

Editorial: Sexual cultures

Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira and
Takyiwaa Manuh



Welcome to *Feminist Africa's* thematic focus on sexualities. This issue provides us with the opportunity to continue some of the debates initiated by Patricia MacFadden, Charmaine Pereira and Sylvia Tamale in an earlier issue (see *Feminist Africa* 2). In keeping with *Feminist Africa's* intellectual development agenda, the present issue also provides a platform for new research carried out by leading African feminist thinkers. The three feature articles present thought-provoking material drawn from the Mapping Sexualities Research Project. This is possibly the first project in the transnational field of sexuality research to have been carried out by African researchers rooted in feminist praxis.¹ Through this new knowledge, we provide ourselves with the opportunity to deepen and further inform the ongoing debates and struggles around various aspects of sexuality.

Much of the literature available on the global market addresses African sexuality by proxy – in terms of grand theorisations of race and imperialism, colonial histories of regulation and population control, or in terms of the negative effects of various violent and abusive practices. In the last decade, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has generated much biomedical and epidemiological research that is largely inattentive to socio-cultural contexts and political economies of sexuality, not to mention the agency and interests of people whose sexual practices are now targeted for study. The fact that we have such limited academic and analytical knowledge about sexuality, a pivotal aspect of social organisation at all levels, provides a powerful motivation for future research to be carried out by African scholars, and to be carried out in new ways that are both transformed and transformative.

This imperative is all the more pressing in view of the sudden surge of interest in the study of sexualities. Realistically, this new international interest is more likely the result of the high costs of the HIV/AIDS pandemic than a reflection of the achievement of global feminist struggles in the arena of sexuality,



significant though these may have been. Externally conceptualised knowledges about African sexuality often treat the subject in a manner that is simultaneously decontextualised and depoliticised. The results offer little in the way of advancing the work of women's movements, or the ways in which our concerns are taken up in local, regional and global policy-making institutions.

Debates among feminists on the changing character of women's activism and its relations to the state, non-governmental organisations and the transnational arena are outlined in Amrita Basu's standpoint piece. She draws attention to the advances to contemporary feminist thinking represented by the insightful contributions by Shireen Hassim and Elaine Salo in *Feminist Africa* 4. While not addressing sexuality directly, this discussion nevertheless draws attention to the intimate connection in feminist praxis between knowledge production and activism.

Women's movements organising around issues of sexuality have recorded some successes with respect to legal reforms and service provision in the realms of sexual health and reproductive rights, anti-violence movements, and movements against various traditional rites and practices. Yet we now find ourselves at a moment in which the gains of the last decades are currently in danger of being set back by the dominant political agendas of our time. The doctrinaire and militaristic global politics fomented by the Bush regime are characterised by such deep sexual conservatism that the prospects for any kind of sexual democracy once again look thin. For example, the US government's withdrawal from the Global Aids Fund and its specific prohibition against using the funds it contributes for condom distribution puts women at risk once again, as abstinence alone cannot protect them from HIV/AIDS or STDs.

The echoes of this global regime resonate in the renewed policing of women's bodies by quite disparate regimes, from Mogadiscio to Harare. This diversity of repressions can be seen within a single nation as well. In the month of October 2005, the women's movement in Nigeria was simultaneously engaged with different kinds of struggle across the country: the application of Sharia in northern states; officials advocating virginity tests as a precondition for scholarships in the south-west; and six teenagers sentenced to flogging for "lesbianism" in the Delta.

It is in this context that we need to retain a critical stance with regard to the agendas of the new interest in African sexualities. What does it mean when leading donors who have reduced their support for gender and women's studies and activism, now shift their focus to work on sexuality? What does the new



saliency of masculinity studies mean for feminism in Africa and the Caribbean, or in South Africa, where it is driven by white male scholars ostensibly influenced by feminism – or possibly a sense of being “endangered” now that apartheid has formally ended? Contemporary research agendas are worthy of analysis – they do not at this stage appear to be fixed or coherent.

This presents us with an opportunity to intervene constructively in the realm of sexuality, the dynamics of which permeate all our social, political and economic institutions. Ultimately, the effects reach very deeply into our daily lives, subjectivities and relationships. Even when sexuality is not a specific focus, it surfaces in the work of feminist researchers and teachers in complex ways, as Tamara Shefer and Judy Aulette point out in their reflections on a colloquium celebrating ten years of Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

Over the last decade, leading South African and Western feminists have produced important texts that subject dominant paradigms to critical social historical analysis (see, for example, Bradford, 1991; Vaughan, 1991; Klausen, 2004). More recently, at least one edited collection has set out to address the deficit in research on contemporary African sexualities (Arnfred, 2004).

To date, African scholarship has been slow to take sexuality research seriously. The realities of economic, political and social underdevelopment and cultural conservatism have yielded extreme injustices and socio-economic inequalities that amplify the machinations of power displayed in the daily exercise of political authority and class privilege. That this daily exercise of power is imbued with sexual dynamics is well known, yet it remains untheorised even as our sexual cultures continue to be configured in complex and contradictory ways. Furthermore, the sexual politics and practices of the academic community, and the institutional and intellectual cultures of our schools and universities, remain deeply problematic and unequalitarian. As a result, sexuality research in Africa has yet to respond to the agendas that emerge out of the oppressions of women, rooted as these are in sexual cultures, and to the history of African feminist struggles around sexual politics.

In this context, it seems fair to assume that an agenda for sexuality studies grounded in African perspectives and intellectual politics would not only require different concepts and methodologies, but would also generate quite different kinds of knowledge. Studies pursuing this agenda would need to be historically grounded in a thorough understanding of local contexts, and to adopt transdisciplinary methodologies that combine cultural and materialist



analysis. The research project that gave rise to these articles was initially conceptualised during the deliberations of a teaching group convened to develop a core curriculum and teaching resources suited to African contexts. Teaching about sexuality was unanimously identified as a key strategic priority for African gender studies, but here we found our efforts somewhat confounded by the dearth of locally generated knowledge in the field. Hence the Mapping Sexualities Project, which brought together a small group of local feminist researchers, who set out to study sexuality in selected African settings. They addressed this challenge by developing a locally grounded feminist epistemological approach, one that would build on earlier critiques of hegemonic academic and policy discourses.²



The three features in this issue are excerpted from detailed local studies that document, analyse and theorise contemporary sexual cultures in selected urban and rural contexts. Given the lack of experience in researching sexuality among even the highly accomplished gender researchers who carried out the work, the project also set out to develop methodological tools and research strategies that would facilitate critical engagement with the ongoing dynamics of sexuality in African contexts. All three articles use a transdisciplinary approach grounded in feminist epistemology. This meant remaining alert to the demands of liberatory praxis, and to the agency, world-views and subjectivities of the various African women contributing to the research. In adopting such an approach, and grounding our research interest in sexuality in the dynamics of local historical and material conditions, it was hoped that both the researchers and the knowledge generated would avoid tacitly reproducing dominant constructions of male dominance and heterosexuality.

Sylvia Tamale's research on the institution of *Ssenga* in modern, urban Kampala points to the complex of social, political, economic and cultural forces that generate transformation in even the most intimate traditional institutions. The commodification of *Ssenga* reflects the advent of globalisation, and the economic impoverishment that this has brought to many Ugandans. No longer exclusive to the Buganda, nor limited to the particular relationship between a young woman and her paternal aunt, enterprising individual women have opted to establish themselves as commercial operators whose services can be solicited on the open market. Thus Tamale observes that groups of women students can pool their resources to hire a *Ssenga* to enliven and develop their sexual competence, and the expertise of well-established *Ssengas* can be tapped through radio chat shows, popular magazine columns, newspapers and

websites. Tamale questions whether the popularisation and proliferation of a previously discrete institution works to subvert or to reinscribe the patriarchal prescriptions for sexuality and gender relations.

Yaba Badoe explores the modern manifestation of another cultural institution, namely that of witchcraft. Using a narrative method of enquiry, Badoe gathered the life-histories of women residing in the village of Gambaga in Ghana, perhaps the best known of the many rural refuges offering protection for women whose lives have been endangered by communal accusations of witchcraft. In Northern Ghana, it is predominantly women who are accused of witchcraft, which is associated with their procreative power and sexuality. Badoe's analysis locates the ritual diagnosis and collective condemnation of transgressive women as guilty of being witches, within the context of a specific gender order. This is one in which women who deviate from the norms of constraint, dependency on male patronage and submission to male authority, are feared and despised. Badoe takes note of the pervasive economic insecurity and poor health status of the communities in which such accusations commonly arise, noting that it is often successful, talented or independent women who seem to attract the intense envy from other members of the community that often precedes allegations of witchcraft. The fact that the violent abuse and ostracism of those who are so accused may be accompanied by communal looting of their assets underlines this aspect.

Charmaine Pereira's article examines another situation in which women's sexual transgressions provide a pretext for collective chastisement, this time in the underdeveloped and impoverished reaches of northern Nigeria. Her excavation of pre-existing sexual cultures and practices among the Hausa-speaking communities of the region provide a marked contrast to the strictures of present day neo-fundamentalist discourses. Here the application of particular interpretations of the Sharia code is placed in the context of neoliberal economic policies that have left large swathes of the populace with limited access to modern educational and other systems and services. Local political actors and officials seeking to increase their legitimacy have deployed aspects of the Sharia code to impose draconian sentences on women deemed guilty of *zina*. The fact that both the code and the concept appear to be poorly and differentially understood by the public and the courts has not prevented a number of women from being targeted. Those charged with *zina* are women who lack the protection of class privilege and/or marriage to (or other liaisons with) powerful men. This points to the political nature of the phenomenon, as does the fact that



men's extramarital sexual liaisons can be conducted with impunity and are widely tolerated.

The three feature articles all address manifestations of heteronormativity that for the most part serve to regulate and contain women's sexuality, even while the development of erotic skills might be considered to hold some potential for empowering women. The empowerment of diverse sexualities, however, might be a more effective and radical way of challenging patriarchies.

Vasu Reddy's standpoint certainly suggests this to be the case. He argues cogently that theorisations of sexual pleasure offer a broad trope for engaging with the relationship between "sexual freedom, the realisation of pleasure and political power". Reddy argues that the construction of spaces and provision of services for gay men and lesbians in post-apartheid South Africa, as exemplified by the Durban Centre in eThekweni, is key to the assertion of identities and to the protection of basic rights and dignity for all, now inscribed in the Constitution of South Africa. Taken alongside Sam Radithalo's tribute to the late K. Sello Duiker, these two contributions indicate that homosexuality – and homophobia – are ever-present realities linked to the complex of patriarchal oppressions still suffusing our lived realities and hampering the democratisation of African societies.

Elaine Salo's interview with seasoned activist Rhoda Kadalie returns us to the debate on sexuality and the human rights of women within campuses and revolutionary movements, and on women's relationships to the state. Kadalie recalls how struggles around gender and sexuality were rendered illegitimate among "progressives" in South Africa's struggle against apartheid and for national liberation. Drawing on her years at the University of the Western Cape, she presents this campus, known for its political militancy, as a gendered space that was highly unfriendly to women. As she outlines the efforts of herself and others to develop a gender-sensitive governance system there, her points resonate powerfully with the feature articles found in *Feminist Africa* 1. She also draws attention to the conservatism and ambivalence of the ANC leadership and the ANC Women's League with regard to gender, and the contradictions that these pose for women in high leadership positions. Kadalie is relentlessly critical of opportunism and careerism in the women's movement, and reiterates the necessity of "truth-telling" and of maintaining the links between the academy and activism.

Male supremacist political and sexual agendas also tend to bring in their wake a suppression of women's articulation of sexuality. The collated cyber-



conversations in this issue about the Ugandan government's banning of the play *The Vagina Monologues* highlight the visceral fear on the part of those subscribing to hegemonic sexual and gender ideologies, of women's agency in matters of sexuality. These conversations, which took place on the Gender and Women's Studies in Africa listserve, a bounded space in which feminist academics and activists in and from Africa can share ideas and resources, also reveal the range of creative tactics by which women resist such measures of control and suppression.

The books reviewed in this issue suggest the rich scholarship on sexualities that is beginning to emerge from African scholars. They cover a diversity of themes, from the politics and multiple meanings in Africa of dress, fashion and bodies to the paradoxical interdependency and sharing of intimate space between white middle-class South African women and their black female servants. Also reviewed is a sexually explicit memoir by a Moroccan woman, raising the question of how far this amounts to a radical reclamation of Muslim women's sexuality. Finally, we find a moving review of celebratory, confrontational and sensual collections of love poetry by two black South African women writers, testament to the power of breaking this particular silence. These promises of the insights to be revealed by new African-centred explorations of sexuality are just one indication of the scope for future work along this trajectory.

As we have reiterated here, sexualities are profoundly bound up with the workings of the state, power structures and daily life across Africa. Instead of the silences and silencing surrounding sexualities, which allow patriarchal, abusive and heteronormative relationships and power structures to have hegemonic sway, it is important that scholars and activists foreground the embeddedness of sexuality in the lives, emotions, desires, health and fears of women and men across Africa. The struggle for real democracy and respect for the full and equal human rights of African people must encompass the diverse sexualities of African people, seeking not to pathologise them but to create the conditions for their nurturance in free and open societies.

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Footnotes

- 1 Supported by the Ford Foundation, the Mapping Sexualities Project was co-ordinated by Amina Mama of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town and Takyiwaa Manuh of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana.
- 2 These are summarised in existing reviews of African gender studies (Mama, 1996; Lewis 2002) and in the teaching resources on sexuality developed by the aforementioned teaching group (www.gwsafrica.org/teachingresources).



Amina Mama

is Chair in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town.

Charmaine Pereira

is the National Co-ordinator of the Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria, based in Ajuba.

Takyiwaa Manuh

is the Director of the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, and a gender activist.