from long-term participant-observation and the contextualizing of the ‘insider’ perspective, is hampered by the domination of short-term evaluations (*ibid.*). But, as Heald (*ibid.*) concedes, anthropologists are more adept at the dissection of policy failures than at contributing toward the universalizing exigencies of policy planning. What we know about sexuality in African contexts is explored here amid this ‘war’ of the approaches.

Sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa: The roots of our knowledge

Historically, there have been a myriad of stereotypical myths regarding the sexualities of ‘Third World’ peoples. The rootedness of the investigation of sexuality in the Victorian age explains many of these legends (Leclerc-Madlala, 2004). Unflattering portraits of sexuality in the developing world are legion, constructing this phenomenon as either ‘exotic, mysterious, [and] uncivilized’ (Jolly 2003: 5), or as hypersexual (Gesheker, 1995; Mama 1996; Elliston, 2005). Several authors observe that the

⁷ Rosenblum & Travis (2000: 1) define constructionism as ‘the perspective that reality cannot be separated from the way a culture makes sense of it – that meaning is ‘constructed’ through social, political, legal, scientific, and other practices. From this perspective, differences among people are created through social processes.’

beginnings of our knowledge about sexuality in SSA were shaped within conceptual schemes derived from colonial legacies and thought (e.g.: Mama, 1996; Osha, 2004). Indeed, others (e.g.: Arnfred, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2004) have indicated that contemporary conceptualizations of ‘African sexuality’ continue to be informed by earlier colonial and Western, Victorian-era imaginations. Within this conceptual framing, the portrait of sexuality in SSA that emerges often reflects ‘the unbridled black female sexuality, excessive, threatening and contagious, carrying a deadly disease’ (Arnfred 2004: 67). Men are not left out of this picture. Standing back from medical discourses often collected around issues such as male circumcision and HIV/AIDS, their depiction as sexually irresponsible beings, who

‘would not use condoms if they did not have to, but would rather practice promiscuous sex without any interest in [their] partner’s health’

equally feeds in to colonial notions of the African male (Jungar & Oinas, 2004: 107).

In current research on sub-Saharan Africa – ‘often donor-driven,’ as Arnfred (2004: 59) notes, not to mention program-driven – the conceptualization of sexuality has privileged a severely limited number of themes, including disease and reproduction. This should come as no shock, as much of what we have learned about sexuality in SSA has been stimulated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The content of this knowledge – drawn primarily from quantitative data in the population and public health fields – has not remained unquestioned, however (see, for example, Watkins, 1993). In the words of Dixon-Mueller (1993: 270), ‘A visitor from another planet would be mystified about sexual behavior if she/he/it were to depend on demographic and family planning journals for information.’ While quantitative research (from survey to biomedical research, epidemiology to computer modeling) has offered undeniably useful portraits of sexuality in the region, by its very nature, it has at the same time employed a limited framework for examining sexuality as a social construct (Watkins, 1993; Dixon-Mueller, 1993; Ampofo, 2004; Poulin, 2005). Consequently, as Watkins (1993: 553) explains, ‘to a surprising degree, our research draws on what we take for granted about

women, men, and the relations between them in order to pose our research questions, to collect our data, and to interpret our results.’ She continues:

‘[O]ur theoretical frameworks are built on maintained hypotheses, the assumed stories we tell about human behavior that we do not test. These tell us not only what to ‘see,’ but also what to ignore’ (Watkins 1993: 567).

It would be erroneous to view quantitative approaches as ‘flawed,’ however. Demographers and public health practitioners, for instance, do not claim to study sexuality as a broad concept. Their interests are necessarily in specific aspects of sexuality that often have critical health outcomes for the populations concerned. But in the absence of sufficient research from other domains, the assumptions inherent in demographic / public health approaches lead to the formulation of limited theoretical framings that may constrain (and thereby distort) our understanding of, or what we know about, sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa. The assumptions have largely been that the motivation behind human sexuality is reproduction – which unwittingly obscures ‘alternative’ sexualities. While procreation is of importance in any culture (admittedly some less than others), an exclusive focus on issues such as the risk of pregnancy and disease oversimplifies the complex nature of sexuality, be it in SSA or elsewhere.

Another theme that has informed the conceptualization of sexuality in SSA has to do with violence, often in the form of female circumcision/excision, now commonly known (although not universally accepted) as female genital mutilation. The debates around this phenomenon are numerous, provoked initially by the potential harm that some forms of female circumcision hold for young girls and women. The need to protect female sexual rights in SSA, including the right to sexual pleasure, has also featured in these debates, as the practice of female circumcision in some societies had/has the aim of moderating the sensuality of women. But several recent interrogations of this matter have revealed the multifaceted nature of female circumcision and its meaning within practicing societies. What is clear from such studies is that the principle of female sexual pleasure can paradoxically exist in a context where female circum-

cision is meant to regulate women's sensuality (Diallo, 2004); that the motivations behind female circumcision sometimes have little to do with sexuality (Dellenborg, 2004); and that female circumcision can be desirable and voluntarily sought-after – indeed, perceived as 'beautiful' (Leonard, 2000), for instance.

In Diallo's (2004) description of societal dealings with female sexuality in Mali, practices that simultaneously hamper and enhance the sexuality of women are shown to co-exist. On the one hand, female circumcision is performed for a variety of reasons, including moderating women's level of eroticism. Conversely, nuptial advisors – whose job it is to train new brides, ensuring that have a pleasurable sex life – form an important part of wedding ceremonies, and continue to provide advice and instruction on sexual and reproductive health matters long after the wedding ceremony.

Dellenborg's findings regarding excision in southern Senegal demonstrate the spiritual motivations behind the practice in this particular milieu, often completely overlooked in common assumptions about the rationale for excision: 'The practice is carried out so that a girl can pray and be part of the women's secret society, to acquire the practical, theoretical, and corporeally 'magical' knowledge that essentially transforms the girl into a real person, into a human being of female gender' (Dellenborg 2004: 90-91).

Finally, in Leonard's (2000) argument for a plurality of accounts of female circumcision, she examines this practice in Mbayé, a village in southern Chad. Mbaye is a village in which female circumcision was not practiced historically, and in which young girls began to independently seek out circumcision (to the consternation of the chief of the village) in the 1980s. The reasons for this are not completely clear, but Leonard's data suggest that there might be several: young girls may perceive female circumcision as a mark of 'modernism,' they may simply be imitating their friends (those who do not get circumcised may be teased by their peers, and excluded from participating in certain dances), or may view the colorful ceremonies that now accompany the practice as highly desirable. As some Western scholars have indicated, the societal pressures that

perpetuate the practice of female circumcision may not be too far removed from pressures faced by some women in the West to undergo tattooing, plastic surgery, liposuction, and other potentially harmful practices which are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Western world (see, for instance, Gunning, 1992; Leonard, 2000).

The above examples give an indication of the diversity of experiences that exist around female circumcision. Clearly, the various aspects of sexuality are much more challenging to unravel than one might initially imagine.

The much-cited 'African sexuality' theory posited by Caldwell and colleagues (1989) was, in fact, driven by a desire to unravel or 'understand sub-Saharan African society and the role of sexual relations within it' (Caldwell *et al.*, 1989: 1). Their contention is that in Africa, morality (which they seem to equate with female chastity) and religion are tangential to sexual relations, which are, thus, characterized by a lack of guilt and a relatively higher level of commercial exchange⁸ than found in other societies. They conclude by linking this mentality, and the consequent patterns of sexual behavior, to a bleak future for SSA in the context of the AIDS pandemic. The essentialist⁹ approach and totalizing perspective reflected in the quest by Caldwell *et al.* for a

'distinct and internally coherent African system [of sexuality]' (*ibid.*, p. 187)

is one that has often been relied upon for engaging the concept of sexuality in African societies. The consequence of similar (essentialist) approaches, coupled with the HIV/AIDS scourge, has been the constriction of the discussion of sexuality in SSA to a few exclusive spheres. Referring to development discourses, for instance, Jolly (2003: 5) indicates that the latter have engaged sexuality by either overlooking it completely, or

⁸ The notion of 'commercial exchange' raises certain questions and is, thus, problematized on p. 14.

⁹ Essentialism may be defined as 'the perspective that reality exists independently of our perception of it, that we perceive the meaning of the world rather than construct that meaning. From this perspective, there are real and important (essential) differences among categories of people' (Rosenblum & Travis 2000: 1).

limiting it to the examination of '(over) population or disease and violence' (*ibid.*). Citing Gosine (1998), Jolly points to a

'racialization of sex' in both development discourse and western popular culture, where positive sensual and emotional aspects of sex are represented for white people in the north, but denied for people in the south where population and disease are taken to be the primary concerns' (*ibid.*)

Although not particularly well-received, the Caldwell article is a helpful point of departure for the conceptualization of models of sexuality in SSA that might be more befitting. Moreover, the many responses to this article (e.g.: Le Blanc *et al.*, 1991; Ahlberg, 1994; Heald, 1999; Arnfred, 2004), devoted to highlighting its theoretical gaps and weaknesses, are useful in granting us a fruitful starting point for theory-building around the subject of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa.

In this review, we deliberately de-amplify essentialist perspectives in order to redress some of the imbalance that exists in the literature. In the subsequent sections of this paper, we address various aspects of sexuality, using the WHO sexuality definition as our primary guide.

Gender identities and roles

The issue of gender identities and roles, one facet of sexuality, has been theorized and chronicled extensively from an African-centered viewpoint over the past two decades. Here again, in spite of the homogenizing around categories of men and women that is still prevalent in the literature, much has been written to demonstrate the complexities and contradictions in gender construction within many non-Western contexts (Lebeuf, 1963; Sacks, 1982; Mohanty, 1991; Amadiume, 1987; Pereira, 2003). Weedon (1999: 184) describes the conceptualization of gender in Western thought as a 'set of polarized binary oppositions' in which the privileged male is the normative standard against which the subordinate female is measured. But can this conceptual model be applied to the realities of all Africans across all spatial and time spans? To what extent can it be used to analyze cultural issues in sub-Saharan Africa? These questions have been raised and debated at great length – admittedly in some (e.g.:

indigenous West African) contexts much more than others. Evidence from Southeastern Nigeria, for example, indicates the dual nature of women's identities, encompassing that of a daughter and that of a wife, with the former remaining pre-eminent and occupying an undisputed place of privilege and power, unlike the latter¹⁰ (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Uchendu, 2003). Some matrilineal societies, such as can be found in Mozambique (see Arnfred, 2001; 2004), for instance, also ascribe an undeniable level of power to women. Indeed, hierarchical subordination may be seen as phenomenon from which no-one is exempt in some African societies. In her examination of the Igbo case, Nzegwu (2001: 15) notes that

[e]very social role and social interaction comes with both a subordinate and superordinate pole that is never constant. Not only are there no fixed or permanent locations of subordination, the subordinate/superordinate feature of roles ensures that no sex group or age group is collectively and permanently privileged or subordinate.

In Pereira's rebuttal to McFadden's (2003) treatise on the relationship between sexual pleasure and power, she cautions against McFadden's generalization that African women – regardless of the diversity of cultures within the continent, and in spite of age and class differences – are sexually repressed (Pereira 2003). While acknowledging that this may indeed be the case 'to some extent [for] many categories of women' (*ibid.*, p. 1), Pereira reminds us that the nuances of inconsistencies and convolutions that gender provokes in the African context should not be overlooked.

Sexual pleasure and intimacy

The very notion of sexual pleasure has faced critique in terms of whether it is a social or biological construct (see Okami & Pendleton, 1994). As many have noted, there is a paucity of engagement with concepts such as

¹⁰ It should be noted that the 'mother'/'wife' duality is also central to the arguments of Amadiume (1987) and Oyewumi (1997) in regard to women's identities.

sexual pleasure, the erotic, love, and desire in the literature. These phenomena are usually only referred to in a bid to bewail their glaring absence. Nonetheless, Moyer & Mbelwa (2003) unveil the hidden ways in which notions of sexuality, pleasure, and morality are framed in the Tanzanian context. Women in particular are noted for their innovative means of interlacing ideas of sexuality and pleasure into cloth design, music, and nuptial ceremonies, for example.

Spronk's (2005) findings among young female professionals in Nairobi, Kenya suggest that the quest for sexual pleasure became an increasingly important objective, as well as a significant 'modern' identity marker, shaping the lifestyles of the study participants', as they progressed in age. Sexual pleasure as an objective is also demonstrated in Brown *et al.*'s (1993) study of men and women in central Zaire, who both perceive a 'dry, tight' vagina as offering immense pleasure, with women going to great (and potentially hazardous) lengths to achieve this effect.

Nzegwu's (forthcoming) philosophical analysis of the indigenous Igbo conception of sexuality centers on

'uncover[ing] a range of formerly concealed practices as well as a subset of sexual behavior and sexual desire that is rooted in pleasure and the attainment of pleasure, and that are not necessarily tied to procreation' (p. 5).

The portrait that emerges from this analysis is a conception of sexuality that positively affirms women, with the vagina taking pre-eminence over the penis as a dominant sexual organ. Furthermore, eight¹¹ kinds of transmarital¹² relationships that occur in this indigenous context are delineated – three of which are rooted in sexual pleasure: it was/is not uncommon for women to develop transmarital relationships when, for work reasons, their spouses are obligatorily absent for long durations; when an aged spouse cannot fulfill his young wife's sexual needs; or in instances where 'there is a physical trait that a wife or the couple sees in some man

¹¹ Nzegwu is careful to note that the list of eight kinds of transmarital relationships she describes are not meant to be exhaustive.

¹² Defined by the author as 'a relationship that is not necessarily 'extra,' but transcends or goes beyond the marital union' (Nzegwu 2005; footnote 5).

and wants to bring into their conjugal unit' (*ibid.*, p 11)¹³. All other instances the author pinpoints as leading to transmarital relationships are rooted in reproductive concerns. In the article, female sexual autonomy emerges as a characteristic of sexuality within the Igbo cultural scheme.

Sex and money

The image presented by Nzegwu stands in stark contrast to much of the literature, which, with gender inequality featuring as a key contributor to the spread of HIV in SSA, has invariably focused on the poverty and vulnerability of women and young girls (Poulin, 2005). Studies abound on the need for African women and young girls, in particular, to have sex for money (rather than for pleasure or to establish intimacy) in order meet their basic needs (Maticka-Tyndale *et al.*, 2005; Mufune, 2003; Nzyuko *et al.*, 1997). This theme has particularly shaped our understanding of the sexuality of young people in SSA. There can be no argument with Poulin's (2005: 2) assertion that

[p]overty in sub-Saharan Africa is indeed gendered; women are poorer than men [although this does not necessarily apply across the board (see, for example, Silberschmidt, 1999, 2004)]

and their economic independence translates into various health consequences,' and that '[y]oung people are often considered to be at particularly grave risk.' There is, in fact, evidence to suggest that gift giving has an insidious impact on the sexual behavior and negotiation ability of girls, and, to a lesser degree, boys (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004), although, arguably, this problem is not pertinent to African societies alone. It may be argued that gift-giving (monetary or not) is usually valued and expected in relationships in most societies. Research in the African region, however, tends to ignore the normalcy of this practice and the possibility that it is not always necessarily linked to sexual favors. Helle-Valle's (2004) interrogation of the purported 'transactional sex' issue is both refreshing

¹³ See also Uchendu (1965) for a detailed description of this practice.

and informative, providing insight into perceived differences by some in 'the West' between 'Western' and 'African' sexuality. Says he:

Many Africanists with a 'Western' background, including myself, feel that there are significant differences between sexuality in 'the West' and in Africa. Perhaps it is not so much a question of African permissiveness, or people's preoccupation with it – we certainly find similar traits in certain social groups in 'the West.' The regional difference is maybe more a question of sexual mores than sexual practice. Perhaps the most significant difference is the Western strictness about sex and motivations: romantic love and/or personal pleasure (physical and psychological) are the 'proper' motives for engaging in sex, while strategic, materially oriented uses of sexuality are strictly tabooed – being forcefully embodied in our image of 'the prostitute' (*ibid.*, pp. 205-206).

But Poulin (2005) goes beyond the reality of poverty constraints and risk behavior issues to examine the social meaning of monetary exchange in the sexual encounters of young people in Malawi. What emerges is a highly nuanced picture in which money transfers, seen as both symbolically meaningful and instrumental, take place in emotionally-committed relationships. Furthermore, the sexual autonomy of young Malawian girls at different phases of their intimate relationships is unveiled. Spronk (2005: 273) provides a similar interpretation of relationships in urban Kenya. Her perspective about the receipt of gifts by young women in sexual relationships is summarized as follows: 'This should not be interpreted as material reciprocity, instead appreciation was symbolized materially. Since women learn that men are financial providers, notions regarding a loving and supportive boyfriend are partly defined by financial support.'

Although much of the literature alerts us to the fact that the sexual encounters of young people in SSA occur in risky contexts (e.g.: Izugbara, 2001; Arowojolu *et al.*, 2002; Erulkar, 2004), there are some emerging studies which, while addressing risk, also center on the primacy of intimacy in young people's construction of sexuality. Notably, there is a paucity of similar research on older adults in SSA.

Issues of modernity

Smith (2000) describes Igbo adolescent and young adult sexuality as more distant from biological and social reproduction today than it was in the past. Nevertheless, reticence toward contraceptive (mainly condom) use in this context is paradoxically rooted in social reproduction concerns:

‘Though few young people actually desire a premarital pregnancy, conscious efforts to block fertility are often viewed as undermining trust and intimacy that is ultimately measured in a willingness to procreate together’ (*ibid.*, p. 116; see Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; and Parikh, 2004, for similar sentiments).

Thus, while sexual intimacy and romance are seen by young people in this setting as a means of creating a desirable ‘modern’ identity, these concepts are simultaneously in competition with more ‘traditional’ models of sexuality received from parents.

In a similar vein, Parikh (2003) highlights the gendered ways in which love letters are used to establish and negotiate intimate relationships between Ugandan youth. Young people are shown to express their intimate emotions through letters written in a highly sophisticated manner. The emerging sexual identities evident in these letters are clearly informed by popular culture and the ubiquitous public health discourse in Uganda. The exigency of reproductive concerns, such as HIV/AIDS, which has provoked this discourse, has also paradoxically heightened a sense of shame and secrecy surrounding the sexual exploration of youth. The unfortunate consequence, similar to Smith’s (2000) description of the Igbo case, is a widened gap between authoritative adults and youth during their critical period of sexual maturation.

But gaps between elders and young people should not be construed as a total rift between generations. For instance, despite the conflict between their desired ‘modern’ forms of sexuality and the expectations of elders regarding marriage and childbearing, Igbo youth appear to simultaneously support these exigencies (Smith, 2000). In her examination of the childbearing views of Guinean women across the life course, Levin (2000) observes an intergenerational consensus regarding reasons for

emerging childbearing patterns. Importantly, the Foucauldian perspective regarding the intersection of sexuality, knowledge, and power in the West is not completely validated by African examples (Renne 2000). The subtle negotiation evident in the senior/junior relations described above is not accounted for in Foucault's (1978) history of sexuality in the West. In Renne's words, 'there is common ground as well as conflict between elders and juniors, and women and men in matters relating to sexuality. It is through careful ethnographic studies ... that the ambiguities of inter-generational and gendered relationships associated with sexuality, past and present, may be more deeply understood' (Renne 2000: xi-xii).

Sex initiation rites

Evidence of indigenous mechanisms for the transmission of sexual education exists in various SSA contexts (Richards, 1956; Ahlberg, 1994; Tumbo-Masabo & Liljestrom, 1994; Mufune, 2003; Blankson Ikpe, 2004). Elders are cited as playing/having played prominent roles in the regulation of young people's sexuality. Changes in the political economy, however, have led to shifts in the moral authority of elders in SSA (Renne, 2000). This phenomenon has had its impact on the sexual behavior of young people, as well as on their socialization process in the realm of sexuality. In earlier times, initiation rites often served as the medium for conveying sexual information, seen as important for the transition to adulthood. Although there is evidence that some of these rites continue (often in a modified form), others are no longer in existence.

Recently, much of the literature devoted to sex initiation rites in SSA has focused on the experiences of females. This is, perhaps, due to a seemingly pervasive interest in more recent times, in the extent of reproductive health knowledge generated by these rites. Historically, female sex initiation rites have also been of interest to researchers. Raum (1939), for instance, describes initiation among Chaga girls of Tanzania as being closely determined by individual sexual maturation, and therefore more private, unlike the case of boys, whose initiation ceremonies are public, communal affairs. According to Raum, female initiation in Chaga society

involves a night devoted to instruction in sexual matters. The importance of, and societal rewards for, virginity and propriety are stressed by a teacher of female initiates. Nonetheless, other secrets of sexual life shared by the teacher, such as the option of intrafemoral intercourse (or 'thigh' sex) and traditional contraceptive measures, indicate that there is room for compromise regarding this ideal.

Van de Walle & Franklin (1996) suggest that sex initiation rites among the Kaguru, also of Tanzania, involve instruction in the form of sex act miming and linking intercourse with pregnancy, coupled with socialization into wifehood roles. But in her study on the Shinyanga region of Tanzania, Roth Allen's (2000) findings indicate that structured puberty initiation rituals were not necessarily common to all Tanzanian contexts. Roth Allen suggests that in the Shinyanga region, these rituals have no history of pervasiveness. Rather, young women in this part of Tanzania have continued to learn about sexuality in a non-uniform manner, through informal networks with one another and trial and error. These studies (among others) conducted in one East African country give an indication of the kind of diversity dealt with in African settings, where even initiation rituals within the same region may not necessarily be described as ethnically specific (Roth Allen, 2000).

There are other contexts in which sexuality information was passed down in a more practical manner. Ahlberg (1994: 230), for example, describes sex initiation in the indigenous Kikuyu setting, saying,

'[I]nstead of lectures, individuals are presented with concrete situations which serve as a case for ethical analysis of themselves and others.'

Male and female initiates were given an opportunity to sleep together provided sexual penetration was not achieved. To ensure this, girls were required to tie a cloth between their thighs, and several couples slept together in a common room, acting as regulators for the proper sexual behavior of one another. This education was also supplemented with instruction that socialized initiates into community values and expectations for adult conduct. Importantly, Ahlberg notes the public, collective nature in which sexuality was addressed during initiation and ritual ceremonies, creating a public discourse around sexuality which stands in stark

contrast to the silence surrounding the subject among the Kikuyu in contemporary times.

An account of the unique form of initiation practiced among the Rukuba of Nigeria is provided by Muller (1972). This phenomenon, like others previously described, involves instruction as to community values and proper behavior. In addition, sexual instruction is provided via a pregnant woman (to whom the initiate is joined in a ritual marriage) who must eventually give birth to a live child for the initiation process to be complete. This male initiate may be aged anywhere from 4 to 14 years of age. Muller explains that

although being so small at the time of the initiation, many Rukuba men later recall with laughter the one night spent with the pregnant woman. They insist on their bewilderment and inability to cope with the situation, the initiate resting with the woman who, apparently, means business however small the initiand might be (Muller 1972: 294).

As Muller interprets it, the symbolism of the husband and father roles that this ceremony evokes are a necessity in the Rukuba culture, ensuring that the initiate (now a ‘husband’ and ‘father’ in the ritual sense) can now technically entertain premarital sexual encounters. In Muller’s words,

After everything is in order, i.e., after [the initiate] is already a father and a husband, then and only then can he have his reward: sitting at home without the trouble of marriage and children, enjoying the pleasant company of his girl-friend. This state of affairs is however, alas, a heresy which has to be neutralized by setting things to rights in a symbolic way *before the sin is committed*.¹⁴ So Rukuba initiation states bluntly that in this world social duty¹⁵ (here

¹⁴ The ‘sin’ referred to here is that of premarital pregnancy as a consequence of premarital sex. As Muller explains, in times past, this would result in abortion or infanticide, illegitimate children being regarded as a ‘bad’ thing. Interestingly, premarital sexual relationships were institutionalized, but pregnancy as a result of them was considered reprehensible.

¹⁵ This assertion concerning social duty is reminiscent of Uchendu’s (1965: 193) description of the Igbo case in which ‘family’-orientedness (as opposed to mere spousal orientation) is seen as a critical social goal through which sexual behavior may be understood. Thus, ‘[t]here is no emphasis among the Igbo on sexual services being exclusive and confined to husband and wife. All that the culture demands is that sex be institutionalized.’ And so institutionalized it is – within the confines of marriage and concubinage (through which husbands, wives, and the unmarried alike may

fulfilled, albeit minimally, by ritual marriage and symbolic fatherhood) must in some sense precede unmitigated pleasure (Muller 1972: 295).

In contemporary times, it is common for young people in SSA to obtain their sexuality information from the media (Smith, 2000), government school teachers (Stewart, 2000; Prazak, 2000), health workers (Stewart, 2000), and from their peers (Roth Allen, 2000), for example. While this gulf between generations has raised calls for the revitalization of indigenous forms of sex education (e.g. Ahlberg, 1994), Roth Allen's (2000) study of the Shinyanga region of Tanzania gives us pause, reminding us that formal instruction about the facts of life was not necessarily a universal practice in indigenous societies. Moreover, as Arnfred (2004) points out, the dynamic nature of customs necessitates their continual location in present-day realities.

Sexuality and religion

The rituals described thus far in this paper (particularly around sex initiation rites) are invariably embedded in the indigenous African religions concerned. Thus, separating traditional rites from religion in SSA contexts poses a challenge. In contemporary times, however, the intersection between religion (primarily Christianity) and sexuality has been documented. It is noteworthy that this documentation tends to occur, again, in the contexts of risk and disease. For instance, Smith's (2004) study of young migrants in Nigeria demonstrates the profound effect that evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity has upon the young people, shaping their perceptions of HIV/AIDS risk in ways that expose them to potential harm. The study suggests that moralistic understandings of sexuality and the AIDS pandemic hold dangers of their own:

On the one hand, relationships are legitimized as risk-free and decisions not to use condoms are rationalized, for example, 'both my partner and I are moral and Christian, therefore we are protected.' On the other hand, behavior that flouts shared religious moralities is thought about as sin (rather than in terms

enjoy non-marital relationships), with sex outside of these institutions being categorized as 'prostitution.'

of health risk) and dealt with through denial. Among young people who are sexually active, religious interpretations of the disease and moral assessments of personal sexual behavior create obstacles to accurately evaluating risk for both those in 'moral partnerships' and those participating in more stigmatized sexual relationships. Christianity provides explanations for who is at risk and who is not, creating contexts where individuals ignore or deny their own risk (Smith 2004: 433).

Conversely, religious commitment has been shown to delay sexual debuts among young South Africans, and to moderate the tendency to engage in sexual intercourse (Nicholas & Durrheim, 1995). Furthermore, Garner's (2000) South African-based study of members of various Christian church types suggests that Pentecostal church affiliation alone diminishes pre- and extra-marital sex levels, through seemingly stringent cultural practices.

Where Islam is concerned, Imam (1997) alerts us to the dangers of the endemic essentializing of Muslim peoples and societies across time and space, and the consequent implications for the understanding of sexuality in Muslim contexts. Outlining the plurality of experiences in Muslim settings across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Imam notes, for example, that unremarkable phenomena in Nigerian Muslim communities, such as divorce and polygyny, are cause for humiliation in India and Bangladesh. The seclusion of women ubiquitously practiced in Bangladesh and northern Nigeria, for instance, is almost non-existent in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and the Gambia.

In her discussion of the Muslim discourses of sexuality, Imam (1997: 3) explains:

There is a dominant discourse and stereotype about 'Islamic sexuality' which presents Muslim women as always both submissive to and tightly controlled by men who have the capacity to marry four wives. Sexuality in this discourse is, of itself, neither good nor bad, but an elemental and natural force that should however be suitably channelled in society. Both men's and women's sexuality are seen as naturally active, and while men's arousal pattern is faster, 'foreplay' is enjoined as a religious duty on men as women also have a desire for and right to sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Women are thought to have a greater potential for sexual desire and pleasure, nine times that of men. However, it is women's passive exudation of sexuality to which men are vulnerable which provokes men who then deliberately arouse and fulfil desire in women. Thus women's sexuality is seen as naturally both greater and more passive than that of men. The idea of natural sexuality here is not solely reproductive,

but it is definitely heterosexual with masturbation, homosexuality and bestiality condemned as unnatural.

On the other hand, the author describes Muslim religious right discourses as typically centering on female sexuality as a root cause of immorality.

Discourses are dynamic, however, and as sexual discourses change, their effect upon the sexuality of men and women will continue to evolve. Imam (*ibid.*), for instance, explains how, over time, institutionalized pre-marital sex play (reminiscent of what Ahlberg (1994) describes concerning the Kikuyu) among Hausa Muslims has come to be regarded as unislamic.

Sexuality and the political economy

Economic and political processes clearly have their effect on sexuality in different locales. Changes in the economy can lead to an increased commodification of sexuality, while political realms or regimes regulate the expression of sexuality (Altman, 1999).

Foucault's (1978) stance that 'the state (or state institutions) controls individuals through the production of scientific knowledge about individual subjects who, incorporating this knowledge about themselves, perpetuate this form of power' (Renne 2000: xi) is well-noted. Renne (2000), however, postulates that the economic constraints of many SSA states have often posed a challenge for their wielding the kind of power Foucault describes (see also Vaughan, 1991). But economic power (or the lack thereof) may not be as all-encompassing a constraint in SSA as Renne would have us believe. African states have been known to control the media and, thus, the information available to citizens (Makungu, 2004). As Kipps (n.d.) notes, 'The African states' relationship with media, and particularly independent media, has always been an uneasy one.' Sexuality-related information or discourse can, thus, potentially be restricted. The 'Vagina Monologues', for instance, inspired by U.S. playwright, Eve Ensler, was banned by the media council arm of Uganda's government (Sheikh, 2005). The play is said to celebrate women's sexu-

ality, examining the joys and pitfalls of the latter. The Ugandan government's resistance to having it performed lay in the play's

'glorifying what [the government] describes as unnatural sex – masturbation, lesbianism and homosexuality' (*ibid.*).

This issue is reminiscent of Gatter's (2001) work on global theories and sexuality. Drawing on Altman's (1999) political economy perspective, he underscores globalization's influence on economic, political, and cultural factors, and, consequently, on contemporary sexualities. In Altman's words:

[I]t is clear that globalization impacts on sexuality in all three ways. Economic changes mean that sexuality is increasingly commodified, whether through advertising or prostitution ... Cultural changes mean that certain ideas about behaviour and identity are widely dispersed, so that new ways of understanding oneself became available that often conflict bitterly with traditional mores ... And the political realm will determine what forms are available for sexual expression, so that there is a far more overt 'gay' world in Manila than in Singapore, despite the considerable gap in wealth, in part because of different political regimes (*ibid.*, p. 563).

Like Altman, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TNGP) also takes a political economy stance on sexuality and its discontents – specifically, the reproductive health concern of HIV/AIDS in the African region. While the norm has been to address HIV/AIDS in Africa as a problem solely related to individual sexual practices ('promiscuous sex with many partners, sex with someone already infected, sex without the use of a condom' (TGNP 2004: 1)), TGNP's (2004) work draws our attention to the linkages between a glaring lack of basic resources (brought on by imperial and global capitalist structures) and the rapid spread of the disease. In the light of these often-ignored realities, the conceptual framings that shape the conventional, exclusive focus on sexual behavior change as the solution to the AIDS pandemic become overly simplistic at best.

Sexuality and the legal system

The legal system's impact upon sexuality in SSA cannot be overlooked. Like the political sphere, the legal domain plays a significant role in shaping the sexuality of men and women. In her reconstruction of the history of Kenya's short-lived Affiliation Act, for instance, Thomas (2000) examines how struggles over sexuality and fertility in postcolonial Kenya, were actually reflected contests over changing gender and generational relations, as well as over material concerns. Passed in 1959, the Affiliation Act was a law that sought to address the issue of illegitimacy by guaranteeing the right of single women to paternity support.

As single mothers in Kenya (some, along with their families) began to benefit from this law, the elimination of the Act became the goal of many men, who were obligated to pay high financial costs for the upkeep of their children born out of wedlock. By employing a rhetorical strategy pitting the 'traditional' against the 'modern' and the 'customary' against the 'civil,' politicians, officials, and citizens alike, preserved men's privileged legal position, to the disempowerment of women via the law. By 1969, Kenya's Affiliation Act was finally repealed.

Since 1999, there have been efforts in some Nigerian states to extend Islamic (or 'Sharia') laws beyond their conventional boundaries of family and personal status law. This reform has had grim legal implications for Nigerian women. Where extra-marital pregnancy is concerned, for instance, some schools of Muslim thought see this state as an adequate confirmation of adultery. Thus, according to Imam (in HRD, 2003),

[W]omen are being held to a different standard of evidence in having to prove their innocence instead of the state proving their guilt. In defense of this patent unfairness, Islamist conservatives have tried to argue that stoning to death for adultery is divine punishment. That's not true: the Qur'an does not mention stoning for adultery. Indeed, the Qur'an has a verse that refers to adulterous women and men marrying each other—clearly impossible if they were dead!

The plight of Amina Lawal comes to mind here. Originally sentenced to death by stoning in Nigeria in 2002 for bearing a child out of wedlock (a recent amendment to the Sharia law), the young Muslim divorcee's fate was overturned on the technicality that she conceived before the modifi-

cation of the law. This process gives weight to Ewelukwa's (2003) argument that a myriad of avenues – including training for judges, social reform, and basic, empowering education for girls – must be pursued alongside the court system if the war of violence against African women is to be won.

The constraining of sexual expression in the SSA context is further exemplified by Tamale's (2003) treatise on homosexuality in contemporary Uganda. Like many African countries, homosexuality in the Ugandan legal sphere is a criminal offense, punishable by a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Gay and lesbian organizations in Uganda tend to maintain a low profile for this reason. Tamale points out (*ibid.*, p. 2) that references to same-sex relations between women are noticeably absent from the Ugandan Penal Code – indicative, perhaps, of a 'dominant phallocentric culture,' but also reminiscent (and, conceivably, reflective) of Kendall's (1998) 'no penis, no sex' theory.¹⁶

'Alternative' sexualities

The term 'alternative sexualities'¹⁷ as it is used in the literature refers to the various forms of sexuality that are not strictly heterosexual. There has been much debate over the very existence of 'alternative' sexualities on the African continent (often addressed in the literature as same-sex sexuality in this context). Consequently, studies have been carried out with the aim of demonstrating that non-heterosexuality is far from a Western import (e.g.: Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Declarations to the contrary by some

¹⁶ This theory is discussed further on pg. 28 of the present paper.

¹⁷ C.O. Izugbara (personal communication, May 4, 2005) has highlighted the problematic legitimacy which the label 'alternative' grants to heteronormativity. The challenges associated with the inadequate language for talking about sexuality are brought to light by this example, and are addressed later in this paper. For the purposes of simplicity, however, we have chosen to use this prevalent term here, albeit with the inclusion of quotes for the word 'alternative' as an acknowledgement of the problems the expression evokes.

African heads of state have sparked further interest in this subject, provoking a number of studies examining the accuracy of these assertions.

Murray and Roscoe's (1998) seminal inventory of same-sex patterns in Africa concludes by contrasting these patterns with those that dominate the Western model of homosexuality, highlighting a fundamental difference:

[T]he dominant Western model of homosexuality ... defines individuals solely on the basis of sexual object choice. In Africa, however, heterosexual marriage and procreation – but not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation, or monogamy – are universal expectations ... In contrast to the homophobia Western homosexuals confront, the social pressure on Africans who desire same-sex relations is not concerned with their masculinity or femininity, their mental health, their sexual object preference and its causes, or the moral status of their preference – but primarily with their production of children, especially eligible heirs, and the maintenance of a conventional image of married life (Murray & Roscoe, 1998, pp. 272-273).

The authors note the politically bankrupt nature of this 'African' model, which, while preventing stigmatization, simultaneously hampers the construction of homosexual identity and subculture. Yet, it is increasingly clear that in our contemporary African societies, non-heterosexuality as an identity is a fact (Tamale 2003), albeit one that many African scholars appear reticent about addressing. The reasons behind this seeming reservation may have more to do with a resistance of the imposition of Western categories and 'naming' (see, for example, Oyewumi's (2003) argument regarding the 'culture of misrepresentation,' or Ajen (1998)) than with a mere denial of reality. For instance, 'woman marriages', a non-sexual institution in African societies, have been misinterpreted and labeled lesbian relationships (see Lorde, 1983). Some interpretations of close female friendships among the Efik/Ibibio as non-heterosexuality have been refuted by African scholars (see, for example, Amadiume, 1987; Blankson Ikpe, 2004). Blankson Ikpe, a culture-bearer of the region in question makes the following observation:

[B]onding between same sex as close friends should not be confused with homosexuality or lesbianism. Douglas seemed to have made that mistake when she assessed the oral evidence collected by Lorde from an Efik-Ibibio woman as a confession to lesbianism. According to the woman: *'I had a woman friend to whom I revealed my secrets. She was very fond of keeping secrets to herself.*

We acted as husband and wife. We always moved hand in glove and my husband and hers knew about our relationship. The villagers nicknamed us twin sisters (Lorde 1984: 49-50, quoted in Douglas 1999: 99). To a European a confession of going hand in glove and acting as husband and wife is a clear indication of lesbianism. But this sort of behaviour is normal in these parts between 'bosom friends.' Although there is an expression of love it does not necessarily connote sex. Indeed if they were engaged in lesbianism, the villagers would have found another name for them instead of 'twin sisters' (Blankson Ikpe, 2004: 29-30)!

Kendall's (1998) description of what would qualify as same-sex sexuality under the Western gaze, is thoughtfully interpreted as non-sexual from the emic perspective. Her investigation takes place among Basotho women of Lesotho in southern Africa. The author describes the intimate, erotic relationships enjoyed amongst women without any illusion of these liaisons being sexual. In other words, within this Lesotho context, 'sex' in the absence of a male organ is regarded as a misnomer. It is noteworthy that these relationships do not serve as an alternative to marriage. Rather, they appear to complement the marital relationships of Basotho women. It is, perhaps, the privileging of inapplicable epistemic standpoints to the neglect of context-specific, African conceptual schemes, that provokes the silence of African scholars (Mama, 1996).

Herdt's (1987) research on same-sex behaviors among the Sambia of New Guinea, gives further insight into some of the complexities and contradictions of non-heterosexuality found in various sub-Saharan African contexts. He, in fact, deliberately neglects to employ the term 'homosexual' in his review of this ritualized same-sex behavior among the Sambia of New Guinea (Okami & Pendleton, 1994), pointing out the potential the term has for misrepresenting what actually obtains in this particular culture. During initiation ceremonies customarily performed for Sambian boys, the latter are required to fellate older men, as the ingestion of semen is considered critical for the major transition to adulthood. Rather than universalize the experience of the Sambia in this context of ritual as 'homosexuality,' or divorce it completely from Western notions of the same, Herdt defines same sex-behaviors in the Sambia context as 'the fusing of a set of desires with an emphasis on growth and socialization of the young, a practice distinct to time and place' (*ibid.*, p. 90),

leaving room for comparison of this phenomenon with other cultures, provided cognizance of the limitations of such comparisons is maintained:

Because this behavior, founded as it is on the belief that insemination is essential for the boy's sexual growth and passage into adulthood and heterosexual marriage, emphasizes symbolic or biological reproduction, use of the term 'homosexual' to describe it may distort the meaning of the term as a categorical construct. Nevertheless, ... pleasure, lewdness, and lasciviousness are also involved in this ritual (*ibid.*).

Similarly, Gatter (2000: 8) points out that

[w]hat the African examples [of same-sex sexuality] lack is an identity and lifestyle in which homosexual relationships are primary and *not* based on gender difference. In other words, the African systems do not define people solely on the basis of sexual object choice. They do, however, universally expect heterosexual marriage and procreation, though not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation or monogamy.

Questioning the centrality of sexual orientation to African models, he concludes by suggesting the de-centering this phenomenon as an organizing concept.

Nevertheless, the debates around sexual orientation in SSA are far from over. The emergence of a distinct non-heterosexual identity in contemporary African societies cannot be ignored. Research on homosexuality in Uganda (Tamale, 2003) and Kenya (Onyango-Ouma *et al.*, 2005) suggests that self-identifying homosexuals, or men who have sex with men (MSM) are often compelled to hide behind heterosexual relationships in order to avoid discrimination. But as S. Arnfred (personal communication, May 4, 2005) proposes, marriage in the MSM context may not always necessarily be a cover-up. The possibility that some MSM may develop and maintain marital relationships because they simply want to and, perhaps, enjoy being in both kinds of relationships simultaneously should not be ignored. Nonetheless, the assertion of a non-heterosexual identity appears to be taking on increasing importance in SSA. For instance, the large majority of the MSM interviewed in Onyango-Ouma *et al.*'s (2005) study, identified themselves as either 'gay,' 'homosexual,' or

‘bisexual.’ Whether the increasing importance of identity is due to external influences, as Gatter (2000) suggests,¹⁸ remains debatable. Homosexuals in Tamale’s (2003) study, many of whom are described as having minimal exposure to external influences, are also described as proud of their ‘straight *kuchu*’ identity, and as regarding bisexuals as ‘sell-outs’ of sorts.

Interestingly, Kendall suggests that the lack of a distinct identity – and, indeed, of a distinct homosexual category – serves as a protective factor for Basotho women’s same-sex relationships. Since lesbianism is not a social construct in the Basotho society, ‘it’ is neither pathologized, nor stigmatized. Says she:

The freedom, enjoyment, and mutual respect of Basotho women’s ways of loving each other, occurring in a context in which what women do together is not defined as ‘sexual,’ suggests a need to look freshly at the way Western constructions of sexuality and of homophobia are used to limit and oppress women. Having a (sexualized) ‘lesbian option’ may not be as liberating as many of us have thought (Kendall, 1998: 241).

Sexuality and language

Clearly, the issue of language is one that needs to be taken into account in investigations of sexuality. Manderson goes so far as to assert that ‘sexu-

¹⁸ According to Gatter (2001: 6), ‘Sexuality became a theme within globalization theory largely because of AIDS. Here was an epidemic of global proportions which linked infection (largely) with sexual behaviour. Many of the influential early campaigns for prevention and care, in the West, developed via community based groups often premised on shared

sexual identification (the epidemic was first noticed in gay men in San Francisco and New York - subsequent AIDS services and activism in America and Europe have retained large contributions by gay men and lesbians). Experience from the West has been taken up in sexual health campaigning elsewhere in the world, whether under the aegis of governments or donor AID programmes. Members of Western sexual minorities have been involved in these campaigns in non-Western countries. They have taken with them their own concerns and identities, which some analysts

now clearly see as contributing to the process of globalizing identities.’

ality is primarily a linguistic problem' (in Okami & Pendleton, 1994: 88). This contention finds echoes in Leclerc-Madlala's reflexive discussion regarding the limited linguistic repertoire for engaging sexuality in SSA. As she puts it:

'[W]e are greatly hampered by limited and inappropriate vocabulary that is the product of Victorian-era sexology' (Leclerc-Madlala 2004: 6).

While Manderson points to the importance of factoring the question of 'who' employs certain lexical items and 'how' they do so into our assessment of the meaning and effects of these items, Leclerc-Madlala calls specifically for African-centered conceptual frames to enhance our understanding of sexuality in SSA, as well as to ensure that we remain culturally sensitive.

Furthermore, while the literature gives an indication of how 'Others' label or 'name' sex and sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, far less attention has been given to how Africans themselves talk about these issues. Moto (2004) does suggest that the Malawian society relies on indirect expressions, euphemisms, and idioms to talk about sex and HIV/AIDS. Regarding male and female genitalia specifically, Machera's (2004) findings in the urban Kenyan context are similar (see also Diallo (2004), for the Malian case). Her findings actually go further to suggest that while feelings of 'shame' are associated with verbal references to the vagina, this is much less so when the penis is discussed. The need for positive discourses around on women's sexual desire, who were noted to have rarely expressed their desire for, or enjoyment of, sexuality, is underscored by Shefer & Foster's (2001) South African-based study. Prazak (2000) notes connections between older men's notions of masculinity in rural Kenya's Kuria District and the view that sex should simply not be discussed. A clearer sense of what these findings really mean, in the diverse societies of SSA, is needed.

Conclusions

Gatter (2000: 7) calls our attention to the gap that arises in our understanding of sexuality as a result of having either 'rather unanchored theoretical accounts [of sexuality]' or 'detailed [ethnographic] description which isn't really theorized.' Although his ensuing argument centers specifically on globalization and sexuality, we find it useful for our purposes here. According to Gatter (*ibid.*, p. 9), 'Theories which assume homogenization ... are not borne out by empirical observation.' Based on our review, we come to the same conclusion regarding theories of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa. We nonetheless acknowledge (and, indeed, underscore) the critical need to enhance (rather than 'move beyond') theory and the accumulation of ethnographic accounts with action and concerted efforts to address the perpetual improvement of sexuality-related well-being in SSA. In our deconstruction of various sexuality concepts, it is critical not to ignore or oversimplify real, concrete problems pertinent to the sub-Saharan African region. We conclude this review by highlighting this important point. Issues such as gender-based violence (notably an under-researched area (Erulkar, 2004)), women's disadvantaged economic position, and reproductive health concerns are very real in different SSA contexts. Resistance to essentializing views should not constitute an impediment to rigorous research into these areas. A major criticism of the social constructionism and its variants is, in fact, their often politically bankrupt response to critical issues (Weedon, 1999).

That young women in SSA are especially vulnerable to HIV infection seems clear (Jungar & Oinas, 2004). That there are manifestations of gender-based violence in the region is apparent (an entire issue of *Sexuality in Africa Magazine* was recently (2004) devoted to this issue; see also Tamale, 1992; Amoakohene, 2004). That strong male involvement in sexual and reproductive health matters would benefit both men and women is logical. Balancing these facts against the more positive realities of sexuality, which are equally a part of the SSA experience, is our challenge.

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