

EXCERPT FROM

BOY-WIVES: FEMALE HUSBANDS:  
STUDIES IN AFRICAN HOMOSEXUALITY

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PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

"ALL VERY CONFUSING"

AMONG THE MANY MYTHS EUROPEANS HAVE CREATED ABOUT AFRICA, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental in African societies is one of the oldest and most enduring. For Europeans, black Africans—of all the native peoples of the world—most epitomized "primitive man." Since primitive man was supposed to be close to nature, ruled by instinct, and culturally unsophisticated, he had to be heterosexual, his sexual energies and outlets devoted exclusively to their "natural" purpose: biological reproduction. If black Africans were the most primitive people in all humanity—if they were, indeed, human, which some debated—then they had to be the most heterosexual.

The figures of "natural" and "primitive man" have proven indispensable to Western projects of self-definition since the Greeks imagined non-Greeks as darker, hairier, cruder, and more profligate than themselves—as *barbaros*. The valuation of the primitive can and has varied. The sylvan "wild man" of medieval folk belief was a monster and widely feared. The noble savage of Rousseau and others was idealized—"natural" man was healthier, better adjusted, the bearer of wisdom. But in all cases the primitive serves the same function: to highlight that which distinguishes Western cultures by describing that which is not Western. Savagery proves indispensable to civilization, as does primitivism to progress, childhood to adulthood, deviancy to normalcy. Ultimately, every social difference that subdivides Western societies—ethnic, racial, national, and not the least sexual—has been mapped on to the ambidextrous figure of primitive man.

The sexualization of "primitive" Africans can be traced to Edward Gibbon's comments in the ninety-fourth chapter of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. When it was published in 1781, hardly any Europeans had traveled more than a few miles into the African interior. Still, Gibbon wrote, "I believe, and hope, that the negroes, in their own country, were exempt from this moral pestilence [i.e., homosexual 'vice']" ([1781] 1925: 506). Belief and hope have been confounded in reports of African homosexuality ever since. A century later, Sir Richard Burton, who had observed homosexual practices firsthand in the Near East and South Asia, gave Gibbon's wishful speculation credence, reporting that "the negro race is mostly untainted by sodomy and tribalism" (1885: 246). The boundaries of his so-called sotadic zone, that region where homosexuality was presumably indigenous did not extend south of the Sahara in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Yet others acknowledged that "sodomy" occurred in Africa but claimed that it was introduced by non-Africans—Arab slave-traders (Kagwa [1918] 1934: 98) or Europeans—or by another African group.<sup>3</sup> Eastern Bantu-speakers claimed that pederasty was imported by the Nubians (Schneider 1885: 295-96); the Sudanese blamed Turkish marauders (Weine 1848: 120). Although such beliefs (which have counterparts throughout the world) may tell us something about perceived ethnic boundaries, they cannot be relied on as evidence for the actual origins or transmission of cultural traits, especially those that are stigmatized.

Unfortunately, rather than dispel the myth of African sexual exceptionalism, anthropologists have often reinforced it by not seriously investigating same-sex patterns, failing to report what they do observe, and discounting what they report.<sup>4</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, one of the most widely respected authorities on indigenous African cultures, said nothing about male homosexuality in his classic 1937 study, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Zande*. Nor did he mention homosexual relations among the Nuer of southern Sudan in his equally influential monograph on that people.<sup>5</sup> Decades passed from the time of his fieldwork until he finally reported what he had learned about male homosexuality among the once-fierce Azande of the northern Congo.<sup>6</sup> In 1957, in a relatively obscure journal, and then in more accessible venues in 1970 and 1971, he related how Azande warriors routinely married boys who functioned as temporary wives.

The practice was institutionalized to the extent that the warriors paid "brideprice" to the parents of the boys. This instance of age-stratified homosexuality, comparable in elaboration to the same-sex practices of ancient Crete or Sparta, had already lapsed by the time of Evans-Pritchard's fieldwork in the 1930s, although it was still remembered. The scope of these practices might be entirely unknown today had Evans-Pritchard not decided to finally write about them shortly before his death.

Other anthropologists, in Africa as elsewhere, have denied (or dismissed) the presence of homosexuality even when they observed it. Alan Merriam, for example, in one sentence stated that homosexual behavior was absent among Bala men and in the next reported native claims that the *kitesha*, a gender-defined social role, "is a homosexual" (1971: 93-94). When homosexuality is acknowledged, its meaning and cultural significance are discounted and minimized. By claiming that homosexual relations are solely due to a lack of women, for example, or are part of a short-lived adolescent phase, the possibility of homoerotic desire—that an individual may actually want and find pleasure in another of the same sex—is effectively denied. In the 1930s, Herskovits asserted that homosexuality among Dahomey youths was merely situational and opportunistic: "[When] the games between boys and girls are stopped, the boys no longer have the opportunity for companionship with the girls, and the sex drive finds satisfaction in close friendship between boys in the same group. . . . A boy may take the other 'as a woman' this being called *gaglo*, homosexuality." Yet in the immediately following sentence he reported, "Sometimes an affair of this sort persists during the entire life of the pair" (1938: 289).

Ethnocentric attitudes are often all-too evident. In the 1930s, Geoffrey Gorer complained that among Dahomean royalty, "Sexual perversion and neurotic curiosity were developed to an almost European extent" ([1935] 1962: 141). Four decades later, Michael Gelfand employed the same judgments to claim the opposite for Zimbabwe: "The traditional Shona," he rhapsodized, "have none of the problems associated with homosexuality [so] obviously they must have a valuable method of bringing up children, especially with regards to normal sex relations, thus avoiding this anomaly so frequent in Western society" (1979: 201).

In fairness, the task of anthropologists, even the most conscientious, is daunting. Their research has always depended on the approval and material support of political authorities—originally those of the colonial powers, today those of both Western and African states. Indeed, as Sally Moore has pointed out, contemporary anthropologists are no less wary of offending the black governments under whose shadow they labor than earlier generations were of white colonial regimes (1994: 6). Given the overtly homophobic attitudes and policies of some African governments (see the discussion of events in Zimbabwe in Part IV), it is not surprising that few anthropologists have made African sexuality, let alone homosexuality, a focus of their research.

The close identification of anthropologists with political authorities also means that ethnographer-informant relations are often fraught with tension. In this context, inquiries about sexuality typically result in a cat-and-mouse game, as Kurt Falk discovered in the 1920s:

To begin with, it is difficult to judge the truth of stories and answers to questions. Secondly, those questioned, under the suggestion of the asker, often guess and readily answer not only the questions in the desired way, but exaggerates further, hoping to make the researcher happy. And then as the questions mostly touch on the subject of sex, they are very reticent and tend more than otherwise to disavowals and denials. It is easier to learn about the subject by questioning a knowledgeable member of a foreign tribe that has lived among them. Here also, however, caution is suggested and control is always to be exercised. (Falk 1923: 42)

Consequently, native denials of homosexuality should be regarded skeptically, as Brian MacDermot learned while conducting field research among the Ethiopian Nuer in the 1960s. MacDermot's informants told him in no uncertain terms that sex between men simply did not occur in their society, and he believed them (MacDermot 1972: 99). Then, one day, he noticed "a crazy old man . . . accepted by everyone in the village . . . [who] either tended the cattle or at other times helped the women harvesting corn or carrying burdens." As the old man treaded off to join the women in their work, Doering,

MacDermot's primary informant, began to tell a story "which completely contradicted all I [MacDermot] had thought and learnt so far about Nuer homosexual relations":

It had always been stressed by the tribesmen that homosexuality between men was impossible, for if discovered amongst them it could be punishable by death. Doering now told me about a crazy man he had once known who lived near Nasir in the Sudan and who frequently dressed as a woman. This was different, Doering explained, because "the man had actually become a woman"; the prophet of Deng had been consulted and had agreed to his change of status. The prophet had decided to call on the spirits and after consultation had declared that indeed the man was a woman. Therefore, he could dress in women's clothes and behave as a woman. From that time onward it was agreed that "he" should be called "she," and "she" was allowed to marry a husband.

"All very confusing," MacDermot concluded with a note of exasperation, "and so totally against what the Nuer had been telling me, that I questioned Doering carefully, but he failed to produce further explanation" (MacDermot 1972: 119).

For individuals from a society in which homosexuality is defined as a unitary, predominantly sexual phenomenon with fixed internal psychological motivations—and who have judged that phenomenon so harshly that even its leading social engineers and intellectuals are afraid to study or discuss the subject—the diversity of African homosexualities is, indeed, "all very confusing." But as this volume shows, African homosexuality is neither random nor incidental—it is a consistent and logical feature of African societies and belief systems.

Today, especially where Western influences (notably Christianity and Marxism) have been strong, the belief that homosexuality is a decadent, bourgeois, Western import has become common. In the late 1970s, when the mother of South African Simon Nikoli discovered that he was gay, she said, "I knew I should not have sent you to that white school" (Bull 1990: 45).<sup>7</sup> Sensitized by missionaries and Western education, defensive in the face of stereotypes of black hypersexuality, and resentful of sexual exploitation in colonial institutions, the first generation of postcolonial Africans was extremely reluctant to

discuss the subject of homosexuality.<sup>8</sup> For most, the negotiation of African identity remained tied to European standards of morality. In seeking to replace a "genuinely perverse" with a "genuinely normal" Other, they drew on the same rhetoric employed in colonial discourse on native sexuality (Bleys 1995: 4-9; see also Dunton 1989). As the medical model of homosexuality was being abandoned in the West, it was widely adopted in the developing world.

In the African diaspora, as well, the subject of homosexuality has evoked denials and just-so stories attributing it to alien sources. In the United States, where Afrocentrism—the movement among Americans of African descent to construct and embrace African history, customs, and values—has become influential, questions of what "tradition" does and does not include are highly politicized. In 1990, a member of the rap group Public Enemy asserted, "There's not a word in any African language which describes homosexual. If you want to take me up on that, then you find me, in the original languages of Africa, a word for homosexual, lesbian, or prostitute. There are no such words. They didn't exist."<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein the Nigerian-English sociologist Ifi Amadiume denied the presence of lesbianism in what are otherwise described as marriages between women and decried Western black lesbians using "prejudiced interpretations of African situations to justify their choices of sexual alternatives" (1987: 7).

What began with denial has ended in a near taboo on the subject of African homosexualities—a taboo nonetheless based on European, not African, morality. The colonialists did not introduce homosexuality to Africa but rather intolerance of it—and systems of surveillance and regulation for suppressing it.<sup>10</sup> As the chapter by Marc Epprecht shows, however, these systems were not successful as long as the reaction of the colonized was simply to hide or deny such practices. Only when native people began to forget that same-sex patterns were ever a part of their culture did homosexuality become truly stigmatized.

Popular images of Africa—as the "dark" continent, the "cradle" of humanity, where distinctions between human and animal, civilized and savage, are tentative and easily reversed—continue to cloud Western views of the continent and its people (see Mudimbe 1988 and 1994). The anthropological literature also offers changing and varied constructions of Africa. In the early twentieth century, in response to the Victorian rhetoric of savagery and primitivism, anthropologists

embraced functionalism and emphasized the integration, morality, and coherence of African societies—thereby redeeming them from an image of anarchy for their Western readers. In the postcolonial period, "change" has replaced "custom" in anthropological writings, and images of stable, traditional, and conservative African societies have given way to depictions of social "breakdown" in the face of urbanization and modernization. Africans are portrayed as emerging from stable social systems into a state of cultural disruption no longer "African" nor fully European (Moore 1994: 57). Some anthropologists have suggested that the collapse of the tribal order is resulting in a new immorality (see, for example, the chapter by Tessman). Many nonanthropologists have taken the next step in such a line of argument by naming homosexuality as one of the "immoralities" to be blamed on the effects of colonialism. Today, Western rhetoric about "African sexuality," with its myths of super-virile men and lascivious women, has found new life in accounts of AIDS in Africa and seems to underlie research agendas (see Chirimuuta and Chirimuuta 1987; Schoepf 1995).

Understanding African homosexualities requires not only abandoning these myths but also suspending certain deeply held Western beliefs and values concerning sexuality, love, and personal relationships. Although the ideals of voluntary marriage based on mutual choice, sexual attraction, and monogamy are now almost universally embraced in Western societies (and in a growing number of other countries), it has only been in the past century and a half that a majority of individuals could hope to attain them. A major impetus for egalitarian relationships has come from feminism, both during its first wave, in the nineteenth century, and its more radical second wave, beginning in the 1960s. For a growing number of Western women, the key to voluntary and mutual relationships with men has become the attainment of economic and legal independence from them. As these ideals have been more widely adopted, attempts to police the borders between voluntary and involuntary sexuality have become increasingly fine-tuned. Relationships between individuals of unequal status (between a powerful man and a woman employee, for example, or an older man and teenaged boy) have become increasingly suspect.

But in non-Western (and in earlier Western) societies in which arranged marriages prevail and strict rules limit and predetermine marriage partners, very different expectations prevail regarding love,

sex, and free will. In their personal relationships, not only women and girls but also boys and men lack choices that are taken for granted in contemporary Western societies. Love (intimacy, companionship, care), while welcomed in a primary relationship, is not necessary or always expected. We should not be shocked, therefore, that in some African societies adolescent boys entered arranged relationships with older men without being asked if they were willing or what their sexual preference was (a concept that did not exist, in any case)—any more than the even more common practice of arranged marriages for adolescent girls with older men shocks us. We should also be prepared to find, as Epprecht shows, that such relationships had a range of meanings for their members—for some, being a boy-wife was almost a kind of slavery, for others a deep bond of love. Finally, it is important to remember that where there is power there is resistance. Lila Abdul-Lughod, for example, has shown how women subjected to rules of seclusion in highly patriarchal cultures (desert Bedouins) find ways to resist and undermine the power of men (1986). We cannot assume that African boys any more than girls and women were passive victims of social forces. Indeed, some young people of both sexes actively seek relations with older adults. The black South African activist Zackie Achmat entitled his 1995 memoir "My Childhood as an Adult Molester."

Instead of attempting to forge yet another mythical African unity—a single, consistent homosexuality across a culturally homogeneous continent—this book offers multiple Africas and diverse patterns of same-sex sexuality. While we do attempt to make generalizations about patterns in the Conclusion and Appendix II, the contributors to this volume focus on specific groups and places, offering, if not always "thick" descriptions in the sense of Clifford Geertz, at least detailed and specific case studies, and they separate the description of practices and beliefs from generalizations about them. Indeed, if nothing else, the diverse backgrounds of the contributors ensure that no unified image of Africa emerges. They include anthropologists, sociologists, historians, linguists, and journalists. Several have had extensive firsthand experience in Africa (or are African themselves), and an oral history provides a detailed account of one contemporary African's same-sex life. These recent studies are supplemented with earlier ethnographies, which are reprinted here because of their value as primary sources and their

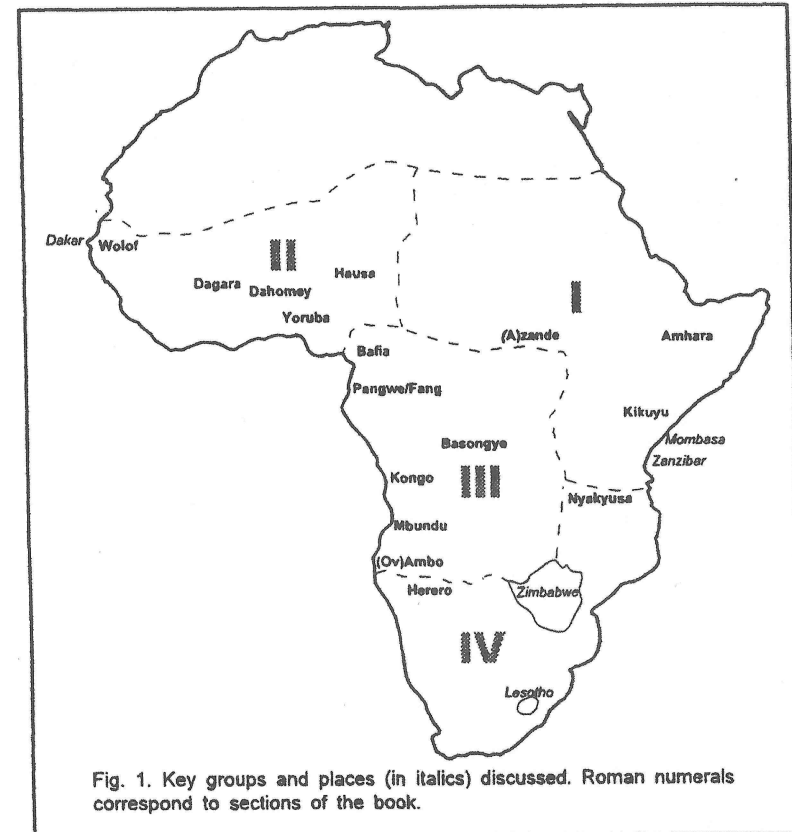


Fig. 1. Key groups and places (in *italics*) discussed. Roman numerals correspond to sections of the book.

inaccessibility. The authors of these reports include missionaries, colonial doctors, and anthropologists.

This book is organized geographically according to four broad regions of sub-Saharan Africa (see fig. 1): Part I covers the Horn of Africa, the Sudan, and East Africa; Part II, West Africa (including coastal West Africa and the interior sudanic region); Part III, Central Africa (from the tropical rainforests of the equatorial region to the Congo basin and east to present-day Tanzania); and Part IV, southern Africa (from Mozambique and Zambia to South Africa and Namibia).<sup>11</sup> Each of the four regional sections begins with a survey by the editors of historical and anthropological reports. The book concludes with a review of the literature on woman-woman marriages, a general