

Gender, sexualities, and culture

It is difficult to even begin to define '*culture*' without foregrounding the link between gender processes and their implications for how sexualities are shaped. What is critical to note is that much dominant discourse on '*African cultures*' has a tendency to describe engagements with gender and sexuality in negative terms, and in terms which relegate the notion of transforming genders, through engagement with sexual potential and ideologies, to a timeless zone called '*tradition*'. This zone then becomes separated from contemporary experiences, collectively identified as '*modernity*'. As Sylvia Tamale suggests ([Feminist Africa 5, 2005](#)), this is a naïve and unhelpful discursive move, and can make the discussion of what is meant by '*culture*' and how this entails sexually-oriented embodiment of many kinds fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, there are debates about the relationship between religious or customary '*cultures*' and practices identified as harmful to the health, dignity, and/or sexual well-being of women (such as Female Genital Cutting, or widow inheritance — see Stella Nyanzi ⁴ et al's work here for an example of research in Uganda). On the other hand, as Tamale's work points out, the '*culture*'/'*modernity*' divide obscures the ways in which contemporary opportunities meld with what is valued about (for example) sexual initiation practices for women (or for men), and ignore the realities of multiple and simultaneous engagements with different '*codes*' of gendered and sexual norms.

Rather than rehearse material on FGM, virginity testing (see Fiona Ross's [5.6](#) article on this in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa), polygamy, or widow inheritance (important as these practices are in the debates on gender, sexuality, and culture), it is useful to integrate consideration of contemporary cultural vehicles into the classroom. This would include taking the media seriously, especially print advertisements, television dramas, and popular music. Where the internet is available, and students have access to cellphone technology (such as MixIt), other opportunities to discuss '*culture*' are created. It is these forms of representation about '*norms*', desirability, respectability, and status which shape gender and its engagement with sexualities much more dynamically than is often acknowledged. It is critical to engage '*culture*' as living social energy, policed and empowered by different interests (especially economic ones), and simultaneously, rebelled against and rejected through the adoption of '*alternative*' norms.

It could be argued that issues of religion also need to fall under this theme. For some, the terms '*culture*' and '*religion*' are so closely interwoven that it makes no sense to attempt to address '*culture*' without exploring issues of religion. This is particularly the case for African contexts in which the histories of Islam, combined with current state policies which privilege Sharia law and-

critically - the complex differences of life within different Muslim countries and communities. It is also true that other religious forces (and the growth of popular and fundamentalist Christianities) have a profound influence on the meanings of gender and sexuality for those who adhere to the religions and also to those who do not adhere to the religion but share space, lives, and relationships with them. Religion is however a sensitive topic, and one in which it is often important that experts within the religion contribute to, and/or, lead the discussions of gender and sexualities where these are brought into classroom space. For this reason, we have created a separate section to offer resources on Gender and Religion to teachers.

It is impossible to ignore, within this theme, the prevalence of violence against women which seeks to abuse, humiliate, and damage through the use of force called '*sexual*' because the '*tools*' deployed involve the parts of the body conventionally thought of as 'sexual', and which carry deep and powerful meanings around that sexuality. This is violence perpetrated by people gendered as men (who use it against other men, and also against children). While many men would not dream of using such violence, it remains that case that masculinities tend to tolerate the potential for such violence within their shape. In many contexts, this potential becomes realized in such destructive ways that it is hard to imagine 'masculinities' without imagining a predilection for sexual violence AS '*culturally justified*'. This is certainly the case in conflict zones, in prisons, and in South Africa. In other contexts, such as parts of Nigeria or Ghana, such masculine aggression may concentrate on controlling women's dress, or on public threats of punishment should women's independence seem to be contravening norms. These are generalizations, based on research on sexual harassment within tertiary educational settings in Nigeria (see the work of Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria), but they gesture towards institutional and urban '*cultures*' in which sexual violence against women is tolerated, and even - in some settings - encouraged discursively and by other means. The review on Gender and Violence has more on this idea.