

Gender, sexuality, and colonialism

As Charmaine Pereira's ² bibliography (attached) suggests, in contemporary African contexts, even where colonialism covered a relatively short period of time (such as in Nigeria and in Zimbabwe) it is critical to understand that colonialisms, of different kinds, involved gender and sexuality in ways which influence contemporary realities. They did so in different ways. Firstly, the histories of colonialisms brought (mostly) European men with particular concepts of gender and particular ideas about women and men's sexual roles, about what constituted '*moral*' forms of sexual behaviour, and about ideas which linked religious ideologies to notions of purity, through which all sexuality was through of as dangerous, and only reproductive sex in non-polygamous marriage gained the blessing of the colonial gaze. These colonial ideologies impacted strongly on the terrains and peoples they engaged with, resulting in active policies to change and control the sexual cultures and gendered norms they encountered. These policies included heavy proscriptions against rituals of femininity and masculinity (circumcision and initiation ceremonies), legislation against polygamy, notions about appropriate dress and behaviour, control of mobility (especially women's mobility), the domestication of women's roles economically and politically, and the introduction of concepts around '*civilization*' and '*hygiene*' which sought to control and manage colonized bodies. Policies, direct and indirect, of racialization created ideas about '*miscegenation*', and policed sexual interaction between settlers and indigenous people in powerful ways. The colonial gaze sexualized both indigenous men's and women's bodies in ways which simultaneously exoticized them as '*excessive*,' '*primitive/animal like*', and '*other*'. Yvette Abrahams has written of this in her historiography of Sarah Baartman, whose experience remains an iconic example of English colonial brutality.

In addition, the increasing power of colonial languages over education, and all state systems, pushed languages full of poetry, sayings, and ritual wealth concerning gendered meanings of sexuality in all its forms, into the background of '*what mattered*' as knowledge. And, of course, colonial systems of health management, while they certainly brought valuable tools around immunization against certain diseases and support for the treatment of others into African contexts, also introduced '*family planning*' as a form of fertility control, in ways that included forced sterilization.

Secondly, resistance against colonialism, which took many forms, also deserves exploration in terms of how questions of gender and sexuality played out in the creation of strategies to undermine or attack colonial power. There are examples of this throughout colonial histories,

such as is described in Lynn Thomas's ³"*Ngaitana! I Will Not Be Circumcised*" which analyses the rebellion of girls in Meru, 1956, against the colonial proscriptions against female circumcision (at the time, also being supported by the local men's council). Later forms of resistance have included the formation of guerilla armies, protests against particular laws or policies, and negotiation. Especially where the formation of underground and/or guerilla armies was involved, gender norms changed in some ways to allow the participation of women into guerilla movements (such as in Uganda, and Zimbabwe), but retained notions of masculinity which put those very same women combatants at risk of sexual assault. In addition, discourses of liberation movement resistance included encouragement of reproduction (as a way of combating settler efforts to 'control' population) and men guerilla fighters' sexual prowess was expected as part and parcel of heroism. This has been written about for South African guerillas in Umkhonto we Sizwe, one of the resistance armies, by Raymond Suttner. And, as in colonial economies, families were broken up by the demands of struggles against colonialism, and this too, had impacts both on new options for sexual liaisons and marriages, new exposure to different climates and sexual norms (what was possible in London for someone in exile as part of a resistance movement might look very different from what was possible in her or her own national context). It also had impacts on family lives in other ways - wives may have gone for years without seeing their husbands (in detention, underground, in faraway army activity - Njabulo Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, explores this), or children could have grown up with growing through the sexual/gendered initiations normal in their contexts. Overall, whatever the shape of the colonial period for a particular country, it is important to explore the impact of ideologies, laws and policies, and institutions (including hospitals and education) on changing gendered and sexual norms.