

Researching and theorizing sexualities in Africa

Sylvia Tamale

Introduction

Researching human sexuality without looking at gender is like cooking pepper soup without pepper – it might look like pepper soup but one sip will make it clear that an essential ingredient in this Nigerian specialty is missing. The hot, tantalizing taste that makes it real and detectable only to the sensitive tongue and palate is absent. In the same way, without a gendered analysis, the ‘dish’ of sexuality research is flat, empty and morose.⁶

Sexuality and gender go hand in hand; both are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central, crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies. They give each other shape and any scientific enquiry of the former immediately invokes the latter. Gender provides the critical analytical lens through which any data on sexuality must logically be interpreted. Things that have an impact on gender relations – such as class, age, religion, race, ethnicity, culture, locality and disability – also influence the sexual lives of men and women. In other words, sexuality is deeply embedded in the meanings and interpretations of gender systems.

⁶ This essay was first published in *African sexualities: A reader*. (S. Tamale (Ed.), Pambazuka Press, 2011). I wish to thank Jane Bennett, who was my primary source of inspiration for writing this essay, for her generosity in reading the first draft and providing valuable comments.

This truism generally recognized by African feminist scholars of sexuality is by no means universally accepted. Many researchers still view sexuality within the narrow spectrum of the sex act without exploring the extraneous factors that impact and shape our multifarious sexualities. Some scholars caution against oversimplifying and essentializing the practice and discourse of sexualities in Africa, urging a reading of their multiple and contextual meanings (Oinas & Arnfred, 2009; Mama, 2007; Helle-Valle, 2004). Reference to sexuality in the plural does not simply point to the diverse forms of orientation, identity or status. It is a political call to conceptualize sexuality outside the normative social orders and frameworks that view it through binary oppositions and labels. Thinking in terms of multiple sexualities is crucial to disperse the essentialism embedded in so much sexuality research.

The various dimensions of sexuality include sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations. Sexuality touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence. It is an encompassing phenomenon that involves the human psyche, emotions, physical sensations, communication, creativity and ethics.

Given that sexuality is a deeply complex phenomenon, studies around it must be specialized to reflect its nuances, and its contextual and multilayered nature. Because the topic of sexualities is often wrapped in silence, taboos and privacies, researchers need to hone specific techniques and methods to reveal invisible, silenced and repressed knowledge. Because in Africa many acts associated with sexualities are criminalized or highly stigmatized, analysts need to tread the territory with care and sensitivity. Most importantly, researchers need to recognize that there is no uniform or monolithic way of experiencing sexualities within one culture or community, or even among individuals, therefore the premise of multiple sexualities provides a starting point for any study. It is also crucial to note that gender as a research variable is not a substitute for sex. Nor can we make homogenized assumptions about African sexualities based on other intersecting factors, such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, religion or other categories. Common sexual stereotypes

find their way into study projects, research designs and, ultimately, theory. Examples include:

- Human beings engage in sex for reproductive purposes only.
- She is disabled and therefore has no sexual desire.
- He is a man and therefore desires only female sexual partners.
- He is a 45-year-old bachelor and therefore must be gay.
- She is menopausal and therefore asexual.
- She wears a religious veil and is therefore sexually submissive.
- She is wearing a dress and high heels and is therefore biologically a woman.
- He is openly gay and therefore his life is exclusively defined by the sex act.
- He is her father and therefore cannot have sex with his daughter.
- Sex workers are nymphomaniacs who cannot survive without sex.
- They are in a childless marriage and therefore she must be barren.
- Her hymen is intact and therefore she's a virgin.
- She is a feminist and is therefore sexually frustrated.
- Sexual activity that does not involve a penis or penetration is not real sex.
- Men naturally have more sexual libido than women.
- Black men have larger penises than white men.

The list goes on and on.

Another important point to note for knowledge production on African sexualities is the issue of language. The fact that the language of Western colonialists has dominated sexuality discourses means that the shape and construction of the meanings and definitions of related concepts necessarily reflect realities and experiences outside Africa. Foucault (1976) instructed us decades ago that it is through language and narratives that knowledge (and hence power) is produced. This poses serious limitations to researchers of African sexualities, who have to collect data in local languages and present their findings in the foreign language of the academy. Inevitably, rich

cultural connotations, ambiguities and multiple meanings are lost in translation. A good example is the different meanings attached to the concept of silence. In the dominant Western tradition voice is valorized and silence constructed as a total blank, while in many African cultures silence can be as powerful and as empowering as speech. Studies have shown there is a legitimate silence surrounding the sexualities of some African women that is ambiguous and not able to be engaged (Tamale, 2005).

In this essay, I retrace the key historical developments in researching and theorizing sexualities in Africa to help understand the present, the continuities and the changes. A historical analysis further illuminates some enduring assumptions and beliefs that underlie many of the studies and theories about African sexualities. Later, I discuss some pertinent issues about researching sexualities in an ethical, balanced and sensitive manner. I conclude by looking at future prospects of researching sexualities in Africa.

Researching sexualities in Africa: a historical trajectory

Perhaps a good place to begin is to ask the question: why do we engage in research at all? There are probably as many answers to this question as there are types of researcher: a university lecturer might do it as a license to academic titles and promotion; a policymaker does it to support and monitor policies; a company does it to improve its product and marketing; and so forth. The primary and most important reason for conducting research is to create knowledge and explain physical and social phenomena. So, for example, a sexuality-related research study would seek to increase our knowledge about issues including: how human beings relate sexually; what influences people's choices of whom they have sex with, how and when; how sexuality influences relationships, laws and policies; how sexualities are reflected in social norms, identities and attitudes; how intimate relationships are regulated and controlled; what causes sexually-transmitted diseases; and so forth. The research process creates knowledge and provides explanations relating to various aspects

of sexuality, ultimately producing theories of sexuality. How, where and by whom the data were collected and for what purpose are all critical in determining the usefulness and validity of such theories.

Nowhere were assumptions regarding the 'knower,' the 'known' and the 'knowable' taken more for granted than in sexuality research conducted on colonized populations such as those found in Africa. In *Decolonising Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes from the vantage point of a colonized indigenous Maori (of Aotearoa New Zealand):

The term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism.

The word itself, "research", is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (p. 1)

Generally speaking, research in the colonial context was conducted along a traditional hierarchy of power between the researcher and the researched. It was almost always assumed that the researchers were all-knowing individuals and the researched were naive "subjects". It was further presumed that only the former could create legitimate, scholarly knowledge, usually through written reports and publications. There was often little or no acknowledgement of the role the researched played in the process.

Examining these methodological and epistemological issues is extremely important to determine the legitimacy of the knowledge that has been constructed about African sexualities. Through methodologies such as those used in Marxism, post-colonial theory, feminist theory and post-structuralism, such hierarchical frameworks in research have been challenged and deconstructed.

As in all research, studies on sexualities have been motivated by ideological, political and/or social

agendas. In Africa, the majority of these studies have been programmatically and/or donor-driven (Arnfred, 2004; Undie & Benaya, 2006). The hypotheses, research questions, research methods and analysis techniques are heavily influenced by these agendas. This is demonstrated by further framing the discussion so that it more or less follows the historical sequence that has informed sexuality research on the continent. Each sub-theme addresses the overall objective of the research, the players, the target audience and the methods, funders and agendas involved.

Sexuality and the colonizing project

A great deal of rich information about African sexualities lies in ancient histories that live through griots, ighyuwas, imbongies, jelis, igawens, guwels and other orators around the continent.⁷ Historical accounts of African sexualities are alive in folklore, traditional songs, dance, folk art, body markings, clothing, jewelry, names and naming systems. Yet these systems of knowledge are denigrated in the theoretical and normative domains of mainstream research. In fact they have been “reclassified as oral traditions rather than histories” (Smith, 1999, p. 33).

Perhaps the earliest written records of studies on African sexualities were those archived from colonial explorers and missionaries who traversed the continent in the latter half of the 19th century.⁸ During this period of imperial expansion and colonization, African bodies and sexualities became focal points for justifying and legitimizing the fundamental objectives of colonialism: to civilize the barbarian and savage natives of the “dark continent” (McClintock, 1995; Young, 1995).

7 These are different names of traditional story tellers/entertainers from various parts of Africa.

8 There is archaeological evidence to prove that written traditions existed in ancient Africa, e.g., in Timbuktu, Ethiopia and Egypt. However, such records are too under-researched to provide a useful academic resource. The 54 countries in Africa were at one time or another colonized by a European imperial power (Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and Portugal), with the exceptions of Liberia and Ethiopia. Liberia was created in the 1820s as a nation for freed slaves from the United States of America, and Ethiopia repulsed attempts by the Italians to colonize it in 1896. However, the Italians occupied Ethiopia briefly between 1936 and 1941.

These colonial expeditions were financed by the imperial governments of Britain, Germany, France, Portugal, Spain and Italy and private companies, such as the Imperial British East Africa Company.

Texts from 19th century reports authored by white explorers and missionaries reveal a clear pattern of the ethnocentric and racist construction of African sexualities. Western imperialist caricatures of African sexualities were part of a wider design to colonize and exploit the black race. Narratives equated black sexuality with primitiveness. Not only were African sexualities depicted as primitive, exotic and bordering on nymphomania (Gesheker, 1995; Mama, 1996; Magubane, 2001; Osha, 2004), but it was also perceived as immoral, bestial and lascivious. Africans were caricatured as having lustful dispositions. Their sexualities were read directly into their physical attributes; these attributes were believed to reflect the (im)morality of Africans (Gilman, 1985; Commons, 1993). The imperialists executed this mission through force, brutality, paternalism, arrogance, insensitivity and humiliation.

The bodies of African women especially worked to buttress and apologize for the colonial project (Commons, 1993) and were fundamental to the consolidation of the imperialism. Juxtaposed with the imported and highly conservative sexual norms of Europe, the relatively unrestrained sexualities of Africans posed huge challenges to the Victorian minds of the early explorers.⁹ Indeed, Victorian women were expected to mute their sexuality and be sexually frigid (Wolf, 1991). Their dress, behavior and mores were geared to erasing any hint of sexuality. Women who acted otherwise would immediately be branded prostitutes or courtesans (Rees, 1977).

African women's sexualities, however, were characterized as the antithesis of European mores of sex and beauty and were labeled primitive. The 1860s travel memoirs of English explorer Sir

⁹ This generalized example by no means signifies a homogenized African or European sexuality.

Richard Burton, for example, described the women that he encountered in the kingdom of Dahomey (present day Benin) as “hideous” and “taken in adultery or too shrewish to live with their husbands”. He described their physical appearance as male-like: ‘muscular development of the frame ... femininity could be detected only by the bosom’ (quoted in Blair, 2010, p. 98). Other myths and stereotypes of African female sexualities included that: “African women could give birth without pain”; “Negro women menstruated in greater quantity”; “Negro women had long and pendulous breasts as an inherited physical trait” (Curtin, 1964: 229).

Europeans’ depictions of African women as insatiable, amoral, barbaric beings said more about the fears, fantasies and preoccupations with sexuality of the former than anything else. Leah Commons (1993) says of Western fixation with African women’s sexualities:

Rather than being a characteristic of African cultures, sexual obsession was a reflection of the repressed sexuality of the British. By describing the African as a lascivious beast, the Victorians could distance themselves from the “savage”, while indulging in forbidden fantasies. More importantly, by laying the blame for lust on women alone, colonizers made themselves blameless for their own sexual relations with African women. (p. 4)

Many Western anthropologists who followed the explorers in the early 20th century picked up from where the latter left off and continued (mis)representing African sexualities as exotic and backward. Historical documents and scholarship that are deeply flawed in their presentations of African sexualities, portrayed in racist, patronizing and morally normative ways have been critiqued by scholars (Owusu, 1978; Lyons & Lyons, 2004; Epprecht, 2006, 2010).

Religion, especially Christianity and Islam, stressed the impurity and inherent sin associated with women’s bodies (Goodson, 1991). Through religion and its proselytizing activities, Africans were encouraged to reject their previous beliefs and values and to adopt the “civilized ways” of the whites.

With these new developments came an emphasis on covering and hiding body parts¹⁰ and one of the most effective methods of controlling African women's sexuality has been through regulation of their dress codes. Perhaps the most notorious post-colonial cases on the continent in this regard were the draconian laws on women's dressing sanctioned by dictators Kamuzu Banda of Malawi and Idi Amin of Uganda.¹¹ A new script, steeped in the Victorian moralistic, antisexual and body-shame edicts, was inscribed on the bodies of African women and with it an elaborate system of control. The instrumentalization of sexuality through the nib of statutory, customary and religious law is closely related to women's oppression and gender constructions. The colonial legacies of African sexualities linger today, seen in contemporary accounts and theories as the ensuing discussion shows (see also Magubane, 2001).

Medicalized sexuality and reproductive health

The baseline of sexuality research in the field of public health in Africa lies in the colonial medicalization of African sexuality and a simultaneous reduction of its purpose to reproduction (Vaughan, 1991; Musisi, 2002). The positivist approach that treats people as objects and is preoccupied with reductionist representations of complex processes dominates studies in this area. The "scientific" prejudices about women's bodies and their reproductive role witnessed in Europe during the period of enlightenment were imported to Africa. The seminal works of philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn (1962), who analyzed the history of science, and Michel Foucault (1976), who articulated the use of the body as a medium of social control and the socialization of reproduction, were significant in

10 This can clearly be seen in religious garb, such as veils, burkas, jilbabs, habits and other wide, ankle-length, full-sleeved loose dresses.

11 The Malawian Decency in Dress Act of 1973 and Uganda's decree of 1972 imposed strict dress codes for women during the reign of these two African autocrats. In both cases women were prohibited from wearing shorts, mini-skirts, hot pants, slacks or low-necked garments. The Ugandan decree gave precise definitions and hemline lengths of what was legally acceptable. For example, it prohibited hemlines that rose '5.08 centimeters above the upper edge of the patella' (knee cap) – see section 1 (ee) of the Penal Code Act (Amendment) Decrees of 1972, 1973 and 1974.

unveiling the role of science and sexuality in constructing and perpetuating social power relations.

The main focuses of public health researchers during the colonial era were disease, pregnancy prevention and curbing sexual excesses and perversions. The narrow approach meant that the research by biomedical experts, epidemiologists and demographers ignored (and in the main still ignores) sexual wellness and issues of eroticism and desire, leading to limited theoretical framings of African sexualities (Undie & Benaya, 2006).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, demographers in the global North, focusing particularly on developing countries, spearheaded rising panic about a population explosion (Ehrlich, 1968; Hardin, 1968). Researchers flocked to the continent to study African sexual behaviors in relation to fertility. Images of oversexed, promiscuous, less moral and less intelligent Africans seemed never to be far from the minds of such demographers and other researchers interested in studies of fertility control.

Some African researchers bought into the imperialist overpopulation discourse and in the process reinforced racist ideologies and stereotypes. This was a period in which great numbers of the African intelligentsia had not decolonized their minds to explore new frontiers of knowledge production. The process of consciousness decolonization involves critical thinking, unpacking common sense knowledge and a radical reconceptualization of dominant ideologies (Mamdani, 1972; Kibirige, 1997).

The global onslaught of HIV/AIDS, with Africa located as its epicenter, brought researchers from the North flocking to the continent in a bid to find ways of curbing its spread; the process engendered a profound re-medicalization of African sexualities. Policies had to be formulated, national frameworks established, advocacy programs drawn up and sexuality theories revisited and reconceptualized. The bulk of these endeavors were quantitative and epidemiological, largely ignoring the qualitative socio-economic aspects of the epidemic. The World Health Organization (WHO), bilateral partners,

international NGOs, pharmaceutical corporations and Western medical and health professionals competed with each other to tackle this uncharted territory. Their different agendas informed the strategies and meanings that they attached to the epidemic.

The dominant discourses reinforced the epidemiology and stigma of HIV/AIDS (Treichler, 1999). The colonial stereotypic images of a specific African sexuality – insatiable, alien and deviant – to this day inform Western discourses in this area of research. Dilger (2008) observes:

[A]part from rampant fantasies about prostitution and the red-light districts stretching from Nairobi to Johannesburg and Dakar, the European/North American discourse on sexuality and AIDS in Africa has been fed by images of an enforced, exotic and often violent sexuality said to prevail on the continent: polygyny, female genital mutilation, and especially the (gang) rapes of women and babies in South Africa have made sexual violence and child rape the main issues for international media reports on AIDS in Africa. (p.125)

An excellent example of the essentialist approach, the totalizing perspective and colonizing representations adopted in research on African sexualities is the oft-cited study undertaken by demographers John Caldwell, Pat Caldwell and Pat Quiggin (1989). Their study, which sought to analyze the social context of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, developed a theory that African sexuality (an essentialist singularity for Caldwell et al.) is inherently permissive, concluding that such immorality in the sexual behavior of Africans spells doom in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the continent. Both the conceptual framework and conclusions of the Caldwell study have been subjects of a polemic, stirring up great controversy and criticism in contemporary sexuality scholarship (see Le Blanc et al., 1991; Ahlberg, 1994; Savage & Tchombe, 1994; Heald, 1999; Arnfred, 2004). Nevertheless, their work made abundantly clear the weaknesses in colonial approaches to research on African sexualities and symbolized a watershed moment for reconstructing theory on the subject matter (Undie & Benaya, 2006).

Research in the area of reproductive health on the continent has a long and checkered history. Because reproduction was viewed as the role par excellence for women in heteropatriarchal societies, it became the primary definer of their sexuality. The earliest studies followed the biomedical model, focusing on maternal and child health and divorced from the gendered aspects of epidemiology, access, decision making and health management systems. The driving force behind most of these studies was to curb the high fertility rates that were typical of “traditional” African families and to forge policies that would reduce these rates and put Africa on the road to modernity. Reproductive health was viewed within the confines of the heterosexual family and women similarly reduced to their conventional mothering roles.

The overriding theory developed from this research established a causal link between overpopulation and underdevelopment. Quantitative research methods, such as KAP (knowledge, attitude and practice) surveys associated with the biomedical model, resulted in skewed findings, suspect theories and faulty policies about African women’s reproductive health and sexuality (Ahlberg & Kulane, 2011).

During the 1990s, reproductive health in sub-Saharan Africa became a subject of particular interest to development partners, who directed significant funds to set up research centers and institutes, many of which continued to apply the biomedical model. These new entities were to complement old-school non-governmental organizations, such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation Africa Region. The African Population and Health Research Centre set up in 1995 in Nairobi, Kenya and the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre established in Lagos, Nigeria in 2003 were only two examples. The fact that the activities of the latter organization focused on Africa’s most populous countries (Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa) spoke volumes about its primary mandate, suggesting that population control was on its agenda. It must nevertheless be noted that, despite the shortcomings associated with donor-driven initiatives such as these, some African scholars and researchers working within these institutions have reinterpreted and reinvigorated

their mandates and goals to shift primary attention to the critical needs of local communities.

Another important aspect of research relating to medicalized sexualities in capitalist conditions reveals the desire of outsiders to explore and discover traditional herbs and plants related to sexuality. Often herbal formulas that are part of the traditional knowledge nurtured by generations of indigenous populations are appropriated, patented and licensed in Western countries for their exclusive enrichment. Many African communities, for example, have keen historical knowledge of local herbs that enhance sexual desire in males and females as well as those that cure erectile dysfunctions (Tamale, 2005; Wane, 2000).

Multinational pharmaceutical and agrichemical companies, keen to exploit such indigenous knowledge, are the key funders of research in the fields of ethnopharmacology and ethnomedicine. Publications such as the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* share information on indigenous people's use of plants, fungi, animals, microorganisms and minerals and their biological and pharmacological effects. The phenomenal success and profitability of drugs such as Viagra are the direct outcome of such exploitative ventures.

Sexual cultures and violence

Beginning with the first contact with African communities, researchers from the global North maintained a voyeuristic, ethnopornographic obsession with what they perceived as exotic (read perverse) African sexual cultures. In the same way that the early European explorers, funded by their imperialist states, laid claim to a plethora of geographical and natural resources on the African continent, they set out with equal zeal to explore and study the sexual artifacts and traditions of Africans. African cultures and sexualities were always framed as different, less urbane and inferior to those of the West. This othering process was, and still is, important in justifying racist and

imperialist policies.¹²

To view these sexual cultures as primitive, bizarre and dangerous, and apply a knee-jerk reflex to “fix” them, was the standard approach. “Africanists” from various departments of social anthropology and cultural history in North America and Western Europe took particular interest in African cultural practices related to polygyny, circumcision, levirate, sexual cleansing rituals, dry sex and so forth (Raum, 1939). The studies were typically juxtaposed with idealized Judeo-Christian standards of sexuality and clearly reflected in the insensitive clichés used to define various practices such as widow inheritance, wife purchase, wife exchange and the ubiquitous bride price.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw a flurry of research activity on sexual violence with a special spotlight on female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM). The graphic depictions of this maimed African sexuality, published by the American journalist Fran Hosken (1980), set the stage for fervent action by Western researchers. In particular, the circumcision of African women became an obsession of social anthropologists and women’s rights advocates from the global North. The inordinate attention that women’s rights advocates from the North paid to this issue was reminiscent of the imperialist, colonial project. They flocked to the continent with the zeal of missionaries to save African women from this barbaric practice (Oloka- Onyango & Tamale, 1995). Such zeal is evident in this passage taken from an early volume of the influential American feminist journal *Signs*:

Fran Hosken has ... proposed a human rights/health action initiative to organize technical and financial assistance for African women’s organizations requesting such support and to establish international cooperation and joint actions with women in the West. Anyone interested in further information should write to Fran Hosken, 187 Grant Street, Lexington,

12 Kathryn (aka Limakatso) Kendall’s (1997) treatment of the Musotho woman, Mpho ‘M’atsepo Nthunya in *Singing Away the Hunger: The Autobiography of an African Woman*, for example, is in many ways more imperialist than the gaze that she criticizes.

Massachusetts. (Copies of The Hosken Report are available from the same address.) Fran Hosken's work is extremely important in bringing the issue of female genital mutilation to public attention. It would be useful if her book, suitably edited, could be republished by a commercial press and widely distributed. (Fee, 1980, p. 809)

The bulk of approaches to the subject matter are culturally insensitive, focus narrowly on the negative aspects of female circumcision and completely overlook the multifaceted nature of the practice and the meanings attached to the rituals associated with it (Nnaemeka, 2005). Although African feminists do not condone the negative aspects of the practice, they take strong exception to the imperialist, racist and dehumanizing infantilization of African women.

The destructive approaches to this cultural practice perpetuated "staples of the canon of racist clichés about Africa, particularly ideas about barbarity, perpetual female victimhood, and the refusal of enlightenment and modernity" (Kaler, 2009, pp. 178–9). Indeed, the latest manifestation of such approaches can be seen in the attempts (since 2006) of a US-based organization called Clitoraid to collect money, under the banner of its racist "Adopt a Clitoris" campaign and purportedly for surgically restoring the clitorises of African women who have undergone FGM.¹³

Same-sex relationships within African communities also attracted the attention of early anthropologists. The tendency was to apply standard Western research indicators and assumptions uncritically, which often resulted in skewed results. When anthropologist Jane Kendall (1998) arrived in Lesotho in the early 1990s searching for lesbian women, she had a rude awakening: she encountered Basotho women who engaged in erotic woman-to-woman relationships, but these were not analogous to lesbianism or homosexuality as known in North America or Western Europe.

13 See www.clitoraid.com. African feminists have challenged and condemned the work of Clitoraid in an online petition at www.thepetition-site.com/1/feministschallengingclitoraid. Retrieved July 9, 2010.

Kendall had to put aside the theoretical and empirical assumptions about same-sex erotics that she had been exposed to in her native United States and be instructed in the novel concepts and meanings of the woman-to-woman (batsoalle) relationships of the Basotho (see also Gay, 1985; Herdt, 1987; Gatter, 2000; Dankwa, 2009).

A growing body of research on the continent pertains to sexual citizenship and identity politics (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved, 2009). Today, more nuanced research on the topic of female circumcision explores the multifarious dimensions associated with the practice, including the spiritual (Dellenborg, 2004), identity politics (Dellenborg, 2004) and even desire (Diallo, 2004). There is an inevitable overlap between tradition, religion (especially Christianity and Islam) and the law in most studies of sexual cultures on the continent, most of what is understood as culture in contemporary Africa is largely a product of constructions and reinterpretations by former colonial authorities in collaboration with African male patriarchs (Women and Law in Southern Africa, 2000; Mama, 2007). The tendency is to commence from the premise that views culture as being hostile to women, an antithesis to their rights. Researchers and theorists speak of rights as if they are culture-less at best or, at worst, born of a superior culture.

Moreover, culture is interpreted narrowly and grouped with custom or tradition on the assumption that these are natural and unchangeable (Bigge & von Briesen, 2000). Mainstream feminist scholarship within and outside Africa, for example, largely tends to view culture in negative terms and to consider it an impediment to effective legal reform (McFadden, 1999; Wanyeki, 2003; Tripp, 2004). Although this indictment is not totally unfounded, such beliefs have the effect of obscuring the potential that culture may hold as a tool for emancipation (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003; Tamale, 2008a). In fact, culture is a double-edged sword that can be wielded creatively and resourcefully to enhance women's access to sexual justice.

Response to HIV/AIDS in the globalized world

Panic about HIV/AIDS was sparked in the 1990s, when it became apparent that in Africa the virus was spreading with unprecedented speed and in populations other than those considered at higher risk. As earlier observed, public health professionals and medical anthropologists descended on the sub-Saharan areas of the continent, ostensibly to work at finding preventive measures, but in reality resurrecting the colonizing project through research that again focused on the sexual practices and behaviors of African men and women in the hopes that cultural and behavioral change would curb the spread of the virus.

Noting how “the AIDS-in-Africa discourse in most scholarly journals and books and in policy documents has been uncritical of its assumptions and sources”, Eileen Stillwaggon (2003, pp. 809–10) laments the wasted decade of AIDS research that has failed to get to the bottom of the complexities of AIDS, especially among poor communities. Instead, HIV provided the opportunity for a resurgence of the colonial mode of studying sexuality in Africa – racist, moralistic, paternalistic and steeped in liberal thinking (see Caldwell et al., 1989; Deniaud et al., 1991; Macdonald, 1996; Gresenguet et al., 1997). In the words of Gausset, (2001):

Like the first studies of African sexuality, it was once again the “exotic, traditional irrational and immoral practices” that were the focus of the research. If the pattern of AIDS epidemics was different in Africa than in Europe, the explanation obviously had to be the difference between African and European culture and sexualities . . . Early researchers were looking for things to blame, and identified African cultural practices as culprits. The logical consequence of this was to fight against African cultures and sexualities. (p. 511)

The discourse of “risky cultural practices” was so intimately bound to the theories and explanations

that had emerged on the continent that it became a main resource for public health advocates and policy-makers. One outcome was that African governments were encouraged to integrate the pandemic into their criminal justice systems. As a result, criminal law began to be applied to cases in which a person transmitted or exposed others to HIV infection through risky practices. It was hoped that these HIV-specific laws would curb sexual immorality and reduce incidents of sexual violence against women. Model legislation, such as that developed in N'Djamena, Chad, was also enacted in Benin, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone and Togo (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2007). Other countries, such as Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Uganda, have reinforced their existing sexual offenses legislation to address the problem.

But the criminal approach to the pandemic has come under heavy criticism from human rights defenders, who view it as a violation of human rights. It is further condemned for its decontextualized and ahistorical approach to African sexualities. To date, there has been no convincing evidence to show that criminal prosecution has reduced the spread of HIV in Africa. Instead, it has enhanced stigma, increased women's vulnerability to the disease and circumvented the fundamental challenges of eradicating HIV from the continent (UNAIDS, 2008). The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) is convinced that "criminal law is a blunt instrument for HIV prevention".¹⁴ After two decades of muddled approaches to HIV prevention in Africa with minimal success, researchers are beginning to revisit their methods and theories (Epprecht, 2009; Kippax, 2010). It has become evident that the insensitive approaches that call for the elimination of cultural and sexual practices will not yield significant results.

The key is not to fight people's cultures and identities but rather to raise their awareness of practicing the safe exchange of body fluids, including blood, semen, vaginal secretions and breast

¹⁴ See the IPPF news release, 'Criminalization of HIV transmission and exposure,' www.ippf.org/en/News/Press-releases/Criminalization+of+HIV+transmission+and+exposure.htm. Retrieved October 27, 2010.

milk. Studies have shown that cultures are flexible enough to adapt to new threats, such as those posed by HIV (Nyanzi et al., 2009; Gausset, 2001). Furthermore, raising public awareness about the gender and human rights aspects of sexuality and HIV/AIDS would yield better results in addressing AIDS risk than the 'social vaccine' approach that emphasizes behavioral change.¹⁵

It is important for researchers to be aware of the vulnerabilities to HIV in the context of debilitating poverty and social disenfranchisement that point to the syndemic¹⁶ nature of the epidemic with significant effects on the sexualities of African communities. It means that HIV cannot be compartmentalized as a disease outside the context of sexual health and rights, gender and class. In order to honor the lives of Africans affected by HIV, scholars must adopt an integrated, comprehensive approach to researching, theorizing and combating the disease.

Another important aspect of HIV/AIDS research (and research on sexuality generally) is that it has been engulfed in the ever-growing commodification of sexual health. The insatiable drive for profits and power has penetrated the 'sexuality industry' in alarming ways. HIV/AIDS has become a multibillion-dollar money spinner for national and international bureaucrats and pharmaceutical companies. Moreover, technological advances in communication and distribution have facilitated the unprecedented spread of information, allowing the exotic and subjective interpretations of African sexualities by Western (mainly US) scholars to be taken to a whole new level.

In the process of researching material for this essay, for example, I entered the words 'black

15 During the 15th International AIDS Conference held on July 11–16, 2004 in Bangkok, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni reiterated his strong belief in the abstinence approach, arguing that without a medical vaccine in sight what his poor African country needed was the 'social vaccine' of behavioral change (Akkara, 2004).

16 Anthropologist Merrill Singer coined the term 'syndemic' in the early 1990s to describe the mutually reinforcing nature of health crises with harsh and inequitable living conditions. That is, 'two or more afflictions, interacting synergistically, contributing to excess burden of disease in a population' (Milstein, 2004, p. 1). Also see www.cdc.gov/syndemics/encyclopedia.htm. Retrieved October 28, 2010.

lesbian rape' on the Google search engine and was shocked to find that almost 90 percent of the 473,000 results were sites advertising or otherwise promoting pornographic videos and other racist, misogynist material.¹⁷ On the Google Scholar search engine, the same phrase yielded zero results. This, in my opinion, was a good indication of a dangerous trend of research on sexuality in the globalized, capitalist, patriarchal world.

Rewriting and rerighting African sexualities

By the 1990s it had become apparent that the prevailing research agendas and methods related to sexuality in Africa – mostly drawn from biomedical science and public health policy – remained blind to its important pluralities. Very little funding was available for sexuality research in Africa, beyond the issues of disease, reproduction and violence. Non-clinical aspects of men's and women's sexualities were largely ignored by mainstream researchers, who continued to objectify Africans, and the age-old legacies of medicalized and exoticized sexuality were far from being broken (Oinas & Arnfred, 2009).

As the concept of gender was overlooked when exploring sexuality, its nuanced pluralities and meanings within different communities were missed. Moreover, most researchers and scholars shied away from this taboo area of study, focusing only on what are considered safe topics, such as reproductive health and violence. Conspicuously missing from the mainstream sexuality research repertoire prior to the 1990s were studies on positive aspects of African sexualities, such as pleasure, eroticism and desire. But after the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, activists were determined to reconceptualize sexuality as a human rights issue. The language of sexual rights made its debut on the international human rights

¹⁷ Google search conducted July 5, 2010.

stage in the Cairo meeting rooms and it has received increasing recognition ever since.

As part of the struggle for self-determination, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) urged indigenous peoples who were colonized through imperialism to “rewrite” and “reright” their position in history, to “tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes” (p. 28). At the turn of the century African feminists heeded this call with unprecedented activism. Anxious to deepen our own understanding of the link between women’s sexualities and their subordinate status in society, the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town, in collaboration with the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, organized a pan-African workshop on mapping African sexualities in 2003. This initiative inspired several case studies undertaken by a network of African intellectuals that deliberately pursued anti-imperialist ethics in exploring this largely uncharted territory (Mama, 2007).¹⁸ Several of these case studies were published in special issues of the journal, *Feminist Africa* (Arnfred, 2009).¹⁹ Several other feminist institutions, networks and scholars on the continent embraced sexuality research in new ways. For example, the South African feminist journal, *Agenda*, which had been around for almost 20 years, began publishing themed editions relating specifically to sexuality issues.²⁰ The pan-African network, AMANITARE, which focuses on sexual and reproductive health and the rights of women, was formed in 2000 with an objective to support research and publication.²¹ There was a deliberate move to break the traditional mould of analyzing sexuality through biomedical and public health frameworks. Not only

18 Another offshoot of this initiative was the establishment in 2006 of the Law, Gender and Sexuality Research Project at Uganda’s Makerere University Faculty of Law.

19 See *Feminist Africa* 5 (2006), 6 (2006) and 11 (2008). The journal is available online at www.feministafrica.org.

20 For instance, see ‘African feminisms: sexuality in Africa,’ *Agenda* 62 (2004); ‘African feminisms: body image,’ *Agenda* 63 (2005); ‘Homosexuality,’ *Agenda* 67 (2006); ‘Rape,’ *Agenda* 74 (2007). Also see Volume 15(1) (2009) of the *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights*, which is a special issue on gender, law and sexuality.

21 Named after the ancient Nubian Queen Amanitare, the AMANITARE partnership invokes a legacy of African women’s leadership and agency (Horn, 2003).

did these studies and publications emanate from social science and the humanities, but they also analyzed human sexualities in a holistic fashion, including its pleasurable and empowering aspects (see Baylies & Bujra, 2000; McFadden, 2003; Arnfred, 2004; Khamasi & Maina-Chinkuyu, 2005; Bennett, 2005; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Amadiume, 2006; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2007; Tamale, 2007; Gould & Fick, 2008).

One of the first publications to mount a serious challenge Eurocentric approaches to African sexualities was *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*, an anthology edited by Signe Arnfred (2004). The essays in that book reflected upon and synthesized African sexualities in ways that scholarship in this field had never done before. Most of the material was concerned with feminist research methods and analyses, foregrounding women's agency and pleasure.

Another important network involved in researching, theorizing and publishing on the subject of African sexualities is Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). This this solidarity network embraces all "women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam",²² and African feminists have been actively involved in its work. For example, the Nigerian women's rights organization, BAOBAB, has received international recognition for its work in promoting women's rights through research, reinterpretation and theorizing Muslim jurisprudence, criticizing negative constructions and practices (done under the name of Islam) and discriminatory sharia criminal law, such as zina (extramarital sex) (Imam, 2000; BAOBAB, 2003).

Such blossoming scholarship has very clearly sought to embed an African sociocultural and political imprint (in all its diversity) on the discourses about human sexuality, hitherto dominated by perspectives from the global North. The aim has been to create knowledge that would facilitate

22 The current coordinator of this international network is a Senegalese feminist, Fatou Sow.

innovative and transformative social change. Concepts of sexual pleasure, the erotic and desire have begun to be unveiled in sophisticated studies, such as those exploring the ingenious, subtle messages embedded in local kanga cloth that Tanzanian women wrap loosely around their waists (Moyer & Mbelwa, 2003); or the celebration of the power of the vagina among the Nigerian Igbo (Nzegwu, 2006); or the indigenous sexual initiation institution of Ssenga among the Baganda of Uganda (Tamale, 2005).²³

Despite sex and sexuality having been at the core of most historical disputes within the Christian church – with one faction seeking sexual liberties against the wishes of a more conservative faction – the conceptualization of sexuality within the framework of human rights has dogged Eurocentric scholars and researchers for a very long time. For example, one of the reasons the Protestant Church broke off from the Roman Catholic Church was because the latter was too rigid in its policy on issues such as clerical celibacy and allowing the clergy to marry and there have long been divergent views on divorce, abortion and homosexuality.

But the close link between what is termed a universal human rights corpus and Western liberal democracy has diminished voices other than those of the West, and differing concepts of sexualities have remained largely buried in the cultural practices of various non-Western communities. The concept of sexual rights, for instance, is not alien to many African and Islamic communities. Take the example of a wife in many pre-colonial African cultures who was (and still is) guaranteed the right to sexual pleasure; or the fact that sexual violence within marriage was frowned upon; or that denial of such formal rights constituted a clear ground for divorce in these traditions (Awusabo-Asare et al., 1993; Pereira, 2003; Tamale, 2008a). Perhaps had historians and sociology researchers not shied away from studying African sexualities in more open ways, they would have discovered that

23 These were welcome additions to the few indigenous publications by scholars such as Patricia McFadden (1992).

the controversial foundations of sexual rights have their roots in African traditional values.

Indeed, the conceptualization of sexual rights within a liberal democratic framework is fraught with tensions and contradictions. Alice Miller and others have articulated the paradoxes that burden the context of rights when it comes to sexuality (Miller & Vance, 2004). The practical application of the concept of sexual rights is not exempt from such paradoxes, since one can simultaneously use the language to claim protection against harm, such as rape or homophobia, and to demand privacy in the defense of the sexual pleasure of consenting adults. The contradictions can be seen further in the awkwardness of claiming the rights of people to sell/make images of sexual activity and simultaneously claim that people should be protected from sexual objectification.

Conducting ethical, sensitive research on African sexualities

I have noted that there have been a number of studies conducted on African sexualities that are sensitive to the complexities of the subject matter. In this section I delve into more detail of what it takes to conduct an ethical and sensitive study in the field of sexuality, providing as many examples as I can from existing studies that have been conducted in Africa.

As stated earlier, the primary purposes of conducting research are to create knowledge and to explain physical and social phenomena, and the bulk of the body of knowledge and published scholarship in the field of sexuality emanates from the global North. What does this portend for researchers of African sexualities? Does it mean that we reject in toto the validity of foreign-grown theories of sexuality as being inappropriate and irrelevant to our contexts? I think not.

Though it is extremely important to develop home-grown theories of African sexualities and to be keenly aware always of the dangers of uncritically using theories that are constructed from the global North to explain African societies, Western views on sexuality cannot be completely ignored

for three reasons. First, many of the contemporary codes of sexual morality and most of the laws pertaining to sex contained in the statute books of post-colonial countries are rooted in the history and tradition of the former colonizing European nations. To a certain extent this means that Western theoretical perspectives define the underlying rationale and practice of the legal regime governing sexualities in Africa. Moreover, as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003) usefully reminds us:

For millennia, Africa has been part of Europe, as Europe has been part of Africa, and out of this relation, a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides has been and continues to be brewed and fermented. To deny this intercultural exchange and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge and simultaneously disregard the (continued) contribution of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history, and vice-versa. (p. 140)

Second, if we were to jettison Western concepts and theoretical frameworks totally, we would spend considerable resources reinventing the wheel – an unnecessary enterprise. There is a lot of sense in using existing theoretical bases as starting points and then correcting/revising them in light of the contextual evidence collected in current studies.²⁴ Existing theoretical frameworks, such as Foucault's conceptualization of sexuality in terms of power relations (Foucault, 1976) or Judith Butler's implicit theory of heteronormativity and her views on the subversive potential in gender performativity (Butler, 1990) or Gayle Rubin's concept of sexual hierarchy (Rubin, 1984), can be extremely useful in analyzing sexualities in Africa, as long as this is done with the continental specificities in mind and a view to improve upon them.

A simple illustration of the point can be made using Rubin's (1984) model of sexual hierarchy.

24 The exception would be studies that adopt the grounded theory methodology.

Rubin shows how American society classifies sexual behavior into a sexual value system in which good, normal, natural and privileged sexuality (located in what she refers to as the “charmed circle” of sex) must be “heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, bodies only and vanilla”. Those that conform to this ideology enjoy privileges and concrete material benefits from society. Outside the “charmed circle” and on the “outer limits” is “bad, abnormal, unnatural and damned sexuality”. Characteristics of the latter include “homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects and sadomachistic”. Those who engage in sexual relations outside the charmed circle face legal and social sanctions as well as maltreatment (p. 281).

Most of the elements in Rubin’s hierarchical model resonate with the experiences in many African societies. However, there are certain elements that clearly differ. For instance, polygyny would replace monogamy in the charmed circle of most African societies. In the same vein, cross-generational sex in the sex value systems of many African societies would move from the outer limits to the inner circle as this is relatively acceptable (albeit privileging sexual relations between older men and young women and not vice versa). Rubin’s stratification could further be criticized for its failure to show how some individuals who seem to fit into the ideology of the “charmed circle” might simultaneously suffer discrimination through, for example, exempting marital rape from criminal sanction.

The third reason for the relevance and usefulness of Western theories to African contexts is that gendered sexualities, whether in the West or in Africa, are primarily based on similar predictions, namely labor, authority and performance (Bennett, 2000). In other words, the hierarchical constructions of sexuality in either context are linked by the force of gender to labor, authority and performance against the backdrop of capitalism and patriarchy (in their multiple variants). Hence there is an underlying resonance between the respective structures of Western and African

societies that compels us not to reject or dismantle Western theoretical scaffoldings completely because they provide some useful tools for researchers to reflect upon and use to develop insights concerning African sexualities. Having said that, because of certain ideologies and practices unique to the continent, theorizing African sexualities would differ from Western sexualities in nuanced specificities (Helle-Valle, 2004). For example, one cannot ignore those aspects of cultural ideology that are widely shared among Africans, such as community, solidarity and the ethos of ubuntu (humaneness),²⁵ just as one must pay attention to the common historical legacies inscribed in cultures within Africa by forces such as colonialism, capitalism, imperialism and globalization. Take the self-identifying terms gay, lesbian and transgendered that have emerged from Western societies. These differ quite markedly from the descriptors for some same-sex relations found on the continent (e.g. batsoalle woman-to-woman relationships in Lesotho – see Kendall, 1998). The identity politics that underpin these Western notions do not necessarily apply in African contexts (Amadiume, 1987; Kendall, 1998; Tamale, 2003; Oyewumi, 2005).

In the same vein, it would be foolhardy for anyone theorizing women's sexualities to ignore the machinations of Africa's "structurally adjusted" economies and the attendant "feminization of poverty" when analyzing women's involvement in commercial sex work and the heightened prevalence of HIV/AIDS. It is also necessary to make the philosophical link between institutionalized and state-inspired homophobia and Africa's autocratic and dictatorial regimes.²⁶ By constantly attacking homosexuals, attention is conveniently diverted from the pressing issues, ensuring the continued suffering of the population.

25 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, pp. 106–107)".

26 Being aware that legalized homophobia in Africa was a direct import by colonial powers.

An increasing trend in the area of research generally involves the strings that come tied to huge research funds offered by various donors and/or development partners. For example, many research funding applications will be approved and disbursed only to projects that promote North–South collaboration.²⁷ Therefore a research institution in the global North must partner with one located in the global South, supposedly to facilitate the cross-pollination of ideas and enhance the project’s knowledge base. Inevitably, such forced collaborations are imbued with historical legacies of inequality and prejudice. The tendency is for the Northern partner to dominate, control and exploit the Southern counterparts. Notably, the bulk of such studies are focused on the south, with few cases of African researchers heading north to investigate European and North American sexualities.

When conducting collaborative research projects, therefore, it is extremely important to be reflexive and sensitive to any possible inequalities (Tamale, 2008b). This by no means suggests that researchers from the global North studying African sexualities should constantly walk on egg shells with imagined sensitivities or that they should wallow in feelings of guilt and contrition. Rather, researchers should develop a keen awareness of all the historical objectifications and derogations in research experiences on the continent. Elina Oinas and Signe Arnfred (2009), for instance, recommend that Nordic researchers view the process as ‘a breaking of silences and hesitance and the application of a reflective approach when studying sexualities in Africa, in addition to a call for scrutiny of actual practices and politics, including the politics of research and writing’ (p. 150).

The researcher obviously has a lot of power in that she or he represents and creates knowledge

27 Another example of conditions that are increasingly being tied to research funding is the requirement for a gendered analysis of the research problem. Although this condition might seem laudable at face value, in fact many times it translates into a pro forma and abusive application of the gender concept, doing more harm than good to knowledge production. For instance, by essentializing the term gender and/or using it in a descriptive fashion or as shorthand for “women and men”, its analytical and conceptual value is watered down; it becomes depoliticized and ahistorical.

and understanding about the researched subject matter. The process of acquiring information is crucial because it determines the depth and quality of knowledge. When it comes to sexuality, the level of knowledge received during research might be influenced by a number of challenges and sensitivities that relate to issues of process, presentation and politics. Table 1 elaborates some of the interrelated ways that these issues might affect data collected in sexuality research.

Sexuality researchers must take seriously such methodological and epistemological issues. There are several publications that speak to these issues with useful tips on how to handle tricky situations (see, for example, Adomako Ampofo & Arnfred, 2010).

Table 1: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN SEXUALITY RESEARCH

Process	Presentation	Politics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex is a taboo subject, therefore it is difficult to get people to talk and engage due to coyness, discomfort, stigma, etc. • Developing rapport with research participants: participants may feel threatened to relate or put down something so private/personal. What if they are exposed and it hurts them? • Personal beliefs, values, prejudices of researcher and researched. • The study may force participants to remember things they wish to forget, which makes the research process traumatic and deeply hurtful for them. • The experience may be too deep and embarrassing for the participant to relate. It may invoke shame, denial, intimidation, tension or anger. • Participants may hesitate to divulge information because they are loath to be pitied or for fear of damaging their bodily integrity. • The research is likely to engage you in difficult and unpredictable ways. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The way participants relate to a researcher's age, sex, gender, sexuality, status, self-presentation, religion, etc. • Language: it may be impossible to translate words or nuanced meanings that may be non-existent in the research language. • Veracity: how does the researcher know that the participant is being honest and not embellishing their story or experience? Or how can they test for accuracy of memory? • The topic may be too complex. Participants may genuinely ask themselves, 'Where do I start? There is no narrative, no language to convey the experience. No linear way to tell the story. It is too layered.' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unequal relationship between researcher and researched. • How does the researcher facilitate the voices of the participants and make the research relevant to them? • Issues of confidentiality. • Private issues moving into the public realm. • The sensitivity of the topic may make it difficult to get people to participate because of internal sensibilities such as people's spirituality and external sensibilities such as breaking the law. • Hopelessness of the situation whereby the researcher is not in a position to do anything to help a desperate participant.

The complexity of the subject matter means that the process of designing a research project on sexuality is by no means a linear exercise. Rather it is a circuitous, undulating process. This means that there is nothing straightforward about the research; there are no holy cows, and the twists and turns are numerous. As the researcher plans, implements and reflects upon the study, each decision might produce implications that require revisiting earlier decisions. This calls for maximum flexibility and minimum bias on the part of the researcher.

A good sexuality research project does not view methodology as a mere appendage of issues of epistemology or “a way of carrying out an enquiry”. Rather, methodology itself is conceptualized as a political process, a ‘space’ in which complex issues of context, voice, ethics and ideological depth are played out (Bennett, 2008, p. 1). It is part and parcel of theory-building and transformative change. I have a firm conviction that feminist methods of research are best suited for research on sexuality (see also Reinhartz, 1992; Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Adomako Ampofo & Arnfred 2010). This is because they consciously attempt to:

- foreground the experiences of participants, as well as the meanings and interpretations that they attach to these experiences. This is important to allow for linkages between real life experiences and the phenomena under study. The researcher gets to appreciate the research issues within the framework of their lived experiences and life situations
- excavate complex and abstract qualitative phenomena that are unquantifiable, such as emotions, feelings and other sensitive issues critical in sexuality research
- refrain from objectifying participants and avoid hierarchical representations of knowledge about their lived experiences. This allows considerable space for the actual voices of participants to be part of the knowledge creation process in the final report or publication
- work within a human rights framework, providing contexts that begin with a consideration of the constitutional and legal context in which sexuality issues are played.

It would be foolhardy to study HIV/AIDS, for example, without paying attention to gender and the political economy within which sexualities in Africa operate (Mbilinyi, 2010). *Politics of the Womb*, the work of Lynn Thomas (2003), which analyzes the linkage between women's reproductive capacities and patriarchal state interests in Kenya, is an example of an excellent multidisciplinary and sensitive case study of African sexualities. Her careful attention to gender, class, generation and race using ethnographic, oral, legal and archival sources forcefully exposes the complex ways that colonial and post-colonial powers controlled female sexual initiation (excision), abortion, childbirth and premarital pregnancies. Thomas's research clearly shows how women's bodies constitute an important site of political struggle in Africa and their connections to the political economies of the state.

Conclusion and future prospects

Researchers in the field of sexuality must remember that the concepts of sexuality and gender, as normatively used, denote both power and dominance. It is therefore useful to speak of gendered sexualities and/or sexualized genders. Such an approach allows for in-depth analyses of the intersections of the ideological and historical systems that underpin each concept, an important factor in knowledge production.

The historical trajectory of research on African sexualities began from a place where colonial and imperial interests, biases and agendas defined their parameters in damaging ways. Conceptualized within a tripartite framework of morals, reproduction and dysfunction, the sexualities of Africans were largely constructed as immoral, lascivious and primitive. Although that legacy has endured over generations, it has been subjected to serious challenge in recent years. The biomedical and Western researcher is gradually being replaced with the multidisciplinary, home-based researcher who embraces holistic and grounded approaches.

As it has emerged that sexuality examined exclusively through the lens of natural science leads to problematic theoretical and methodological concerns, scholarship has turned an important conceptual corner. Today, a comprehensive understanding of African sexualities means that the researcher must observe through several lenses that take in history, politics, economics, art, law, philosophy, literature and sociology. The study of sexualities cannot be abstracted from power and particular interests. It is a dialectical, circuitous process that allows for back-and-forth movement and empathetic understanding, and recognizes the fusion between sexualities and various structures of power.

Though researchers will find that African sexualities differ in many ways from those outside the continent, a fresh and open approach might reveal that there are more intra-continental differences in practices and norms of sexualities than there are variations across continents. After all, we cannot underestimate the global effects of neocolonialism, organized religion and globalization on contemporary sexualities around the world. Not only do othering systems lead to oversimplified theories, but also they lead to discrimination and xenophobic attitudes.

There is considerable virgin ground for researching and theorizing African sexualities and still a great deal that scholarship has to address. The prospects and possibilities for researching sexualities on the continent have greatly expanded thanks to the internet. One of the biggest challenges for African researchers is how to apply and draw from theories that emerged from studies conducted elsewhere in a way that simultaneously gives serious consideration to the specificities of African contexts within which various sexualities operate.

In other words, theoretical globetrotting for the African researcher must inevitably be enriched and rejuvenated by the historical and cultural realities of the studied communities. Researching and theorizing sexualities beyond the tired polemics of violence, disease and reproduction and exploring their layered complexities beyond heterosexual normativity and moral boundaries will lead to fresh

conceptual insights and paradigm shifts. It will illuminate the limitless and diffuse capacities that the human body, as well as the mind, heart and soul, have for eroticism and pleasure.

Furthermore, repositioning both the geographical and conceptual locations of what is African will avoid the slippery terrain of the essence of who and what is African. Collecting further quantitative and rich textual ethnographic empirical data that is not only interdisciplinary but also transdisciplinary is a must. This is the way to embark on a more complex theoretical journey through the constructs and issues that deepen our understanding of African sexualities.

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