

## THE LONG HISTORY OF SAME-SEX DESIRE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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*Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in South Africa.* By MARC EPPRECHT. Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 317. \$57 (ISBN 0-7735-2750-8); \$18.95, paperback (ISBN 0-7735-2751-6).

KEY WORDS: Southern Africa, South Africa, Zimbabwe, masculinity, sexuality.

Whatever the author's intention may be – and Marc Epprecht is clear in his commitment to the cause – writing about African same-sex desire is always a political project. This applies even more so in the complex context of Southern Africa. *Hungochani*, a Shona term which roughly translates as 'homosexuality', traces what the author refers to as dissident sexuality and homophobia in Zimbabwe and South Africa. South Africa's constitution, the first to guarantee the right of sexual orientation, and the struggle by Zimbabwe's GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe, founded in 1990) to have their voices heard give hope in a social and political environment characterized by widespread homophobia spearheaded by political leaders such as Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe. With a still very small body of literature on homosexuality in Africa, which moreover focuses on contemporary issues and white sexuality, Epprecht's monograph fills an important void.

Epprecht succeeds in challenging some of the most fundamental – and, as he shows, unfounded – popular assumptions about African sexuality. He contends that homosexual practices and relationships, while rare in Southern Africa before the late nineteenth century, did exist and were generally tolerated. African rural societies, he argues, were concerned with social harmony and defining sexuality in reproductive terms, so that even rigid heterosexual normativity could accommodate perceived homosexual deviations by ignoring them or, at most, shaming those involved without reaching for drastic punitive measures. Contrary to public current anti-gay discourse in the region, he inverts the perception that African homosexuality contradicts traditional values and results from contagion with Western and oriental societies. On the other hand, Epprecht asserts, colonialists and missionaries did introduce homophobia. Finally, he emphasizes that mapping African same-sex desire and sex requires distinguishing between different contexts to avoid easy explanations such as the absence of women in institutionalized living conditions like prisons and mining compounds.

A study of this scope and ambition poses a range of challenges. Epprecht emphasizes African initiative, agency and creativity. He also tries to show not merely that same-sex desire existed but, as he states several times, that such relationships must have made up the majority of homosexual encounters. Yet his own research overwhelmingly reveals African voices who emphasize that their sexual encounters were situational, involuntary or not sexual at all, since no penetration was involved. In fact, he argues with Dunbar Moodie that the increased availability of women as sex partners for migrant workers in South Africa from the mid-1970s meant that mine marriages, that is relationships between male mine workers, decreased significantly. Thus, Epprecht finds himself looking for evidence which proves sodomy as a way of making his case. This is a slippery slope, for there is danger of conflating sexual orientation with sexual practices. Unfortunately, for the time period before the Second World War, the written sources are insufficient to come to a conclusion other than that same-sex desire certainly existed.

Epprecht made a great effort at collecting data for the entire region and for both rural and urban areas. Still, a clearer sense of urban culture beyond the workplace

would have been helpful. One aspect which fades in and out of the narrative which would have made an intriguing chapter is the account of the Ninevites, a South African gang which became notorious in the 1890s and whose members practised sodomy with men. It was organized according to Zulu and Afrikaner military structures, and the proven gang members, referred to as 'warriors', had male wives. The gang leader apparently argued that their sex practices were a choice made to show, like their name itself, that they were true rebels, against society, against God. Here it would have been helpful to know more about self- and public perception of this gang. Was it merely their use of violence or were their sexual practices indeed seen as such a flagrant and frightening transgression? If so, what conclusions can be drawn for African sexualities and masculinity?

Two smaller critical points: first, the study's ambitious time frame, reaching back thousands of years to rock paintings and mostly moving back and forth between the early nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries, necessarily leaves the depth of arguments uneven. Second, this study is mostly based on government sources such as the two South African enquiries from 1906 and 1907 and court cases. Despite the author's care in reading his written sources critically, occasionally late twentieth-century interviews are mustered to support arguments about an earlier time period, as in the use of contemporary studies on Swahili societies in Kenya and Zanzibar as evidence that Swahili traders practised homosexuality in Southern Africa 1,000 years ago.

The strength of this book as a historical study lies in the glimpses it allows into the everyday life of migrant labourers and urban life in both South Africa and Zimbabwe in the first half of the twentieth century. It does not, and probably no one book could, fulfil the claim to be a regional history of dissident sexualities for at least the past 200 years. In the introduction, Epprecht contends that queer studies do not merely add gay men to the historical narrative. The author does not always succeed in doing more than that, but still produces an important contribution to Africa's historiography.

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## WHAT SHAPED THE LIVES OF WORKING WOMEN IN UGANDA?

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*Women, Work and Domestic Virtue in Uganda, 1900–2003.* By GRACE BENTEBYA KYOMUHENDO and MARJORIE KENISTON MCINTOSH. Oxford: James Currey, 2006. Pp. xii + 308. £50 (ISBN 0-85255-988-7); £17.95, paperback (ISBN 0-85255-987-9).

KEY WORDS: Uganda, gender, household, labour, women.

Kyomuhendo and McIntosh have undertaken a study of women and (income-generating) work in Uganda from the early colonial years to the early twenty-first century. They argue that eight factors combined in different ways over the years to shape the lives of working women: economic factors (existence of markets, women's need and/or desire to gain access to cash); political factors (state policies, warfare and physical danger); education; religion; women's organizations; legal protection of women; demography and health; and ideology. Of particular importance is what they term the 'Domestic Virtue Model', or DVM. Beginning in