

## Face to Race

### Gender, Ethnicity and the Media

Marc Epprecht. *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008.

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1 The presence or absence of homosexuality in Africa is certainly one of the most hotly contested debates in academic and political circles in recent years. This debate was orchestrated partly because of the desire of African homosexuals to come out of the closet and secure legal and institutional recognition for their sexual orientation, which is considered "unnatural," "abnormal" and "unAfrican" by mainstream heterosexual Africa. At the center of this seemingly intractable contestation is a well-articulated position that same-sex affairs are not only alien to the continent but were introduced by foreigners, notably Westerners, during colonial rule. Some African leaders like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda launched formidable repressive attacks aimed at "cutting the head of the roaring monster." The release of important studies like Murray and Roscoe's *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, Marc Epprecht's *Hungochani* and Neville Hoad's *African Intimacies*, among others, signals a new turning point in academic engagement with sexuality discourses. These authors denounced the absence of non-normative sexuality in Africa by looking at institutionalized forms of same-sex affairs among some select African ethnic groups.

2 Epprecht's new book, *Heterosexual Africa*, while conforming to the theoretical orientation of the above-mentioned works, charts a new direction in the discourse of sexuality in Africa. Instead of focusing on specific regions of the continent, Epprecht takes a *longue durée* approach to the historical evolution of contemporary academic discourses and popular ideas, which summarily see same-sex affairs as "unAfrican." The book's data come from specialized disciplines such as history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, as well as film, literature and popular culture studies. The contribution of this book to sexuality studies and Africanist scholarship definitely goes beyond the richness and diversity of sources and methodology. The origin of the idea of Africa's heteronormativity or exclusive heterosexuality devoid of the "pestilence" of homosexuality as well as its transformations from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century is presented in a captivating manner.

3 By looking at the evolution and transformation of the idea of the "unAfricanity" of homosexuality and Africa's exclusive heterosexuality over a period of over 500 years, Epprecht is able to demonstrate how significant developments such as colonial rule, political and cultural nationalism during and after the demise of colonial rule, and the debate over the causation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic from the mid 1980s have structured scholarly and popular endorsement of Africa's heteronormativity and the idea of a distinct African sexuality which is not only permissive but also promiscuous. Epprecht opines that some misguided scholars of HIV/AIDS and other commentators not only see Africa as essentially heterosexual, but also believe that

the pandemic is attributable to sexual permissiveness and promiscuity. What is more, by historicizing the entrenchment of Africa's exclusive heterosexuality, Epprecht clearly exposes this blind spot of African history, thus showing that writings and debates about the absence or presence of homosexuality predate our contemporary age – thereby contradicting the assumption that the contestation over homosexuality is a recent development.

4 According to Epprecht, European travelers and armchair commentators were the first to document their observations about African sexuality. They were convinced that Africa was immune to the satanic and barbaric influence of sodomy. Some of them, like Edward Gibbon, provided the intellectual justification that points to Africa's closeness to nature. In Western conviction and imagination, the closer a group or race was to nature, the more natural and the less prone they were to sexual aberration and anomalies like homosexuality, bisexuality and other shades of sexual orientation that depart from the "normal" and "natural."

5 The idea of "primitive" African sexuality free of the sexual pestilence of homosexuality did not end with the establishment of colonialism. Indeed, colonialism facilitated the entrenchment of a new class of writers and commentators who had the resources and time to study Africa and its "barbaric" and "uncivilized" cultures and peoples. As an intellectual arm of imperialism, anthropology, according to Epprecht, not only endorsed the observations of its homophobic precursors but also provided new coherent and systematic findings pointing to an African exclusive heterosexuality. Within this ideologically motivated endeavour, evidence pointing to same-sex affairs was either discussed ephemerally or outright dismissed. In Epprecht's words, "By conjuring idealized or exoticized Natives, Primitives, and other Others, they [anthropologists] helped to create an understanding of 'normal' and 'modern' by way of contrast and edification. In the process they created a body of purportedly empirical or scientific data that in retrospect we can see as deeply flawed and morally normative" (34).

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6 Africanist scholars and nationalists as well as contemporary academics consider colonialism as a dark period of African history for it led to enormous human and material exploitation. However, as Epprecht opines, they agree with these early anthropologists that same-sex relations are "unAfrican." Thus, according to Epprecht, Africanist scholarship inherited some of the age-old biases of the Western tradition of homophobia. Epprecht mentions the works of prominent nationalist writers such as Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, who clearly demonstrates the reluctance of nationalists to accept the presence of homosexuality in Africa. Even when they mentioned the presence of homosexuality, they were quick to adduce it to the influence to Western cultural infiltration. On why Africanist scholars seem to denounce same-sex affairs, Epprecht's opines, "Indeed, in colonial and Cold World contexts, where homophobia was almost a civic duty and where Africans commonly encountered patronizing attitudes from whites, African scholars may have feared that to produce evidence on the topic, or even to show curiosity about it, might be taken as a reproof of African dignity" (131). Thus, Africanist scholars and writers, especially those in the literary field, depict the representation of same-sex affairs but do not endorse them.

7 The Yoruba proverb "A kii dara ka ma ku si ibi kan" (literally, "No matter how excellent one is, there is always a dose of imperfection" or "all good things have limitations") best explains the strength and weakness of this work. The limitation of this book is explicable in terms of its orientation as a synthesis. On several occasions, evidence is only cursorily presented in buttressing points and arguments. This approach, while conforming to the standard of a highly specialized academic field of history of sexuality and sexuality studies, may not satisfy the curiosity of readers who are not familiar with the complex debates and directions in the field.

#### Page 3:

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