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## Book Review/Revue de livres

Arnfred Signe (ed) *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004, 276 pp, ISBN 91-7106-513-X

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From the perspective of Feminist/gender scholarship this book was intriguing and highly enlightening to read. For feminist and non-feminist scholars alike, this book brings new insights and perspectives about sexualities in Africa. It makes a highly significant contribution to theorizing African sexualities and deconstructing Western/Euro-centric myths about sexualities in Africa.

Relying on different types of methodologies such as ethnographic research, narrative analysis and case studies the book brings a richly nuanced and textured understanding of Africans' lived experience and interpretation of their own sexualities. The 'insider views' are contrasted with the constructed 'outsider' (Western) views of the 'dark discourse' on sexuality in the context of the African continent.

Using Chandra Talpade Mohante's seminal article 'Under Western Eyes' as a starting point, the introduction locates the book as a critique of Western understandings of African sexualities. As the title of 're-thinking' implies – a double move of de-construction and re-construction takes place. The book is divided into three sections. In the first section, titled 'Under Western Eyes' a new discourse on sexuality and gender in Africa is constructed in opposition to the 'dark continent discourse'. In the second called 'Problems of Pleasure and Desire' areas of investigation rendered invisible by mainstream thinking comes under scrutiny. African male and female desire and lust, constructed from Africans' own points of view become the object of analysis. This analysis takes place in a context in which moral condemnation or judgement is suspended.

In the third section on 'Female Agency' socio-economic changes and gender power relations and their interpretation are investigated. How do

sexual beings cope in the face of growing poverty, soaring HIV/AIDS infection rates and the growing impact of globalization?

Important and innovative theorization takes place in the introductory chapter. Arnfred shows how it is often the case that in an attempt to deconstruct the 'dark continent discourse', new binary oppositions that are not helpful are put in its place, such as South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, arguing for a return to tradition and custom.

Arnfred also shows how the Gender and Development (GAD) discourse that is supposed to be a more 'liberating' discourse than the Women in Development (WID) discourse is still based on the assumptions of colonial/missionary images and imaginations of 'African culture' as excessively patriarchal and women as down-trodden and overworked. The GAD discourse is powerful in structuring the minds of donors as well as gender researchers who uses essentializing concepts of female subordination and patriarchy. She also theorizes the contribution of Christianity as establishing heteronormativity as the normative framework that should be embraced, making same sex relationships invisible. In the context of 'morality and sin' insights about sex for procreation and sex for pleasure became obscured. Yet, one would have liked to also read the voices of authors in same sex relations in this book.

In the theorization of pleasure and desire, African women's genital cutting in Senegal is, for example, explored by Liselott Dellenborg and the Western condemnation juxtaposed with these women's own desire for excision that inducts them into society and womanhood.

The psychology of race and the impact that the colour of bodies have on desire in the South African context is very revealing for our understanding of how colour created a desirability that is completely divorced from beauty and how black African women's sexual relations with white men are viewed as betrayal (turning them into prostitutes) through the narrative of a research subject, theorized in the chapter by Ratele Kopano. The book also grapples with and interrogates multiplicitous sexualities and 'dividuality' where dividuality is determined by the social context. People belong to different social context and these contexts can determine the meaning of sex in the context of marriage and outside of marriage.

Female agency is theorized in terms of wifehood and motherhood and exposes agency as freedom to choose motherhood but not wifehood in certain conditions. Mumbi Machera's chapter and that of Jo Helle-Valle brings new insight and understanding to a myth that African women are merely victims of oppressive sexual relations.

The chapter that best addresses the 'dark continent discourse' is that of Katarina Jungar and Elina Oinas titled 'Preventing HIV? Medical Discourses and Invisible Women'. The authors through their analysis of medical discourses on HIV/AIDS in Africa show how the notion of male circumcision is promoted by Western medical experts as a strategy to diminish the spread of the HI virus even though there is no proof that circumcised men are less likely to contract or spread the virus. Neither is this strategy promoted for Europe or North America. The underlying assumptions behind this 'preventative strategy' are that circumcision is an 'African thing', ie part of African culture and that it is the only strategy that can work on the 'lost continent' since Africans can't control their sexual desires, won't condomise or cannot use condoms properly. With this discourse African Aids is invented, rendering invisible the complexities of the spread of AIDS such as conditions of poverty, global exploitation and marginalization of the continent and the reluctance of big pharmaceutical companies to provide anti-retroviral drugs at affordable prices.

There is a total invisibility of women in this Western medical discourse even though the spread of HIV/AIDS is heterosexual in Africa. As a consequence this invisibility of women may make it harder for them to negotiate sexual relations and requesting condom use if circumcised men decide that circumcision is indeed preventative. As the authors point out – the male circumcision debate seems more involved in reproducing imagery of 'African sexuality' than envisioning actual change.

Every chapter in this book is fascinating to read for its ability to shift our thinking about male and female sexuality in Africa but also for retheorizing African Gender Theory (see for example the chapter by Mary Kolawole 'Re-Conceptualizing African Gender Theory: Feminism, Womanism and the Arere Metaphor'). In this regard it makes a contribution to the broader developing body of indigenous African gender theorizing. It also makes this book different from other descriptive accounts of sexualities.

Everyone who has an interest in feminist theory, gender scholarship or sexualities should read this book. It will also be a very useful tool for post-graduate teaching. This book is a timely and necessary contribution to gender scholarship. I recommend it very highly.