Exposing the "Unthinkable"

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Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa
by Signe Arnfred, ed.
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There was indeed a large void on discourses relating to sexuality/ies in Africa. This disturbing silence is not unrelated to the violence and humiliations of colonialism. As so many scholars – such as Ann Laura Stoler, Anne McClintock, Sander Gilman, Megan Vaughan, Robert Young – have demonstrated, the colonial event in its various dimensions and reverberations was shot through by very powerful sexual undercurrents. The colonial drive, in other words, was essentially phallic: the adventurous agents of empire – the soldier, the administrator and the missionary – penetrated a seemingly passive geographical space, a virginal wilderness that was awaiting the thrust, domestication and eventual uplifting of Euro-modern civilization and modes of rationality. From Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespusi to the Japanese invasion of China during the Second World War, the colonizing gesture was a manoeuvre of powerful phallic drives, a violent act of copulation that is often difficult to disguise.

Signe Arnfred, the editor of the volume, hints this in her introduction but drives the point harder in her chapter, "African Sexuality/Sexuality in Africa: Tales and Silences", which reconfigures sexology with colonialism. Edward Said's work on the orientalization of the orient by the Western gaze and reason is well known. Employing the same tropes and striving for perhaps similar effects, Arnfred renarrativizes two famous tales of colonial copulation: Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and the tragic figure of Sarah Bartmann. Haggard's famous story of the colonial quest is set in Southern Africa and Bartmann was the unfortunate black South African woman carried off from Cape Town in 1810 to be exhibited in mainly London and Paris on account of her steatopygic attributes.

In these two accounts of sexual conquest and denigration, the black subject is the victim. The sexualization of the black subject has always been marked by violence and menace and Arnfred's chapter foregrounds this knowledge. She also reminds us that, apart from the unusual case of Amina Mama, a scholar of gender studies who attempts to tackle the topic of African sexualities, other scholars with similar concerns such as Ifi Amaduime and Oyeronke Oyewumi have for their own part avoided it. Heike Becker adds more insights as to why the issue of African sexualities remains problematic: "African and their sexuality were savage; at issue was merely whether African sexuality was of the noble or the ignoble savage variety. […] protagonists agreed that it had to be contained" (p.37). These views obviously evince why the discourses revolving around African sexualities have had such a hard time getting off the ground.

The volume does a lot to reveal the range of African sexualities and the multiple ways in which they can be addressed, problematized and conceptualized. After the lingering effects of colonialism on the black sexual subject, there is the need to rehumanize the very domain of black sexuality and one way of doing so is to recognize, as Liselott Dellenborg points out in the volume, that "besides being a very individual experience that is difficult to measure and compare, sexuality and sexual pleasure are culturally and socially constructed" (p.88). Furthermore, regional agendas on how to conceive of, and mobilize, discourses on sexuality need not be similar and are in fact often oppositional in nature. Indeed, "at the United Nations Second World Conference on Women in Copenhagen in 1980, for instance, Western feminists vexed women from the Third World countries by debating on the quality of clitoral and vaginal orgasm" (p.90). Of course this did not go down well with participants from the South, as other more pressing concerns such as the "lack of clean water and fuel, and high maternal and child mortality" (*ibid*.) were more to the point for them.

Undoubtedly, some of the ideas and concepts explored in the volume are controversial. Kopano Ratele, in a contribution aptly titled "Kinky Politics", begins by modestly claiming that "many people around the world still find inter-racial, inter-cultural, inter-religious, or inter-ethnic coupling irritating or at best titillating…"(p.139). And then, within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, he argues that "young men and women should be encouraged to have good, 'normal', sexual intercourse at the earliest opportunity with another person, race or ethnic group before they reach a certain age. It may be one way of attaining liberated masculinities. Most crucial, though, good interracial sex could have a deep significance for reconstructing our national politics" (p.144). Ratele correctly admits that his suggestion is indeed provocative. Perhaps it is only possible to advance this line of argument in post-apartheid South Africa. Certainly, it would be a very difficult argument to conceive and project in mainstream America where the history of racial violence and oppression is no less violent.

Another concept is explored in the book which, though slightly less controversial, nonetheless deserves our attention. In the mid-nineties, the anthropologist Jane Guyer theorized what she termed *polyandrous motherhood*. In her words, "polyandrous motherhood is a liaison consisting of women cultivating co-parental ties with more than one father of their children" (p.224). Guyer's ethnographic locale for the concept is south-west Nigeria, but Liv Haram, in an exceptionally revealing contribution, demonstrates how it works in East Africa, notably Tanzania. In relation to how the concept works in south-west Nigeria, I would want far more concrete empirical evidence. This is not to say that such cases are not to be found in the region. But we need to know more about the frequency of such cases, the modes of cultural resistance and acceptance it encounters and also the social strata in which it is most manifest. One gets an idea of these details in Haram's chapter, but Guyer's work, which serves as the primary conceptual model, perhaps ought to have been better highlighted, so that we get a fuller picture of the social significance of the concept.

A number of the contributors to the volume rehash the usual debates about women's liberation in Africa. Perhaps this is not the kind of volume to address such preoccupations; sexuality is the central concern here. However, we get quite a broad picture to African reactions to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There are also competent explorations of themes of female genital mutilation. And as for sexuality itself, we are reminded in several instances, notably by Jo Helle-Valle, "not only that different people relate to and practice sex in different ways, but that sexual mores and practices in fact mean many different things for each and every individual, depending on the socio-cultural contexts they take place within" (p.206). In thinking in this manner, we will find the appropriate kind of language for what we conceal in so many historically and culturally specific ways.