

## **If Sexuality were a human being...**

### **Introduction to 'African Sexualities: A Reader'**

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**2011-05-11, Issue [529](#)**

**<http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/73150>**

'African Sexualities' is a groundbreaking new volume, forthcoming from Pambazuka Press. As well as using popular culture to help address the 'what, why, how, when and where' questions, the book's contributors provide a critical mapping of African sexualities that informs readers about the plurality and complexities of sexualities on the continent – desires, practices, fantasies, identities, taboos, abuses, violations, stigmas, transgressions and sanctions. At the same time, the contributors pose gender-sensitive and politically aware questions that challenge the reader to interrogate assumptions and hegemonic sexuality discourses, thereby unmapping the intricate and complex terrain of African sexualities.

The following article by 'African Sexualities' editor Sylvia Tamale comprises the book's introduction.

If Sexuality were a human being and she made a grand entrance (*l'entrée grande*) into the African Union conference centre, the honourable delegates would stand up and bow in honour. But the acknowledgement of and respect for Sexuality would no doubt be tinged with overtones of parody and irony, even sadness, because although Sexuality might represent notions of pleasure and the continuity of humanity itself, the term conjures up discussions about sources of oppression and violence. In fact, once Sexuality got to the podium and opened her mouth, the multiple complexities associated with her presence would echo around the conference room.

The Reader on African Sexualities (hereafter referred to as the Reader) intends to translate these echoes into comprehensible notions and concepts, carefully examining their different wavelengths and the terms of their power and laying bare the theoretical, political and historical aspects of African sexualities. The term 'African sexualities' immediately provokes the questions: who/what is African? What is sexuality? Who determines what qualifies as African sexualities? Among other things, the Reader attempts to address these deeply complex questions through the lenses of history, feminism, law, sociology, anthropology, spirituality, poetry, fiction, life stories, rhetoric, song, art and public health. In this way the Reader offers a rare opportunity to theorise sexuality through various modes. The idea is to deconstruct, debunk, expose, contextualise and problematise concepts associated with African sexualities in order to avoid essentialism, stereotyping and othering.

The material in this Reader has been carefully selected to surface the complexities associated with what has been pandered as African and the issues surrounding sexuality that have been taken for granted. One of the main challenges for contributors to the Reader was to refuse to

perpetuate colonial reification of 'African' as a homogenous entity. Hence, the title's reference to African sexualities is not because we are unaware of the richness and diversity of African peoples' heritage and experiences. Jane Bennett's essay in Chapter 6 addresses this issue at great length.

Any reference to the term 'African' in this volume is used advisedly to highlight those aspects of cultural ideology – the ethos of community, solidarity and ubuntu[1] – that are widely shared among the vast majority of people within the geographical entity baptised 'Africa' by the colonial map-makers. More importantly, the term is used politically to call attention to some of the commonalities and shared historical legacies inscribed in cultures and sexualities within the region by forces such as colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, globalisation and fundamentalism. Even as these commonalities are proposed, however, readers will find them challenged.

Although diverse forces interrupted the shape of sexualities on the continent – redefining notions of morality, for example, and 'freezing' them into social and political spaces through both penal codification and complex alliances with political and religious authority – differences among continental spaces meant that such interruptions had diverse effects. Such forces further attempted to standardise global ideas about African sexualities, often erasing questions of diversities and complexities of sexual relations. As the material in Part 1 reveals, however, colonial methods of researching, theorising and engaging in sexualities in Africa left indelible and significant imprints on people's sexual lives.

This, however, is not to suggest that the continent became a hostage of its late colonial history. As the materials in this Reader clearly show, the continent is currently replete with vibrant movements, some seeking to reinforce sexual hegemonic powers and others challenging, subverting and resisting imposed modes of identity, morality and behaviour patterns. Some of the subversions have deep roots – Parts 2 and 3, titled 'Sexuality, power and politics' and 'Mapping sexual representations and practices of identity', respectively, offer expansions of these issues and excavate the political origins and social consequences of the politics of sexualities in Africa.

We speak of sexualities in the plural in recognition of the complex structures within which sexuality is constructed and in recognition of its pluralist articulations. The notion of a homogeneous, unchanging sexuality for all Africans is out of touch not only with the realities of lives, experiences, identities and relationships but also with current activism and scholarship. Ideas about and experiences of African sexualities are shaped and defined by issues such as colonialism, globalisation, patriarchy, gender, class, religion, age, law and culture. Because these phenomena are at play elsewhere in the world, and because of the various historical links that connect Africa to the rest of humankind, some theoretical and conceptual approaches that have informed sexualities studies elsewhere have relevance to the way writers think through questions of African sexualities.

Sexualities are often thought of as closely related to one of the most critical of biological processes, namely reproduction. But contemporary scholarship understands sexualities as socially constructed, in profound and troubling engagement with the biological, and therefore as heavily influenced by, and implicated within, social, cultural, political and economic forces. The

study of sexualities therefore offers unending lessons about pleasure, creativity, subversion, violence, oppression and living. Attempts to define the term sexuality often end in frustration, and become in themselves exercises about writers' own orientations, prioritisations and passions. As Oliver Phillips reminds us:

'Sexuality can be defined by referring to a wide range of anatomical acts and physical behaviour involving one, two or more people. We can relate it to emotional expressions of love, intimacy and desire that can take an infinite variety of forms. Or it can be implicated in the reproduction of social structures and markers through rules and regulations that permit or prohibit specific relations and/or acts. In the end, it emerges that these definitions are far from exhaustive. None of them are adequate on their own but that when considered all together they reflect the multiple ways that sexuality is manifest and impacts on our lives, and that above all; these definitions all consistently involve relations of power.' (Phillips 2011: 285)

It is this question of power to which the materials in this Reader return time and again.

As a continent, Africa has made significant progress in creating the space at policy level for discussion of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Since the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt in 1994, the African Union has adopted the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol),<sup>[2]</sup> the Plan of Action on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (Maputo Plan of Action),<sup>[3]</sup> and the Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA).<sup>[4]</sup> These continent-wide efforts have boosted the possibility of creating national policies on a wide variety of issues including gender-based violence, access to reproductive healthcare and a focus on sexualities education, among others.

Although these policies are numerous, missing are the theoretical and practical sparks to ignite the commitment required from both state and non-state actors to implement them. Moreover, studies have revealed the direct link between the delivery of sexual and reproductive health services and sustainable development (UN Millenium Project 2006). Part 5 of this volume addresses the latter, with the opening essay by Beth Maina Ahlberg and Asli Kulane clearly framing the link between sexual and reproductive rights and issues of development.

The law turns sexualities into a space through which instruments of state control and dominance can be deployed. For example, the criminal legal system in most African states attempts to regulate how, when and with whom we can have consensual sex. The offences of prostitution, abortion and adultery clearly curtail both women's and men's sexual autonomy (although as the Reader material suggests, it is women's autonomy that is most severely under threat), and the criminalisation of homosexuality affects both men and women who do not conform to the dominant ideology of heterosexuality. The material in Part 6, titled 'Sex and masculinities', demonstrates this very well.

Western scholars have thus far conducted the bulk of studies on sexualities and a big chunk of what has been published on the African continent emanates from South Africa.<sup>[5]</sup> This phenomenon has more to do with geopolitical power differentials than academic superiority. The dominance of Western theories and perspectives on sexuality studies and the fact that the main

languages of academia are colonial have serious implications for rapidly growing sexualities scholarship on the continent. African feminists and other change agents are well aware of the dangers associated with the uncritical application of Western theories to non-Western contexts (Adomako Ampofo and Arnfred 2010). They constantly struggle to overcome the limitations and encumbrances that come with creating and disseminating cultural-specific knowledge in a foreign colonial language. They understand the capacity of language to confer power through naming and conveying meaning and nuance to sexuality concepts. Concepts such as silence, restraint, choice, gay, lesbian, coming out and drag queen, for example, all carry specific social meanings steeped in Western ideology and traditions.

It is worth reiterating the point made earlier: as researchers and theorists of sexualities we must always take great care not to fall into the homogenising trap. One of the salient points made by various authors in this volume is to avoid homogenising and essentialising people's sexualities (whether Africans, Europeans, Asians, Middle Eastern or Hispanics).

Although many writers often hold romanticised notions of pre-colonial African sexualities as having been unrestricted and unbridled, the facts are quite different. As in all social organisations, African societies historically involved the organisation of gender, sexuality and reproduction – the diverse shapes, fluidities, the visible and invisible, the spiritual and the political and economic dynamics of those societies – which resulted in certain restraints.

For instance, almost all societies on the continent would have treated sexual interaction with a child or between parent and offspring as abominations. Part 8 is titled 'Sexuality, spirituality and the supernatural', and provides a glimpse of some of the complexities that pervade African sexualities in light of traditional beliefs and practices.

In the context of a resurgence of cultural, religious and economic fundamentalist movements, feminists and gender activists on the continent have forged global alliances in the struggle for women's bodily integrity and sexual autonomy. After all, patterns of control seen in sexual and gender-based violence, marital rape, sex trafficking, teenage pregnancies, women's sexual pleasure and so forth bear no national, religious or cultural stamp. But as feminists across the continents increase their global political activism for women's reproductive health and sexual rights, so do they have to account more carefully for the differentials in culture and history.

So, although it is important to pay attention to the intersections among nations regarding gender inequality, it is crucial that the strategies employed by African feminists be informed by the lived experiences of women and men on the continent and the specificities of what they hold as their culture, taking into account that there is not always agreement among people in the same locale about the nuances and meanings of culture. Part 7, titled 'Who's having sex and who's not?', surfaces some of the most common stereotypes and prejudices about sexualities and the lived experiences of marginal groups in our societies.

Debates on sexual inequality represent the most fundamental challenge to struggles for global democracy. One of the biggest challenges of our times is how to confront the complexities of intersecting oppressions so that people identified as sexual minorities, for example sex workers, lesbians, gays, transgendered, intersexed, rape survivors and people living with HIV/AIDS, are

able to stand with full status on the same podium such as those representing groups fighting dictatorships, corruption, social injustice, insecurity, discrimination against women, or people with disabilities. There are of course sexual minorities within each of these groups and often implicit among groups are concerns about sexualities. Until we close the gap between different voices demanding justice and equality, embracing the infinite possibilities of our sexual, social, economic and political beings, the African renaissance or the transformation that we are striving for will forever remain a mirage.

One important way of closing these gaps is by raising awareness through formal and informal education on sexualities. Part 9, titled 'Pedagogical approaches', demonstrates how this can be done in creative and effective ways.

## HOW TO USE THIS READER

The key objective of this Reader is to amplify the voices of Africans on the topic of sexualities. This is achieved through a critical mapping and unmapping of African sexualities.

The process of mapping is meant to inform readers about the plurality and complexities of African sexualities, including desires, practices, presentations, fantasies, identities, taboos, abuses, violations, stigmas, transgressions and sanctions. At the same time, it poses questions that challenge the reader to interrogate assumptions and hegemonic sexuality discourses, thereby unmapping the intricate and complex terrain of African sexualities. How is sexuality linked to gender and subordination? What is the 'Africanness' in sexualities? How has history shaped African sexualities? What explicit and implicit diversities exist within sexuality?

The Reader exposes the hidden or subtle lines that link the various aspects of our lives and sexualities. Such exposure facilitates our understanding of the negative and positive factors associated with the complex phenomenon of sexuality, including how it is instrumentalised, commodified and politicised, as well as its reproductive, pleasurable and empowering aspects.

Generally speaking, by the time we grow into adults many of us have done a great deal of learning, most of it rote (uncritical). Mechanical learning (cram, cram, cram, drill, drill, drill) is the norm for most of us as we move along the conveyor belt of examinations in post-colonial African education systems. The informal cultural systems of education that largely emphasise children's unquestioning obedience to adults do not help either. Both formal and informal education in the main promote learning in dualisms and absolute truths, such as right and wrong, good and bad, moral and immoral, inclusion and exclusion and male and female. These do little to foster reflective and critical thinking.

The end result is that our learning processes grossly neglect to instruct us in the important concept of unlearning. Without this skill, it is extremely difficult for us to think critically and to question unjust frameworks or challenge the established order. Most of us passively absorb the assumptions and perspectives of the dominant view and many of us have a visceral negative reaction to the concept of sexuality. Unlearning literally requires us to discard our old eyes and acquire a new set with which to see the world. It requires us to jettison assumptions and prejudices that are so deep-seated and internalised that they have become normal and appear to

be natural.

The critical process of transformative learning requires us to apply our intellect, unlearn deeply entrenched behaviour patterns and beliefs and relearn new ones. It requires us to acquire the vital skills to critically analyse internalised oppression and complicity with patriarchy and capitalism. It further requires us to step out of our familiar comfort zones and enter the world of discomfort and anxiety associated with change. Such processes, which call for a reorganisation of the old, are always fraught with difficulty, disequilibrium and stress.

This Reader on African Sexualities calls on us to do exactly that. It challenges us to confront issues that society has clothed in taboos, inhibitions and silences, to unclothe them, quiz them and give them voice. It certainly requires us to unlearn and relearn many things that we take for granted about sexualities and may well leave us confused, shocked, offended, embarrassed, scared and even a little excited. Many of us, for instance, will be baffled by the fact that issues of sexuality and desire, which are viewed as apolitical and private, are in fact steeped in politics and power relations. But such realisations are part of transformational learning and are reflections of our intellectual and political growth and our personal development.

To get maximum benefit from this Reader we need to pry our minds open to fresh ideas, absorb new knowledge and apply our intellect, knowledge and experience to develop a critical analysis of the issue at hand. Opening our minds means to accept differences, to see the world through the eyes of others, to open our ears to diverse viewpoints and to venture beyond our familiar horizons. To appreciate the Reader we have to tap deep into our inner resources of respect, empathy, tolerance, self-reflexivity and courage. We have to let our minds drift beyond the box, to see with our hands, hear with our skin and taste with our mind's eye.

The Reader is divided into nine thematic parts, each containing essays that introduce the reader to the main concepts as well as key issues and debates in the area, thus providing a solid framework for analysis, review of knowledge and transformative action. There is an inevitable overlap of issues across the parts, which serves as a constant reminder of the intertwining nature of sexualities in every aspect of our lives and the web-like political effects. The structured divisions are forced for conceptual neatness and reading convenience more than anything else. In addition to the essays, the Reader unconventionally carries a wide variety of genres including poetry, fiction, life stories, songs and diary entries. The range of writings is meant not only to connect readers to everyday, real-life sexual experiences, but also to stimulate creative, interesting and critical thinking about the inter-linkages between sexuality, power, rights, (under)development and various structures of inequality.

At the end of each thematic part, the reader will find a set of questions that acts as a guide for a systematic and critical approach to the key issues. Though this Reader attempts to use accessible language, analyses of African sexualities inevitably involve the use of complex and unfamiliar terms and concepts. For this reason, we have included a glossary at the end of book.

A final note concerns the authorship of the material. Almost all of the authors can be described as African writers, if the term African is understood as a geopolitical space. All of them can be termed African in the sense that the passion driving their research and writing comes from

engagement with the idea that serious global knowledge creation requires that the lives, experiences, ideas and imagination of people throughout the continent be considered critically important.

The diversity of the authors defies categorisation: they are men, women, sex workers, intersexed and transgendered; they speak many languages and write, here, in English; they live in 16 of Africa's 54 countries and in the diaspora; they have experienced multiple African realities; they live their own sexualities across diverse possibilities of desire, attraction, family creation, political activism and identity. When working with this Reader, it is also important to recognise that many of the authors represented here are prolific and previously published writers in addition to a crop of fresh and exciting new scholarship.

\* Edited by Sylvia Tamale, 'African Sexualities' is a groundbreaking volume, coming soon from [Pambazuka Press](#).

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## NOTES

[1] The African philosophy of ubuntu (humaneness) refers to understanding diversity and the belief in a universal bond and sharing (Ramose 1999). Justice Yvonne Mokgoro of the South African Constitutional Court elaborated this difficult-to-translate concept:

In its most fundamental sense it translates as personhood and 'morality'. Metaphorically ... [it describes] the significance of group solidarity on survival issues so central to the survival of communities. While it envelops the key values of group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, conformity to basic norms and collective unity, in its fundamental sense it denotes humanity and morality. Its spirit emphasizes a respect for human dignity, marking a shift from confrontation to conciliation. (Quoted in Sachs 2009: 106–107)

[2] Adopted in 2003 and brought into force in 2005, the Maputo Protocol addresses the health and reproductive rights of African women in Article 14.

[3] The Maputo Plan of Action was adopted in 2007 as a strategy to implement the continental policy framework for sexual and reproductive health and rights.

[4] Launched in 2009, CARMMA was meant to speed up the process of implementing the Maputo Plan of Action.

[5] These facts are clearly reflected by the dominance of Western theories as well as the over-representation of South African scholarship in this volume.

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