Editorial: Subaltern sexualities

Elaine Salo and Pumla Dineo Gqola

Anyone who is passionate about women, gender and development in African contexts needs to interrogate discourses about African sexuality. These discourses have long histories of academic authority that have assisted in ensuring that hegemonic discourses about sexuality were at the heart of the continent's underdevelopment during colonialism. And as contributors to *Feminist Africa* 5 (on Sexual Cultures) point out, sexuality remains central to contemporary conflict about citizenship in postcolonial and post-apartheid contexts.

Even a cursory glance through the many travel diaries of European explorers in the Cape Colony reveals these early colonial adventurers' voyeuristic preoccupation with local women's sexuality. More importantly, as Yvette Abrahams indicates, Linnaeus' [the 18th-century Swedish scientist and taxonomist] and others' "scientific" examination and classification of indigenous women's genitalia in the Cape informed colonial science's classification of the local populations as sub-human species: "Linnaeus classified the Khoekhoe as not quite part of the human species on the basis of his perceptions of their genitals" (2000: 102). Social Darwinian systems of classification located these populations in the lower echelons of a racial hierarchy, on the basis of categorising these men and women according to their genitalia. This provided key moral justification for genocide and enslavement.

These descriptions of the genitals of Khoekhoe and Khoi women obliterated the rich texture and nuanced quality of their everyday sexual, social and economic lives. Instead, in what would become hegemonic discourses, as well as in the texts alluded to above, these women became hyper-sexualized bodies, devoid of names, individual personalities, personal opinions, vital relations with kin, or membership in social groups. The undressed Khoekhoe woman with her "strange" elongated genitalia and protruding buttocks became a trope that justified colonial racism and the economic underdevelopment of Africa, and implicitly sustained the power and the glory of the Empire. Scientific and legal

discourse about African sexuality informed colonial policies that denied the gendered personhood and citizenship of indigenous Africans. Moreover, once they had been consigned to a social death, the colonial powers' underdevelopment of Africa in the nineteenth century could continue, virtually unhindered by the moral discourses of human rights.

As Yvette Abrahams (2000) indicates, these colonial discourses, which sustained the binaries of race, nationalism and development (white/European/civilised – black/African/uncivilised), simultaneously entrenched the hegemony of heterosexual masculine regimes and homogenised the internal complexity and diversity of African sexualities as they interlocked with gender, identity and the political economy. Yet, historians of colonial processes in Africa have for the most part ignored the nexus between the discursive construction of gender, sexuality and colonial underdevelopment of Africa. Recently, however, feminist historians such as Luise White (1990), Helen Bradford (1991) and Terri Barnes (2002) have eloquently traced the incestuous relationship between colonial policies on migration, housing and reproduction on the one hand, and gender and sexuality on the other. These studies, based as they were upon innovative research methods that examined the historical record through the lenses of gender and sexualities, pointed to the need for a revision of historical methodology.

So too, as the contributions to this issue of *Feminist Africa* attest, an exciting genre of feminist studies on sexualities and identities in Africa suggest that in postcolonial contexts, the discourses, norms and practices of heterosexuality, centrally anchored in male authority, are emerging or have hardened into the central basis for defining personhood, gender and sexuality. Clearly, such heteronormative definitions hold major implications for human rights claims, as well as the diversity of gender and sexual relations that are considered permissible between consenting adults in diverse African countries. Current writings on sexuality inform our understanding of gender, and have begun to challenge dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity on this continent. Yet much of this writing on sexuality examines only how sexuality underwrites heterosexual masculinities and femininities (see, for example, Rwebangira and Liljestrom [1998] for Tanzania; Morrell [2000] for Southern Africa) and such scholarship itself falls within the parameters of prescribed heterosexual gender roles. The contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* seek to explore the diversity of sexualities that exist across normative heterosexuality and homosexuality.

While heterosexual masculine regimes appear hegemonic to notions of gender, personhood and sexualities in Africa, their dominance is fragile and

contested from multiple sites in civil society. Even in societies where the human rights of women and gender minorities are only cursorily acknowledged in, or are absent from national constitutions, societal responses to women and men who have transgressed the heteronormative masculine norms and practices, are often extreme, and demonstrated in acts of interpersonal and structural violence. These severe reactions to perceived transgressions attest to the very fragile, contingent nature of heteronormative masculine regimes. In her study of witchcraft accusations in Ghana in *Feminist Africa* 5, Yaba Badoe describes how women who are independent social agents are perceived to be such a threat to patriarchal, heteronormative cultural practices, beliefs, and institutions that they are accused of being witches, beaten and banished from their homes. Similarly, although under happier circumstances, Palesa Beverley Ditsie gave a landmark speech to the government forum at the Beijing Conference in 1995, challenging the heterosexual biases implicit in the international women's movement, and calling for the recognition and acknowledgement of lesbians' human rights as a key part of the struggle for women's human rights.

Other social movements have emerged in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in southern Africa, such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), led until recently by a gay man, Zackie Achmat, have challenged the heterosexism of anti-retroviral treatment programmes. These were initially offered almost exclusively to HIV-positive mothers-to-be to prevent transmission to their unborn children. So too, as Wendy Isaack describes in her interview with Pumla Dineo Gqola in this volume, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Project has consistently pressured the South African Constitutional Court to grant lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTi) persons full and equal standing under the law. Even with South Africa's positive track record of changing much South African legislation between 1994 and 2004 in order bring it in line with Constitutional protection of minority sexual rights and freedom from discrimination, NGOs must continue to pressure for legal revision of the heteronormative biases in definitions of marriage and parenthood.

Contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* have challenged the dominance of heteronormativity as assumed in the limited set of sexualities considered permissible within African societies and associated primarily with patriarchal gender identities. Leaders within the African state and in civil society have often evoked the notion of culture, both to defend the hegemonic hold of heteronormative gender relations as anchored within dominant notions of masculinity, and to silence any nascent claims by those who self-identify

as homosexual, bisexual or transgender persons – even though, for instance, cross-dressing has a long history in parts of Africa, as pointed out by Jessie Kabwira Kapasula in this issue.

In her article "Re-righting the body", Jessica Horn interrogates the evocation of morality associated with an assumed authentic "tradition" or "culture" that is used to justify the tide of homophobia in Africa. She traces the development of sexual rights that are not implicitly linked to heterosexual gender identities, and challenges both local and international feminist organisations to take up the struggle for sexual rights in Africa. In the same vein, Kopano Ratele argues in this issue that the recent rape trial of Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, erstwhile deputy-president of South Africa, and the latter's revelations about what constituted "legitimate" as opposed to "unnatural" sexual activity, have fuelled the extant robust debates about gender, permissible sexual relations, sexual rights and citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa. Ratele indicates how Zuma's power as a political leader helps to inform and enforce a hegemonic discursive gender regime located in heterosexuality, that is increasingly being challenged by feminists and LGBTi activists. Ratele follows the example of others such as Sylvia Tamale in Uganda (2003) as he points to the discursive power of the utterances of African leaders as a potent means of constituting and re-instating dominant societal beliefs about sexuality and gender roles, thereby sustaining gender inequality and homophobia.

As these scholars correctly note, the power of such individual opinions or their silences about permissible gender and sexual relations can be life-threatening. Their words of warning are borne out in the murder of Lorna Mlosana, the HIV/AIDS activist from Khayelitsha in Cape Town, South Africa. In her poignant obituary in this issue to this ordinary South African woman, Margie Orford maps out how men's desire to control women's sexuality through the rape epidemic in South Africa, coupled with the misogynistic notion that women are the primary vector of the HI virus, fuelled Lorna's murder.

Chipo Hungwe's article emphasises the importance of historicity in our conceptualisation of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. She addresses the meanings of heteronormative gender identities as these interlocked with race within the historical context of colonialism in Zimbabwe. She describes how black heterosexual masculinity relied heavily upon the colonial authorities' control over women's productive and reproductive labour, and enforced a notion of feminine respectability that undermined black women's autonomy. Similarly, in contemporary Zimbabwe, the state attempts to manage the

current socio-cultural and economic crisis by categorizing women according to notions of "respectability". However, as Hudita Mustafa indicates in her study of Senegalese women's display of homosocial eroticism through the aesthetics of beauty, even as hegemonic patriarchal regimes police and reinforce women's permissible gender roles and sexuality, women are still able to render the display of normative heterosexuality fluid.

Similarly, Shelley Barry's standpoint, in which she reflects courageously on her sexuality as a disabled lesbian, evocatively lays bare our assumptions about the sexually neutered disabled body. She writes against the myth that only "able" bodies can be desired or evoke desire, revealing the extent to which sexuality and desire have become commodified, with only certain bodies considered suitable in the marketplace of desire. These bodies are able, youthful, often heterosexual, thin, middle-class; they adhere to contemporary Western dress styles and are ethnically neutral – or, occasionally, interestingly "exotic". By celebrating the beauty and power of her own body and its scars, Shelly Barry provides a bold counterpoint to the dominant discourse of the commodified body in the global marketplace, which brands the disabled body as asexual. Shelley not only blurs the seemingly distinctive boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality, but also points to the plasticity and diversity of human sexuality.

The profiles of the organisations Sister Namibia and Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Trust, as well as the book reviews in this volume, reflect the small but growing activist-scholarly engagement with subaltern sexualities in Africa. Finally, in her reflections on the 50th anniversary of the famous march on the seat of apartheid power in 1956 by South African women, Elinor Sisulu reminds us of the rich traditions and real dangers that African feminists confront in the 21st century. Read, reflect and act.

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