

# 1 ↪ A Puzzling Blindspot, a Troubling Silence, a Strange Consensus

## *Reflections on the Heterosexual Norm in “African AIDS”*

### THE RESEARCH QUESTION

HIV/AIDS WAS IDENTIFIED IN AFRICA south of the Sahara in the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> At that time its rapid, atypical progress in populations focused considerable attention on so-called African sexuality. Scientists, theologians, pundits, gender activists, and other researchers were all struggling to explain both the unprecedented rates of HIV infection and the fact that men and women appeared to be equally affected. This suggested a different epidemiology than in the West, where HIV infections occurred mostly in gay and bisexual men. Efforts to solve the mystery were complicated by the relative paucity of African epidemiologists and other researchers in the search for answers. Indeed, the vast majority of those who published their findings in the early years of the epidemic were European or North American. Only about one in twelve of the participants in the very first AIDS in Africa conference in 1985 actually came from Africa (Putzel 2004, 21), while the most widely cited publication to synthesize their findings with the ethnographic record was authored by three Australian demographers (Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin 1989).

Not knowing Africa or African languages all that well, and under intense pressure of time and the looming health calamity, foreign researchers relied heavily on received wisdom and rational logic to fill in the many critical gaps in knowledge about the disease in its African manifestation. Their work in turn contributed to a new problem that in many ways continues to frustrate research, prevention, and education initiatives. The problem resides in the

notion that a singular African sexuality exists and that it exacerbates the risks of HIV transmission particularly for women. This hypothetical singular African sexuality includes, above all, the supposed nonexistence of homosexuality or bisexuality, along with Africans' purported tendencies toward heterosexual promiscuity, gender violence, and lack of the kind of internalized moral restraints that supposedly inhibit the spread of HIV in other cultures. Another common thread is a tendency toward age discrepancy in sexual relationships (mostly older men with young women, girls, or even female infants), and, compared to the West, a relative absence of romantic affection and a predominance of transactional relationships (sex in exchange for money or gifts). Further examples of such "otherizing" or pathologizing of African sexuality in the popular media are legion, and many will be discussed in the chapters to follow. But a sobering example in the peer-reviewed academic press is worth pointing out here. Rushton (1997, esp. 178–83) claims a relationship between Africans' penis size and sexual behavior that can account for the high rates of HIV/AIDS among women in Africa and in the African diaspora.

African opinion makers often responded defensively to Western claims about an African sexuality. Yet ironically, they often at the same time buttressed one key aspect of it. Hence, on the one hand, African critics pointed to the colonialist (or even older) provenance of received wisdom about African sexuality. They have suggested that the long shelf life of negative stereotypes in contemporary discourses was evidence of whites' pervasive unthinking racism against Africans. As late as 2004, for example, South African president Thabo Mbeki angrily rejected questions about the high rates of rape and HIV infection in that country by accusing whites of clinging to apartheid-era demonizations of black men.<sup>2</sup> Yet on the other hand, many African leaders accepted or even amplified the accompanying stereotype that homosexuality was exotic in Africa. In some cases they baldly asserted that male-male sexual transmission was so rare that it should and would not be discussed, even as a theoretical possibility. Both African and foreign scholars proved surprisingly receptive to this unscientific assertion. Important scholarly texts aimed at health care professionals sometimes went so far as to say that there are only three modes of HIV transmission in Africa (that is, heterosexual intercourse, intravenous injection, and mother-to-child transmission; hence, there is no transmission through homosexual intercourse and it is therefore not worth mentioning on the precautionary principle, let alone as a substantive issue).<sup>3</sup> This understanding of African sexuality is now typically so much taken for granted that it does not even warrant a footnote to substantiate or qualify it.

To be fair, the phrases *African sexuality* and *heterosexual African AIDS* made a lot of sense to many people at the time of the onset of the disease. The phrases not only appeared to account for the high rates of heterosexual transmission (men infecting women and vice versa), they accorded with the consensus of expert opinion dating back a century or more. These expressions accorded as well with what African informants themselves often claimed in strong terms, and with the evident absence of anything remotely approaching a “gay scene” outside select (white-dominated) urban centers in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The fact that the dominant clade, or genetic variation, of HIV-1 was different in Africa from the clade that was infecting gay men in the West added to the accumulating logic of difference. Moreover, the appearance of heterosexual African AIDS was timely and convenient for political struggles in the West, notably the struggle against homophobia. Heterosexual African AIDS allowed gay rights advocates in the West to deflect prevalent blame for HIV/AIDS away from the “homosexual lifestyle,” a huge political achievement.<sup>4</sup> An essentialized, singular African sexuality also suggested a problem that could be fixed with education, aid dollars, and Western advice drawn from painful experiences fighting AIDS in the early 1980s.

It was a winning combination, or a perfect storm, depending on one’s perspective. This book takes the latter view. Indeed, I maintain that the idea of an African sexuality and, stemming from it, an exclusively heterosexual African AIDS, are both wrong and decidedly harmful to struggles for sexual health and sexual rights in Africa and globally.

Comprehensive scholarly critiques of crude forms of the African sexuality and heterosexual African AIDS arguments in fact followed closely upon their assertion. In particular, the Rushton penis theory and the promiscuity thesis of the Caldwells and Quiggin drew withering criticism and have by now been refuted with a wealth of empirical data.<sup>5</sup> We know that some Africans do engage in sex with multiple partners and other high-risk behaviors, just as elsewhere in the world. Many do not. Careful studies have shown that sexual initiation for African youth actually tends to come later than in the West and that high rates of multiple partners are associated with the specific circumstances of migrancy rather than with African culture per se (e.g., Dyson 1992 or Crush et al. 2005). High rates of sexual and gender violence that contribute to the risk of infection (where they in fact exist, which is not everywhere) have also been shown to be historically contingent. Far from being essential to Africanness, gender-based violence is often remarkably responsive even to such simple interventions as providing microfinance (Pronyk et al. 2006).

In light of this growing evidence about diverse and historically changing African sexualities, a strong consensus has emerged that HIV/AIDS needs to

be understood not as singular in its epidemiology but as distinct, overlapping pandemics in different parts of the continent. This view has entailed a marked move away from morally judgmental language (like *promiscuous*) and sweeping generalizations (like *African sexuality*). Rather than looking for single explanatory factors, researchers have now also increasingly concentrated their efforts on unraveling the many factors that seem to overdetermine so much of Africa's vulnerability to HIV. Much of that research points to nonsexual and even non-African factors, such as malaria and the yawning inequities of the global economic system.<sup>6</sup>

A similar discrepancy between the sweeping claims of "African sexuality" and the empirical evidence has also been established with regard to the claim or assumption of no homosexuality. True, few Africans south of the Sahara even today would identify as homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, queer, or any of the other terms coined in the West to signify a more or less innate individual sexual orientation. We now know, however, that many people who do not so identify nonetheless sometimes, and sometimes even predominantly, have sex with people of the same sex. It was known even in the mid-1980s that such people existed in Africa south of the Sahara and that consequently there were not merely three potential modes of transmission of HIV among black Africans. Admittedly, references to such people were sometimes buried in easily missed footnotes or subordinate clauses following assertions of the predominantly heterosexual nature of transmission. They were nonetheless in the public record. The famously prickly director of one of Africa's first AIDS Control Programs, for example, responded to a direct question from a journalist about homosexuality in Uganda in 1986. Dr. Samuel Ikwara Okware reportedly first asserted that it was rare, but then voluntarily conceded that "the situation might be different in the prisons" (Hooper 1990, 250).

The resolute silence that followed this admission can also be put in context with another contemporary account by an African journalist. Mark Mathabane's memoir of growing up in the black township of Alexandria, near Johannesburg, in the 1960s is ultimately a celebration of black middle-class dignity, triumph over racism, and the affirmation of African heterosexual and other signifiers of normalcy. But it also includes a description of the young Mathabane's visit to a male-only mine hostel where he witnessed high-risk male-male sexual encounters. Not only does this account vividly juxtapose with the by then already solid scientific consensus about the nonexistence of male-male anal intercourse among Africans. That the book was published by a major press in the United States, was widely reviewed, and was easily available to interested researchers makes the lingering invisibility of the issues it raises all the more remarkable. As Mathabane put it,

Before I fully realised what was happening, the boys, now completely naked, had begun lining up along the three bunks. They then bent over and touched their toes, their black anuses high up in the air. One of the naked men brought out a large bottle of Vaseline and began smearing, lavishly, the boys' anuses, and then his long, swollen penis. My eyes darted to the other men; they too had begun smearing their penises with Vaseline. . . . I looked at the men, and one of them said to me, as he continued rubbing his long, veined penis with Vaseline: "This is a game we and the boys play all the time." He grinned; I tensed [ . . . ]

"Don't be afraid, boy," said one of the men softly, dreamily. "It's only a game we play, and nobody gets hurt." (1986, 72)

The gap between such accounts and the silences in mainstream HIV/AIDS discourse is dramatic, and it is tempting to suspect that homophobia lies behind the determined refusal to admit the existence of homosexualities in Africa. Without denying that possibility, however, almost nothing in the published scholarly material indicates homophobia as a direct cause, at least in the sense of an active aversion or opposition to conducting research on same-sex sexuality. On the contrary, the first cohort of HIV/AIDS researchers clearly adhered to a professional code of ethics and the antidiscrimination (including antihomophobia) praxis of the World Health Organization. Moreover, the homophobic rhetoric that certain African leaders became notorious for did not start until well after the scientific orthodoxy was firmly established—more than ten years after in the highly publicized case of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. Unlike in the United States, therefore, HIV/AIDS researchers in Africa did not encounter significant overt, political homophobia or a swell of popular reaction against "the homosexual lifestyle" when they conducted their initial research. Such a lifestyle scarcely existed in Africa, and where it did, was visible primarily as an elite, white, exotic phenomenon of no interest to the vast majority of Africans potentially at risk for HIV.

Something other than homophobia, in other words, was going on to engender this particularly stubborn element of the African sexuality stereotype. That element has not been given the attention it merits, although, I will argue, the notion of no homosexuality is at least as wrongheaded and harmful as the stereotype of African promiscuity. How the idea came into being, and came to be so strongly believed across such a wide spectrum of identities and politics, will be the focus of this book. Specifically, I aim to trace how "the invisible presence of homosexuality" (Phillips 2004) was concocted, conjured, confirmed, and contested over time through various professional and scientific

discourses in and about Africa south of the Sahara. I aim to explore exactly how the stereotype of an exclusively heterosexual African sexuality was established and maintained over the years in the face of suspiciously weak or directly contradictory evidence.

The presumption throughout is that an understanding of how a falsely constrained notion of African sexuality was constructed in intellectual terms can help us deconstruct it. From there, we may be better able to reformulate some of the most basic—and evidently ineffective—tenets of HIV/AIDS and other health and human rights interventions in Africa today. The history of an idea thus might have applications for a reconfiguration or invigoration of activist struggle, language, and politics, including the politics of alliance among civil society groups and across insider-outsider or academic-activist divides. In short, understanding the history of flimsiness in the base on which a significant body of contemporary HIV/AIDS research and activism stands might improve our ability to make stronger interventions in the future.

#### SAME-SEX SEXUALITY IN AFRICA: ISSUES, CONCEPTS, OBJECTIVES

Let us begin with two basic facts. First, African men sometimes have sex with other men or boys, today as in the past. They do so in a variety of ways, including anally, between the thighs, and by mouth or hand. They do it for money, for love, or when drunk. They identify as gay, straight, he, she, or some other persona. They do it by rape, out of curiosity, out of shyness or fear of women, and for many other reasons. They do it in their bedrooms, in hotels, prisons, dormitories, nightclubs, cars, in the bushes, and elsewhere. Sometimes they feel ashamed or embarrassed by such behavior, and sometimes they feel just fine. As one married Mosotho informant told me, “I mostly like to fuck, anal or between the thighs. This is called ‘in the passage’ here. Interestingly, sometimes I like to be fucked by these manly men I have talked about before.” As to why he and other often-married men like to do this: “Why? Because it is fascinating” (Epprecht 2002, 384, 382).

Second, African women also sometimes have sex with other women or girls, today as in the past. They did not, and still for the most part do not, identify this as lesbian behavior or even as sex. That reluctance points to an interesting question or two about definitions. To quote from one important study from Lesotho, “I learned of fairly common instances of tribadism or rubbing, fondling, and cunnilingus between Basotho women, with or without digital penetration” (Kendall 1998, 233). Deep kissing, mutual manipulation of labia majora, dildo play, and female-female marriage were also all noted both by Kendall and in earlier anthropological studies. Such relationships

clearly did not detract from the traditionally high value placed on heterosexual marriage and reproduction. On the contrary, in the context of severe economic strain, and high levels of male absence and male sexual irresponsibility, the lesbianlike relationships that Kendall's informants describe probably strengthened traditional heterosexual marriage forms by allowing women to avoid entanglements with men outside marriage.

The Sesotho culture is unique, and Lesotho is a small country that experienced relatively extreme demographic and social stress under colonial rule and racial capitalism. It absolutely cannot be taken as representative of the whole of Africa or even southern Africa. The Basotho people nevertheless share much in common with other African peoples, including their views on this issue. Indeed, while forms of heterosexual marriage with a gendered hierarchy of power are widely held up as ideals in Lesotho, as throughout Africa south of the Sahara, same-sex sexuality is also alluded to fairly widely. It is substantively documented in scores of scholarly books, articles, and dissertations in a wide range of academic disciplines, in unpublished archival documents such as court records and commissions of enquiry, in art, literature, and film, and in oral history from all over the continent. These will be discussed in depth in the chapters to come. For now, let me just mention Henri Alexandre Junod (1962 [1916]), Evans-Pritchard (1971), Gay (1985), Moodie (1988), Dunton (1989), Harries (1990, 1994), Jeay (1991), Krouse (1993), Achmat (1993), Gevisser and Cameron (1994), GALZ (1995), Bleys (1995), and Murray and Roscoe (1998) as groundbreaking or "canonical" studies in laying the theoretical and empirical foundations for what is sometimes termed queer scholarship in Africa. My own earlier work has drawn attention to a rich history of struggle over, and changing meanings of, sexuality and sexual identities in southern Africa (Epprecht 2004; see also GALZ 2008). Morgan and Wieringa (2005) offset the prevailing concern with male sexuality in many of the above studies with close anthropological studies of lesbianlike relationships in southern and eastern Africa, while Niang et al. (2002, 2003), Gueboguo (2006a, 2006c) and Eboussi Boulaga (2007) have begun to challenge received wisdom in francophone Africa. Current events, reports on legal status and government policies, international links, and other up-to-date information and debates concerning gay rights from all over the African continent can be easily accessed through the Web site Behind the Mask ([www.mask.org.za](http://www.mask.org.za)). Same-sex issues in the struggles for human rights and HIV/AIDS awareness around the continent are closely documented, with strong policy recommendations, in Johnson (2007). A growing number of studies from around the continent have meanwhile begun to trickle in that establish credible baseline statistics on and testimony from women who have

sex with women who experience heterosexual assaults (Reid and Dirsuweit 2001; Potgeiter 2005; Swarr forthcoming), and of men engaging in high-risk same-sex sexual activity. Jewkes et al. (2006) is a particularly powerful intervention in that respect, on account of the size and quality of the survey it was based on. It demonstrates that male-male sexuality is more widespread *in a rural setting* (nearly 3.6 percent of informants admitted to it) and has a higher correlation with HIV infection than ever before imagined. Niang et al. (2002) is also significant in that its survey of 250 Senegalese men revealed high levels of violence in male-male relationships. No less than 13 percent of those informants had experienced rape by ostensibly heterosexual police.

The language by which same-sex relationships are described in many of these sources is often Eurocentric—the word *homosexuality*, notably, suggests a clarity arising from a specific history of scientific enquiry, social relations, and political struggle that did not historically exist in Africa and still does not very accurately describe the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women in Africa. The language Africans have used to describe such relationships is in fact commonly euphemistic or coy almost to the point of incomprehensibility beyond those in the know. Africans are by no means unique in this, of course, as cross-cultural studies and as students of secret gay dialects have well documented (esp. Prieur 1998; Cage 2003; Leap and Boellstorff 2004; and Reid 2006, notably). Yet in recent years this subtlety has begun to change quite dramatically. The result is that depictions of same-sex sexuality are now becoming increasingly explicit and frank, even from places with a strong reputation for conservatism on this issue. Nigerian author Temilola Abioye, to give but one of many examples, frames a short story around five female friends who complain to each other about men's irresponsibility. The one out lesbian character among them wraps up the discussion by asking cheerily, "Why don't we all take a shower and go down on each other. It wouldn't be copulating, it would be a lot of petting, smooching, and caring" (in Azuah 2005, 136).<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, this kind of writing is not broadly available in Africa and many Africans would probably be surprised by it. Even among the small out gay communities and sexual rights associations, until very recently there has been little awareness of the historical and ethnographic evidence about same-sex sexuality. A further limiting aspect of the existing material is that many of the cutting edge studies on "how homosexuality became un-African" (Aarmo 1999) are narrowly focused by theme or geography. For instance, and very problematically, South Africa as a place has overwhelmingly predominated in the production of such knowledge. This allows determined naysayers elsewhere to rationalize their disinterest in the topic even when the most carefully researched

material about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people (lgbti) in Africa is presented to them. This can be frustrating, if not disorienting in an Alice in Wonderland way. I have found, for example, that evidence from South Africa or even rural Zimbabwe and Namibia is often given little credence among people who regard those countries as not “real Africa” on account of having had so many white settlers.

Yet by now, it all starts to add up: while most African societies historically did and still do tend to place a very high priority on heterosexual marriage and reproduction, many allowed or even celebrated “pseudohomosexualities” and “sex games,” providing they occurred within the bounds of specific rituals, sacred or secret spaces, and designated social roles.<sup>8</sup> They also generally had ways and means to explain why some people did not always and easily fit those heterosexual marital ideals and norms. Whether that was because they refused to marry, or they were unable to consummate their marriage, or they were caught engaging in same-sex or other disapproved sexual practices, such people existed and were known to exist. No doubt some experienced cruelties and humiliations for failure to conform to gender and sexual ideals and norms. And no doubt different societies differed in degrees of tolerance toward individual exceptions and eccentricities, and some may well have approached implacable in their intolerance or violence of reaction against difference. But on the whole, the ways and means to explain and accommodate sexual difference appear to have been relatively humane and respectful of the dignity of the persons involved. This was provided, crucially, that he or she did not put the integrity of the family and community at risk by his or her behavior. That latter provision was not as hard to meet as proponents of African sexuality might think. It could be met in a wide variety of ways, including not naming the nonnormative behavior, not identifying it as an individual sexual choice, and covering it up from public awareness. The keeping of secrets was of paramount importance and could include, as Kendall’s and Abioye’s women suggest, hiding meanings from even that intimate “public” of one: the individual’s own self-consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

These discretions, as well as the ways, places, and frequencies that same-sex sexuality could be expressed, changed over time in response to many factors. The growth of cities and industries, migrant labor, prisons and boarding schools, new cultural influences from outside of Africa, and changing material relations between men and women are just a few examples. Others include the international gay rights movement and all the vocabulary and political boldness that its participants have generated. Changing relations between ethnic groups within postcolonies have also been a factor in giving rise to new attitudes and state policies toward homosexuality, as Namibian lesbian activists

Madeleine Isaaks and Elizabeth Khaxas reveal. By their account, ethnic domination by the strongly evangelized Ovambo over the more traditional Damara partially explains the rise of explicit homophobia in Namibia in the postindependence era (Morgan and Wieringa 2005, 79–80, 92, 125). A similar link has been argued in the case of new forms of intolerance or active homophobia against the Hausa *'yan daudu*, who are taken by some Nigerians as a lightning rod for gathering resentment against corrupt Northern domination of the federal government and economic malaise in the 1980s (Aken'ova 2002).

What appears or is asserted as timeless African tradition today, in other words, is often historically quite recent and contested. Same-sex sexuality and attitudes toward it thus clearly have a history in Africa, just as they do elsewhere in the world.<sup>10</sup>

A great many gaps in this history remain. Islamic jurists wrote judgments and advice on civil cases throughout a huge swathe of Africa, creating in the process a documentary archive that extends back for a thousand years or more. This almost certainly contains decisions and learned reflection on same-sex issues (as it does elsewhere in the Islamic world where close research has been carried out).<sup>11</sup> Portuguese documents, also extending back hundreds of years, might similarly shed light on changing ways that male-male sexuality in particular was understood and regulated over time (see Sweet 1996 and 2003, for preliminary investigations). Anthropological and sociological studies specifically focused on uncovering histories of female-female sexuality have only barely begun, while indigenous African-language novels, television shows, advertisements, and other mass media remain almost entirely unexplored for their allusions to and treatment of same-sex sexuality. One remarkable study of prison graffiti, for example, hints both at men's attitudes toward same-sex relationships and at a censorious role by African research assistants who appear to have erased evidence (Koopman 1997, 81). Newell's biography of the Nigerian trader John Stuart-Young (Newell 2006) also suggests another potentially rich source: oral histories and private diaries of public personalities who did not quite fit the mold in terms of marriage, children, and sexual preferences. The fields of demography and "colonial gynaecology" that flourished in French colonial Africa, meanwhile, tended to explain low levels of fertility among African women in ways that were useful to the colonial state. As Nancy Hunt (1999) and Charles Becker and René Collingnon (1999) discuss, this analysis maintained that female infertility was a result of heterosexual immorality leading to uncontrolled heterosexually transmitted infections. Unpublished observations by the researchers or confidential correspondence might reveal more complex local histories about African sexualities under stress in the colonial era.

As Adam Ashforth eloquently described in the case of his research into somewhat analogous secrets around witchcraft in contemporary Soweto, all of the above would need to explore the “lattice-work of local knowledge that supports such silence, the tracery of suppositions . . . the skeins of gossip and idle speculation—oft-repeated, half-remembered—that are the living history of the community” (Ashforth 2005, 11). Exploring these gaps and querying these secrets suggest formidable methodological challenges.

Yet even acknowledging the limitations of the research thus far, the evidence presented in existing studies is strong enough to beg the question, why would anyone doing research or activism about gender and sexuality ignore the evidence? And yet they do. Indeed, many of the examples to follow suggest a powerful will not to know that flies in the face of recommended best practices to address HIV and AIDS. For example, study after study of this devastating disease insists on the “urgent” or “immediate” need for research into real as opposed to aspired sexuality if progress is going to be made in the fight against it (e.g., Williams 1992; Parker and Aggleton 1999; Caldwell 2004; Lwabaayi 2004; Allman et al. 2007). Why then issue a report on addressing HIV in prisons in Zambia (the country with the steepest drop in life expectancy attributable to HIV/AIDS) that does not even mention the possibility (rather, the well-known fact, even in Zambia [Simooya et al. 2001]) of male-male transmission in prisons? Why conduct a huge, very expensive survey of sexual practices and attitudes among youth in Botswana (the country with the highest seroprevalence in the world) that does not venture a single question about homosexuality or bisexuality? Why publish a “definitive text” on the pandemic in a country with a well-established and vocal LGBTI community that does not make one single mention of same-sex sexuality in African communities? Why, in short, tacitly condone or even encourage ignorance, denial, and stigma regarding actually existing sexualities when such ignorance, denial, and stigma expose young people in particular to unsafe sexual practices?<sup>12</sup>

Homophobia and cultural sensitivities undoubtedly account for some of this fatal discrepancy and the reluctance to raise controversial topics. Crude, threatening expressions of homophobia by African leaders in recent years have in fact been a tempting and easy target for human rights activists (e.g., Long, Brown, and Cooper 2003), sometimes addressed in provocative or sarcastic language (Anele 2006; Gueboguo 2006b). But neither homophobia nor culture as such can explain the durability of silences, stereotypes, and stigma against same-sex sexuality in Africa among professional scholars or gender and human rights activists. On the contrary, many of the authors and activists at the forefront of struggle against HIV/AIDS were obviously striving for nonjudgmental research on scientific lines, were aware of and respectful

of gay rights and the diversity of human sexuality, were not afraid of controversy, and were even, in some noteworthy cases, proudly out homosexuals themselves. Edwin Cameron, for example, South Africa's first openly gay Supreme Court judge, cannot be accused of homophobia. But even in his otherwise hard-hitting memoir (2005, 83), he makes but a single passing reference to the possibility that male-male HIV transmission may be understated in the dominant discourse.

Further complicating the picture is a gap between state- or church-sponsored homophobia on the one hand, and grassroots disinterest or de facto tolerance of discreet sexual difference on the other, a gap I will explore through an analysis of African literature and film in chapter 5. Not to underestimate the pain of "real homophobia," my sense is that much of the reported violence against suspected gays and lesbians in Africa is displaced misogyny or anger at economic or other marginalization among young men, not always neatly distinguishable from regular criminal violence or sexism against professional women. The latter might explain, for example, the glaring difference between the treatment Ugandan sociologist Sylvia Tamale describes receiving for her public support of gay rights (stunning vitriol), and the non-chalance or even national pride that greeted Monica Arac de Nyeko for her prize-winning story of a lesbian affair between two Uganda girls just a few years later.<sup>13</sup>

In short, something far subtler than homophobia appears to be at play. Trying to get to it—that is, to unlock subtleties and secrets from the dominant discourse—requires specialized methods to interrogate the data. I begin by clarifying the key concepts, terms, and analytic tools that I (and many of the colleagues who laid the groundwork for this study) have employed toward that end. First and foremost is the concept of queer theory.

*Queer* became a term of abuse in post-World War II America, roughly on par in its meanness with *faggot* or *homo*. The word was then co-opted as a marker of pride by activists in the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and '70s. North American gay and lesbian intellectuals subsequently adopted it to describe their efforts to stretch feminism, Marxism, subaltern, and other radical critical theories in order both to facilitate enquiry into issues regarding same-sex sexuality that are hidden within the dominant discourse and to deploy the enquiry toward healing or dismantling coercive ideologies of gender, sexuality, and national or other sexualized identity. While Michel Foucault and Judith Butler were the highly Westocentric guiding lights to queer theory in the 1980s and '90s, queer theory has since expanded its horizons to include critical race theory and global political economy.<sup>14</sup> Partly as a consequence, it has gained some currency among non-Western and African diaspora schol-

ars,<sup>15</sup> and has now proponents among African lgbti. As one anonymous contributor to the Web site Behind the Mask put it in answering his or her own rhetorical question, “Why queer?”

Well, yes, “gay” is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we’ve chosen to call ourselves queer. Using “queer” is a way of reminding us of how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike gay, doesn’t mean male. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it’s a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, queer can be a rough word but is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him.<sup>16</sup>

It was in that spirit that I began the present research, *queer* serving as convenient shorthand to describe an antiessentialist approach to researching gender and sexuality that is open to the whole range of human sexual diversity; that underscores sexuality as a critical component in the construction of class, race, national, ethnic, and other identities; that analyses language and silences in relation to material conditions and struggles; and that engages with current debates about global economic and other inequalities coming out of African feminist, subaltern, and critical masculinity studies, both as those debates play out in academe and in the broader political sphere. Important markers in those debates—challenging naturalistic fallacies and Eurocentric assumptions about the relationship between physical sex and social gender identities and roles, interpreting Foucault and Gramsci to reconstruct histories of prostitution, marriage, class, and ethnicity formation in Africa, destabilizing the conflation of women and gender found in much of the early feminist scholarship, and more—include Amadiume (1987), White (1990), Oyéwùmí (1997), Mbembe (2001), Arnfred (2004a), Morrell (1998, 2001), Lindsay and Miescher (2003), Nnaemeka (2005), and Jeater (1993, 2007). Glen Elder (2003) is also important for introducing the term *heteropatriarchy*—a reminder against the marginalization of nonnormative sexuality that sometimes happens in feminist critiques of male domination. Arnfred (2004a) provides an astute analysis of the muted nature of discussion of sexuality in general in African feminist writings that queer theory, hypothetically, could usefully

challenge, while Newell (2006) uses queer theory to effect in uncovering sexual secrets in middle-colonial Nigeria.

These debates, however, now suggest to me that queer theory is not necessarily very helpful anymore. Indeed, three potential problems that were evident in the late 1990s have since become more clearly manifest. The appropriateness and value of the word *queer* in scholarship and struggles for sexual rights in Africa has to be reassessed in light of those problems.

The first issue is that Africans and Africanists who do gender and sexuality research remain extremely reluctant to embrace the term *queer* even when they make use of insights from the queer canon.<sup>17</sup> This is understandable given the long history of Western theories, fads, and prescriptions imposed inappropriately and uncritically on Africa. Because the term derives from a specific North American context of political struggle rather than emerging organically from African intellectuals and activists, it carries for many the strong whiff of North American “gay imperialism” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999, 3) and of trying to shoehorn African evidence and perspectives into ill-fitting North American formulations. On the continent, many would add South African hegemony through “unreflexive” and “homogenizing” interventions that purport to be sympathetic to black gays and lesbians elsewhere in the region but are nonetheless inattentive to specificities and subtleties of culture, history, and struggle outside South Africa (for a succinct critique of that tendency in the South African magazine *Chimurenga*, see Shaw 2004, 197). As Morgan and Wieringa remind us in explaining their choice to eschew the term *queer* (2005, 310), there was nothing queer at all about many of the African women living with women that they encountered in their research in places like Uganda, Tanzania, and rural Namibia. The women there expressed their sexuality in line with existing gender categories and as such were perfectly normal in the cultural context.

Second, notwithstanding recent efforts to globalize queer theory, it remains heavily dependent on Western empirical evidence and referenced by Western theoretical frameworks. African material and African intellectuals tend to be overlooked, seemingly token, or relegated to the margins in ostensibly global queer literature. A further concern is that Western queer researchers in Africa do not always write or publish with African audiences in mind and that their publications are not easily available or accessible in Africa. A number of the studies noted above—and I acknowledge that this could include some of my own interventions—are written in a peculiarly dense, jargon-laden prose that is hard to make sense of outside a narrow circle of North American researchers immersed in North American cultural referencing. This begs the questions, who exactly is queer theory trying to talk to,

and how effective or sustainable is it in acknowledging discrete audiences by continuing to use quotes around the word *queer*?

Third, in methodological terms, far from representing a radical break from colonizing traditions of Western scholarship, queer theory in practice can be strikingly old-fashioned. Through the 1980s and '90s this conservatism appeared mainly in the form of cherry-picking obscure references in select ethnographies by sometimes dubious Western adventurers, racists, and amateurs in Africa under the umbrella of homosexual (see Dynes 1983, for example, and others to be discussed in chapter 2). Note also the casual androcentrism in the defense of queer from *Behind the Mask* cited above (which assumes all homophobes are male). But this conservatism also persists in the form of the conceit that strong opinions about African societies can be expressed without reference to African authors or even visiting the places pronounced upon. William J. Spurlin (2006) provides a sobering example of this in a monograph by a major queer studies publishing house, metaphorically returning to the mission porch to announce what he terms “insurgent” (no definition provided) sexuality in southern Africa. It has been at least five decades since anthropologists rejected root and branch the idea that Western scholars could reasonably comment on African societies without living in Africa, learning the languages, and working in close collaboration with African partners, especially when venturing close to topics as sensitive and secretive as sexuality can be. Spurlin, by contrast, ventures an extended critique of Judith Gay’s pathbreaking ethnographic study of lesbianlike relationships among Basotho girls and young women without going to Lesotho to reconnoiter local knowledge. The result is a mishmash of speculation and cross-cultural analogies, empty rhetorical questions, and outright absurdities. The latter include the assertion that mummy-baby relationships are “a feminist practice” and “a potential site of decolonization” (Spurlin 2006, 76), when not one single Mosotho feminist, let alone the women and girls that Gay interviewed three decades ago, has ever made such an analytic leap.

Justification for this aspect of the methodology further undercuts the credibility of queer theory in Africa when it feeds into heart-of-darkness stereotypes about Africa in North America. To pick on Spurlin again, he suggests that Zimbabwe was too “dangerous” to do research into same-sex sexuality when he visited briefly in 1996, hence the need to rely for his information on unnamed (why?) “underground” writers and activists from afar (2006, 5). In fact, there were numerous researchers in Zimbabwe at that time openly doing their research, publishing in the local papers, and unabashedly supporting the objectives of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ). This included foreigners, like me, then employed by the Zimbabwean state, as well as local

Zimbabweans. Except for mine, however, Spurlin does not refer to any of the work produced by these obviously brave individuals (Antonio, Chigweshe, Phillips, Sibanda, Goddard, Machida, Aarmo, and numerous contributors to GALZ publications, for example, including in its monthly news magazine, the *GALZette*). This disinterest in African researchers cannot be explained by difficulty of access, since many of the publications were readily available, even from outside Zimbabwe.

Homophobia is a real issue in Zimbabwe, as it is in Wyoming and many other places. But who exactly gains by inflating its pervasiveness and danger? Zimbabweans, including LGBTI activists who have publicly supported their homophobic president against Western imperialism, will not, particularly when the Western authors who overstate the dangers of talking or reading about same-sex sexuality in Africa at the same time blithely overlook the work of African and Africa-based researchers. This gap between queer theory as stated and queer research as practiced, in short, deeply compromises the project. Until unambiguous interventions from African intellectuals and activists persuade me otherwise, I have to conclude that it is important to acknowledge but not to promote queer theory as a research strategy in Africa.

For the purposes of the present study, therefore, queer theory's most important and original contribution is simply to make explicit what is commonly implicit in, for example, critical men's studies and other antiessentialist research. Primarily it alerts us to ask about the often extremely subtle ways by which same-sex sexuality is rendered invisible or is stigmatized in hegemonic culture. What, in precise instances, are the discursive tools and tactics by which the ideology of exclusively heterosexual Africanness was asserted and is maintained in the face of accumulating contradictory evidence? What can we see in Africanist discourses when applying a sharp eye for allusions to sexual difference, ambiguities, and change over time?

The most obvious rhetorical techniques in this regard are those clumsy forms of homophobia noted earlier that have become a staple among certain political and religious leaders. These include conflating homosexuality with rape, child abuse, bestiality, or prostitution. Such rhetorical homophobia extends to direct threats against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexual people themselves and against those researchers and sympathizers who work to reduce the invisibility and stigma against African LGBTI people. Homophobia on this scale is frequently amplified with barely veiled innuendo of racism or imperialism against Africans. The government of Uganda offered a disturbingly forceful case of denial in November 2004 when it threatened to bar international donors from the country if they provided safer-sex education to homosexuals. The government of Nigeria is meanwhile

seeking to expand its current criminalization of homosexuality to include people who so much as “witness, celebrate with or *support* couples involved in homosexual relationship [*sic*],” coded language presumably directed mainly against foreign donors and activists.<sup>18</sup>

A more subtle form of homophobia is the apparently reasonable argument that lgbt people are an insignificant minority and gay rights a sideshow to the larger challenges African governments are facing. Maina Kahindo of the Ministry of Health in Kenya, for example, explained why he opposed new research into same-sex sexuality: “taking into account other modes of transmission of HIV/AIDS, homosexuality is negligible, and should not take up our resources and time.” He continues, “We have other, far more pressing areas which affect the majority of our people and therefore need urgent attention” (Panos Institute 2005). That argument ignores the fact that out lgbt are but the tiny, visible portion of a web of profound cultural attitudes and sexual practices that includes men who sometimes have sex with men but do not consider themselves homosexual or bisexual (msm) and women who sometimes have sex with women but do not consider themselves lesbian or bisexual (wsw). Characterizing lgbt people as an insignificant minority also underplays the significance of homophobia in shoring up other prejudices in society, notably, when it serves a vicarious attack on women’s empowerment against sexism, or when used as a smear tactic and scapegoat by xenophobes, tribalists, and racists.<sup>19</sup>

At the level of scholarly analysis, dogmatic opposition to allowing discussion of same-sex sexuality is not very widespread. Denial, stereotyping, and stigma generally occur in much more subtle and often unconscious ways. Rather than homophobia, such blindness and presumption are known as heterosexism. In simple terms heterosexism means naively assuming that the social ideals and norms of heterosexual reproduction, marriage, sexual attraction, and so on are *not* predominantly or even significantly social. Rather, the heterosexual form is conceived as a predominantly natural phenomenon, intrinsic to the human race and consequently not historical. Exceptions to that form are assumed to be a basically freakish minority of genetic dead ends. A heterosexist mindset involves *not* thinking about exceptions to the presumed normal majority, *not* asking questions that challenge presumptions of normality, and *not* wondering if attitudes toward presumed normality might be implicated in wider issues of development, health, and governance.

Once attuned to the concept of heterosexism, it is not hard for a critical reader to spot when it occurs. Silence is the most obvious expression, which can be achieved by not looking or asking in the first place, or by self-censorship of evidence that complicates the heterosexist narrative. Some of the starkest

illustrations of such silencing appear in educational material on HIV and AIDS in Africa. As alluded to above, one authoritative volume aimed primarily to educate health care providers (Essex et al. 2002) does not even include homosexual contact among its list of modes of transmission (see esp. the chapters by Piot and Bartos, and Kristensen). Issues of specific concern to women who have sex with women but do not identify as lesbian, or women who may be infected with HIV by men who have sex with men but do not consider themselves gay, are meanwhile almost totally absent in mainstream AIDS discourse. A quick search of the UNAIDS Web site for sub-Saharan Africa in late 2005, for example, turned up precisely zero documents for each of the keywords *homosexuality*, *lesbian*, *msm*, *wsw*, *bisexuality*, *homophobia* and *anal sex*—the only part of the world to be so systematically uninformed.<sup>20</sup> Abdool Karim and Abdool Karim (2005) manage only two passing references to homosexuality in hundreds of pages of text surveying the history and epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in Africa, both of which refer to the initial years of epidemic among gay white men in South Africa.

Another common manifestation of heterosexism appears in studies that purport to be about sexuality in general but in fact are specifically if not exclusively about heterosexuality. Controversial AIDS researcher John C. Caldwell sets the tone with his magisterial overviews of “social context” that somehow manage to avoid reference to the discussions of same-sex issues (and even masturbation) that occur in some of the very ethnography that he relies on to make his argument (Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin 1989; Caldwell 2000). Jock McCulloch’s study of “sexual crime” (2000), to give another example, draws on archival documents that include hundreds of cases of male-male sexual crime. Yet he systematically ignores those cases in what amounts to an analysis of so-called Black Peril crimes only (sexual relations between black men and white women). Innumerable other studies on gender and sexuality in Africa (and even of “perversion” — Jeater 1993) overlook the possibility of same-sex sexualities or “explain” them in passing as anomalous or insignificant, or both.

Obviously one can only do so much in a monograph. But when titles do not accurately reflect content, or do not use qualifying adjectives to avoid overgeneralization, they serve to normalize the ostensible nonexistence of same-sex sexuality. In other cases, the frustration arises when scholars do recognize the importance of queer theory, point to the need for research into African homosexualities, and in some cases even announce their intention to seek new evidence or perspectives on same-sex sexuality. For whatever reason, however, they commonly do not follow through in any substantive manner. Nigerian physician A. Olufemi Williams, for instance, was an early

voice to note that “the silent or the undiscovered bisexual/homosexual African may be a very important host for the dissemination of HIV” and that “all efforts” needed to be made to identify and reach out to such a person (1992, 74). Yet elsewhere in the same book he categorically denies their existence based on speculative, xenophobic logic and isolated, uninformed studies (65). William Rushing (1995) also speculates on secretive “bisexuality” as a possible vector of HIV from men to women. Yet he too does not provide much more than the barest references to empirical evidence that might justify the speculation. Arnfred (2004b), meanwhile, correctly points out the urgency of rethinking colonial-era and racist conceptualizations of African sexualities, including by tackling the stereotype of pure African heterosexuality. But only one of the contributors to the volume she edited even briefly takes up her challenge (Mumbi Machera, reflecting on her difficulties with raising the topic of homosexuality in her lectures on gender at the University of Nairobi).

The major scholarship in French adheres to the same striking pattern. Beginning in the early 1990s, Bibeau (1991), Dozon (1991), and Dozon and Vidal (1995) offered powerful critiques of medical scientists’ disregard for social science in their approach to HIV/AIDS in Africa, and of Western scholarship in general for naïve and uncritical reiteration of colonial-era stereotypes and slanders. Homosexuals remained invisible, however, to the extent that they, msm, wsw, inmates, and street children are absent even from the list of absent groups in the review of social science literature in Dozon (“les groups absents” refers only to intravenous drug users and recipients of blood transfusions [1995, 43]). Becker et al.’s (1999) groundbreaking collection also sharply criticized Western neocolonialism in the knowledge production process. It noted as well the existence of two linguistic solitudes, with the anglophone scholarship significantly dominating the francophone in quantity and in the quality of its theorization of sexuality. Yet while calling for greater interdisciplinarity, collaboration with African researchers across language barriers, and attentiveness to historical, cultural, political, and other social context, and while at least one contributor mentions in passing that “homosexuality is widespread” (in the Sudan, north and south; El-Battahani 1999, 312), Becker et al. never significantly question the heterosexuality narrative. Indeed, in some cases contributors seem almost deliberately to shore up that narrative by failing to state the obvious. In a survey of Nigerian university students’ perceptions of HIV/AIDS, notably, Edlyne Anugwom found that they regarded the disease as a white, Western phenomenon with no mention of its association with homosexuality. The chapter thus erases what was in fact common knowledge throughout Africa at the time (Anugwom 1999, 501). A subsequent overview of the history of HIV/AIDS (Denis and Becker 2006), while sensitive

to the colonizing tendencies of Western scholarship, continues that same strand of erasure by simply ignoring the proliferation of studies and Web sites that have appeared in the intervening years. It makes no mention of same-sex issues in black communities notwithstanding that at least two studies are cited in the bibliography that focus primarily on situational male-male sexuality among black men (Harries 1990 and Niehaus 2002).

This juxtaposition of theoretical awareness and de facto silence or denial within a single volume also occurs in a weighty collection of erudite articles entitled *HIV and AIDS in Africa: Beyond Epidemiology* (Kalipeni et al. 2004). That book was one of the specific motivations for this one, and for that reason I will belabor the critique for another paragraph. *HIV and AIDS in Africa* is impressive for its breadth, its passion, and its critical perspective on the theoretical and methodological flaws of earlier research. Among other points, coeditor Susan Craddock introduces the notion that same-sex sexuality and attitudes toward it may be underinvestigated in Africa. Oliver Phillips follows up with an incisive chapter on how the topic of homosexuality is avoided in mainstream AIDS discourse. He traces that avoidance back to silences generated in part by the colonial legal systems and customary discretions in African languages. The two of these come together in one striking anecdote that Phillips relates: during the trial of former Zimbabwean president Canaan Banana for sodomy and indecent assault, a female court interpreter had to be dismissed because she was unable or unwilling to translate the Shona word for penis (Phillips 2004, 166n8). Yet none of the other twenty-three contributors to the volume either engages Phillips's argument or evidence or pursues the lead that Craddock offers. Anal sex (which is often wrongly assumed to be only a male-male issue) is not discussed in nearly four hundred pages of dense text. Oral sex is not discussed. Homophobia is discussed only briefly in one chapter, and that with an incorrect citation (Akeroyd 2004, 98–99). Bisexuality is not discussed except to be dismissed in mocking terms. Indeed, in that chapter, two of the contributing editors reiterate an argument they had made several years earlier that harshly reviewed the book by William Rushing mentioned above (Oppong and Kalipeni 1996, 2004).

Rushing was undoubtedly careless to transpose a concept like bisexuality from North America to Africa without conducting local research or even consulting much existing scholarship. But Oppong and Kalipeni are flatly wrong when they claim that there is “not a shred evidence” to support what they call “the myth of the bisexual African homosexual” and “the mythical African homosexual, Rushing's creation” (Oppong and Kalipeni 2004, 52–53). They are also inflammatory to invoke the specter of white racism (“bias”) against Africans in order to discredit this one aspect of Rushing's book.

To be sure, big books, Web sites, and official documents do not tell the whole story, and in fairness it must be stressed that much more is going on on the ground than academic tomes and cyberspace might suggest.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the tentative or hostile attitude toward same-sex sexualities in mainstream HIV/AIDS and Africanist discourse is apparent enough to vindicate at least some of Cindy Patton's powerful polemic on the topic, "Inventing African AIDS" (1999). There appears to be a prior, unspoken commitment to promoting a uniquely heterosexual Africanness that overrides open-minded scholarship on this issue. As Phillips (2004) puts it, homosexuality is an invisible presence in AIDS and presumably other social science research in Africa. That presence skews questions, findings, and logic. We need, therefore, to contest that invisible presence and those who would defend and perpetuate it.

Toward that end, this book aims to support those African intellectuals, including health care professionals at the frontline of HIV/AIDS struggles, who have begun to recognize the harm that the invisibility causes. An important if understated remark by Adamson Muula, head of the Department of Community Health at the University of Malawi made this point in the *Lancet Infectious Diseases*. "When teaching about virus transmission, we need to go beyond politically correct thinking. Anal sex between a male and a heterosexual female certainly happens in Africa but it is rarely spoken of; this must change." So too: "homosexuality happens" — deal with it.<sup>22</sup>

I do not want to underplay the potential risks in engaging with this debate. It is a fact, for example, that homophobic white supremacist groups in America are beginning to use evidence about homosexuality, bisexuality, and anal sex in Africa to promote their iniquitous agendas.<sup>23</sup> There is also the danger, already evident in Nigeria and other parts of the continent, that Christian, Islamic, or other fundamentalist groups might exploit evidence of African homosexualities to promote reactionary visions of moral order that further disempower women and sexual minorities. Among witchcraft believers there is the potential to inflame links in popular culture between sexual transgressions, disease, and what Adam Ashforth (2005) has described as an almost debilitating "spiritual insecurity" and accompanying violence. There is the potential, seen in analogous debates about life "on the down low" by African American men, that exaggerated claims about secretive, insatiable bisexuality could cause panic and despair among African women, who are otherwise the major focus of empowerment initiatives (King 2004; Boykin 2005). There is also the danger that raising the profile of people, activities, and idioms that for the most part still fall under the public radar could invite homophobic or xenophobic reaction against them. The risk of reaction is especially high when it is non-Africans who are doing the research (as has

tended to be the case in queer scholarship in Africa so far, myself included). How to guard against non-African queer researchers and activists eliding into what Obioma Nnaemeka (2005) scathingly refers to as “insurgents” whose overzealous interventions might actually demean African agency and dignity or place them at heightened risk? A dramatic illustration of exactly this kind of tension arising from Western appropriations or interventions occurred following the World Social Forum in January 2007. This culminated in a harshly worded denunciation of the “blatant disrespect” and “neo-colonialism” of pioneering UK LGBTI activist Peter Tatchell by leading African LGBTI activists.<sup>24</sup>

I am acutely aware that I am running the same risks by tackling the topic on a grand scale, and that I am exposing myself to charges of overgeneralization from scant or “negative” evidence according to a Western, gay rights logic. Several strategies can allay these risks. First is to bear in mind a point that I try to make in all my interventions on this topic. Winning human rights for LGBTI people equal to the rights theoretically guaranteed to all citizens is not simply my personal “white,” let alone queer, priority. As the quickest of glances at gay rights Web site Behind the Mask makes clear, African activists and intellectuals, including religious leaders and broad civil-society movements like the Treatment Action Campaign, have begun to make this argument forcefully and articulately. Many African governments have also made the same commitment. In the case of South Africa, this has been done explicitly through its constitution, which since 1996 has prohibited discrimination against anyone on the basis of sexual orientation. Ten years later, in Banjul, Gambia, the African Union’s Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights also explicitly endorsed the principle of extending nondiscrimination and equal protection for lesbian and gay people across the continent.<sup>25</sup>

In other cases, the commitment to LGBTI rights is implicit in treaty obligations such as, above all, the African Union’s Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. That document, presently ratified by all fifty-three member states, recalls a founding principle of the Organization of African Unity: “freedom, equality, justice, and dignity are essential objectives for the achievement of the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples.” It accepts the validity of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It calls for the elimination of “all forms of discrimination.” And it commits to guarantee the protection of those rights “without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, color, sex, language group, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status.”<sup>26</sup> The African Youth Charter (2006) further specifies young people’s right to freedom of expression, access to information, education, and the acquisition of life skills including on HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, and cultural practices that are harmful to women and girls.<sup>27</sup>

The African Union's protocol on the rights of women (July 2003) makes an even stronger commitment to that end. Article 2, so far signed by forty-three African states and ratified by twenty-one, declares:

States Parties shall commit themselves to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of women and men through public education, information, education and communication strategies, with a view to achieving the elimination of harmful cultural and traditional practices and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes, *or on stereotyped roles for women and men.*<sup>28</sup>

It is true that not many African governments would concede that the above commitment is logically connected to lgbti rights. Indeed, they would likely argue that the African Union's obligation to promote family and "positive morals" supersedes any implicit commitment to the rights of lgbti individuals. I believe that that argument cannot survive in the long run, however, particularly as African lgbti people demonstrate their own practical commitments to family and moral living (which they often do in both very creative and sometimes surprisingly conservative ways). And what else is homophobia if not a practice that both polices and gives rise to stereotyped roles for women and men?

The danger of fueling suspicions of Western academic imperialism can also be allayed in part by turning to African lgbti groups for vocabularies. This is not always practical for trying to make broad observations or comparisons given that there are hundreds of languages in Africa. Almost all of them likely have vernacular terms and culturally specific idioms to indicate shades of meaning about gender identity and sexuality. While some of those terms are known cross-culturally over large areas—*skesana*, *matanyola*, *istabane*, *ngochani* across much of southern Africa, for example; *woubi*, *oubi*, *ibbi* across francophone West Africa; *kuchu* across much of east Africa—they often suggest varying degrees of social disapproval or even insult. They have also sometimes drastically changed meaning over time—not unlike the word *queer* has. African activists are addressing the clutter and mutability of African terms in part by judiciously borrowing from the West to develop a common language. But the results here can also be remarkably unstable. A term specifically invented to avoid identity politics, notably, is now commonly used in precisely that way (to wit, "Is he gay or bi?" "No, he's msm"). Even some francophones have embraced the new acronym without explaining why they choose to identify in English as opposed to French.<sup>29</sup> Attempts to become visible also sometimes

come up against the power of the market to marginalize poor, black, female, and even “normal gay” experiences vis-à-vis high consuming white male drag queens.<sup>30</sup>

My own way to minimize the problems inherent in the terminology is, first, to use local and historical terms when referring to local and historical instances of same-sex sexuality. Second, when making more general arguments, I use the terminology now generally preferred by African lgbti associations in their activism.<sup>31</sup> This includes queer but also, still more commonly, msm, wsw, and lgbti (which recognizes diversity within a common political rubric). Following Van Zyl and Steyn (2005), I have used the lowercase rather than the reifying uppercase as a gesture to their mutability and contested meanings, making exceptions only for proper nouns and those identities derived from geographic places (Africans, Arabs, Europeans, Western, for example). More general descriptors and analytic categories (*identity, modern, traditional, black, white*, and so on) are similarly open to debate, dispute, and dissimulation. I employ them bearing in mind the cautions and qualifications pointedly discussed by Mudimbe-Boyi (2002a) or Setel (1999). Frederick Cooper’s (2005) reflections on historical method and Western epistemologies in African studies are also apposite to my approach. This analysis recognizes the limitations of language for capturing the protean, historical natures of identities. Indeed, the dissonance between words that describe people’s sense of identity (or projection of identities onto others) and people’s actual behavior is a major focus of the enquiry that ensues.

Problems in deciphering local meanings are enormously compounded when the scope of the analysis is extended to the whole of Africa south of the Sahara. There are powerful arguments against even attempting such a vast project. I respect those arguments, and I acknowledge the risks that painting on so broad a canvas necessarily entails. On the other hand, the many evident parallels in the empirical data from around the continent, including north of the Sahara (e.g., Cobham 1993; Hayes 2000; Mudimbe-Boyi 2002b; Ahmed and Kheir 2002; Jacob 2005; Inhorn 2005), are compelling. I am also persuaded by critical pan-Africanist theory to take the risk. Some African intellectuals have pointedly castigated petty nationalisms and postmodern dithering in certain streams of Africanist research that narrowly and artificially frame research questions (esp. Zeleza 2005, 2006–7; Mkandawire 2005). They call for sensitivity to the local within the broad framework of a continental liberation struggle. As Joseph Ki-Zerbo expresses it, “The strategic goal of African intellectuals should, therefore, be to forge a new nationalism wherein pan-Africanism will be an integral part, serving as a driving force and giving it meaning.” Paraphrasing Kwame Nkrumah, he makes a convincing argument that “na-

tionalism without pan-Africanism is meaningless and pan-Africanism without a liberation dimension is also an absurdity” (2005, 90; see also Mkandawire 2005, 2). Since the struggle for LGBTI rights and gender transformation has moved to the continental scale, and since resistance to sexual rights often shares the same logic and vocabulary across the continent, a continentwide assessment of the scholarship on sexuality is warranted. This can serve as goad, and perhaps a guide, to the kind of close local investigations that are ultimately needed. It may offer insights into similar struggles against other invisibilities on a continental or even global scale such as, notably, the struggle for disability rights or for men’s empowerment understood through a pro-feminist lens.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, two concepts introduced by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld have proven very helpful for teasing a sense of history from the silences and innuendo concerning nonnormative sexuality. “Cultural intimacy,” first, refers to “those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.” Herzfeld gives examples of “those alleged national traits—American folksiness, British ‘muddling through,’ Greek mercantile craftiness and sexual predation, or Israeli bluntness, to name just a few—that offer citizens a sense of defiant pride in the face of a more formal or official morality and, sometimes, of official disapproval too” (1997, 4). People, from common folk to intellectuals to bureaucrats and politicians, express or play with these “self-stereotypes” in complex, often ironic ways as part of their engagement with (or avoidance of) power, including resisting, sidling up to, and exercising power. J. Lorand Matory applies this analysis with effect in unraveling the construction of secrets around same-sex sexuality within trans-Atlantic (African and Afro-Brazilian) religion. Particularly fascinating and directly pertinent to the present study is Matory’s demonstration of how homophobic portrayals of *candomblé* were deployed over the decades to promote feminist politics in North America, Brazilian nationalism, and antiracist performance among United States–based African scholars. Remarkably, as weak as the empirical evidence behind the various claims ever were, they took on a life of their own among Brazilian gays and lesbians (Matory 2005).

Herzfeld terms this process of self-stereotyping and linguistic play “social poetics” or “the analysis of essentialism in everyday life” (31). Where Herzfeld helpfully differentiates social poetics from Benedict Anderson’s similar and widely used concept of “imagined community” is first, by applying it to different scales than the nation-state (in my application, Africa, African, and Africanist), and second, by emphasizing the dialectic between top-down and grassroots or between insider and outsider in promoting or subverting certain

self-stereotypes. In other words, no one party has the power to impose self-stereotyping, but it emerges over time through alliances, marriages of convenience, expedience, and strategic silences. The concepts of African sexuality and heterosexual African AIDS appear to fit this model.

#### SOURCES, METHODS, AND LIMITATIONS

Charting the history of an idea that is often unspoken and unrecorded is inherently more difficult than uncovering evidence of human activity. I acknowledge that my principal sources leave significant gaps that often require extrapolation from scanty and geographically uneven evidence. One of the goals of the book is thus to appeal for further research that can start to fill the gaps with more empirically grounded data and analysis.

My main sources are published books and articles, principally in English but also some in French. These sources include descriptive accounts and original ethnographic or other research ranging from 1352 to 2007. Several hundred such accounts over five and a half centuries of writing about African gender and sexuality make some mention or allusion to same-sex sexuality, albeit often in as little as a fragment of a single sentence in an entire book. Published sources include memoirs and biographies of some of the authors of those accounts, plus secondary studies that draw on unpublished documents and oral interviews. I have not included in the reference list many hundreds of other scholarly publications and probably thousands of newspaper or other popular media articles that make no mention of same-sex sexuality, although this negative evidence is an important part of the research.

I have cast the search as widely as possible over the whole of Africa south of the Sahara, although, for historical reasons that will be discussed, the pertinent scholarship is far denser in southern Africa. My own closer familiarity with obscure and unpublished material in southern Africa acquired over several years of close archival research in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Lesotho, and Malawi may reinforce the impression of a bias toward that region, and an unwarranted extrapolation from it to the whole. I have tried to offset that bias in the historical material by drawing, where possible, on current debates elsewhere in Africa on Internet sources—above all, *Behind the Mask*—and through my personal electronic networks. Much of this material has been culled from the popular press or sociological research in different African countries. This in turn may at times create a presentist feel—little of the material from Nigeria predates the late 1990s, for example. Nonetheless, there are sufficient implicit histories in the contemporary material to warrant carefully qualified comparisons and analogies with southern Africa.

This is not to impose southern African experiences or models elsewhere but to suggest avenues for productive future research in the different subregions.

Far more problematic for an exercise in African history than this regional imbalance is that so few Africans contributed to the published record before the very recent past. African voices overwhelmingly appeared in the scholarship through the muffle of European, North American, and latterly white South African or Zimbabwean translators and interpreters. Men like Alfred Nzula, Jomo Kenyatta, and T. Adeoye Lambo did eventually acquire training in European scholarly methods and established profiles in their respective fields. For reasons to be discussed, however, African professionals' main contributions on this specific issue were commonly silence, derivative reiterations of received wisdom, romanticized portraits of so-called tribal heterosexuality, or active attempts to still research and speculation that might challenge the consensus. Virtually all the substantive, explicit, and original contributions to the research on same-sex sexuality thus continued to be done by cultural outsiders well into the 1990s, and in many cases remain so. The history of the idea that there is no homosexuality in Africa thus tends at times to read like an extended, albeit minor, footnote in European intellectual history.

To offset that enormous imbalance, and to pry out more direct African input into the discussion, I had to turn to sources that are not normally given much credence in the scientific or even historical scholarship—African fiction, plays, and videos. These sources provide a powerful countervailing African voice to the silence and denial that predominate in empiricist-minded scholarship. They cannot be taken as realistic in an empirical or objective sense. However, the ambiguities, nuances, and compromises that they often portray almost certainly convey, in a figurative or subjective sense, more realistic representations of society than dogmatic or ideological silence. African artists are inventive and manipulative, to be sure, but on this topic they may also be a more reliable guide than African scientists trained and immersed in homophobic or heterosexist European intellectual traditions. They also shed new light on the ways that European ideas about sexuality were refracted through African eyes.

To do this history properly requires much more. Oral testimony from African informants would go far to offset Eurocentric tendencies and assumptions in the published material, but I have not gathered such evidence in any remotely comprehensive manner. I have done some, however, in the form of face-to-face and e-mail interviews with key informants, conversations with academic colleagues and activists, and participant observation (for example, of annual general meetings and other gay rights activism). Reflection on my

years as a teacher in boarding schools in Zimbabwe and Lesotho might be considered another form of participant observation. Still, I acknowledge that this aspect of the research is underdeveloped. An appropriately systematic level of oral history remains another project, which could involve, for example, interviewing specific authors and research assistants who wrote msm and wsw out of their publications or who translated research instruments and interviews in contentious ways. It could involve interviewing community and church leaders to explore specifically how and when those leaders established their knowledge and certainties about homosexuality. It could involve interviewing gay rights activists on specific strategic choices they made in their struggles or in downplaying their presence in public discourse (especially in the early days of HIV/AIDS).

Another pronounced bias in the sources is toward male-male sexuality. African women are largely invisible in much of the Africanist scholarship before the 1960s (and in some disciplines remain so even now). Disinterest in women and female sexuality is particularly evident and inexcusable in colonial-era ethnopsychology. But while women and gender have become staples of much Africanist scholarship and development-oriented literature since then, female sexuality continues to be decidedly underinvestigated or encrusted with assumption and moral judgment.<sup>33</sup> I have tried to balance the bias toward men in the published sources by highlighting the relatively sparse research or discussions of female-female sexuality. The androcentrism, however, is not always blameworthy. With respect to the chapter on HIV, notably, I accept the worldwide consensus that female-female sexuality does not represent a significant mode of transmission. There are huge issues of specific concern to wsw about HIV, and transmission of the virus can occur through some kinds of lesbianlike encounters. But the risk appears to be so much lower than male-male or male-female sexual intercourse that the disinterest by researchers and activists through the 1980s (the focus of my study) can probably be forgiven.

Finally, the HIV/AIDS crisis has created a fertile field for wild conspiracy theories and over-heated if not slanderous accusations. That makes it important to clarify in explicit terms what I am *not* going to do. I will not be suggesting that Africans as a group have a unique problem with keeping sexual secrets. On the contrary, I will be drawing attention to the myriad ways within the dominant discourse that different African cultures kept, winked at, or flaunted sexual secrets not unlike people elsewhere. I am also not going to dispute that the demographic most vulnerable to HIV in Africa south of the Sahara is young women who are infected by men through heterosexual intercourse. Hence, I do not propose that homosexuals, bisexuals, msm, or wsw constitute major

vectors of HIV. All I will be saying is that the numbers of msm and wsw are bigger than commonly assumed and asserted, and that there are further indirect costs to denying their existence. In a context where many millions of people are infected, a revision of even only a percent or two upward translates from the assumed negligible into hundreds of thousands of citizens.

Leaving these people out of the picture is to seriously undermine the holistic or cross-sectoral approaches to HIV/AIDS that most people now agree are essential to tackling the disease. My goal here is not to position histories of individual lgbti, msm, wsw, or specific subcultures of nonnormative sexualities in the center of the picture. Rather, it is to focus on how and why they were left out of the picture in the first place, and so often continue to be. It aims at strengthening the argument in favor of a truly holistic and cross-sectoral approach to HIV and AIDS and other sexual health and human rights discussions.



The present volume follows influential ideas, silences, and presumptions about same-sex sexuality in Africa as they developed over time. Specifically, it asks how various forms of prejudice and presumption concerning sexuality infuse science and acquire a misleading authoritativeness that spread throughout other academic disciplines and “common sense.” The book posits that there are parallels or synergies in research between more densely researched southern and anglophone Africa and the rest of Africa south of the Sahara that suggest possibly fruitful future research. It shows that compromising links can be demonstrated between colonial-era representations of African sexuality and early HIV/AIDS research. From those links, is it possible to draw lessons from history that might help us imagine more effective, less ideologically burdened interventions in the future?

Reflecting on my earlier work on the history of same-sex practices and subcultures mostly in Zimbabwe and South Africa, I have identified four bodies of scholarship and art that were especially influential in establishing, and then beginning to destabilize, the consensus about the supposed nonexistence or irrelevance of same-sex sexuality in Africa south of the Sahara. I then query each of these overlapping discourses in roughly chronological order of their appearance. I trace intellectual connections and, in some cases, personal relationships between authors promoting these ideas. I link their analyses of African sexuality to broader debates and trends in contemporary international scholarship and to the political economy of the times and places in which each discourse emerged as influential. I will not, however, claim a comprehensive

expertise in each of these fields, nor do I intend to imply moral superiority over the work I critique. Each of the disciplines has grappled with and, I believe, has surmounted or is theoretically capable of surmounting the problems I point out. I nonetheless contend that it is salutary to be reminded of just how extreme, casual, and not very far away in time the racism, androcentrism, and homophobia could often be in even the most respectable scholarship on which we depend to address current pressing problems in health and social justice.

The new discipline of anthropology was established in the nineteenth century and developed in relationship to colonial exigencies and anticolonial critiques through the mid-twentieth. Early representations or intimations of same-sex sexuality in Africa got lost or suppressed as the field matured. Here I focus on vicissitudes in the appearance and disappearance of *homosexualism*, *uranism*, *Oscar Wilde-ism*, *unnatural vice*, and the many other terms inappropriately deployed in that field of enquiry. Most professional anthropologists came from Europe and North America and their findings (often little more than speculations) were heavily influenced by debates taking place in their home countries. A small number of African intellectuals added an affirming voice to these debates, but I argue that the majority, by their very silence, provided an important confirmation of the dominant colonial narrative.

Pursuing a similar analysis of ethnopsychiatry and other mental health sciences, one finds efforts in the 1930s and '40s to use Freudian methods in order to render an understanding of “the African mind,” a term then commonly used as shorthand for Africans’ decision-making processes about sexuality. Much of this “science” drew on the extant ethnography and direct advice from approving Christian missionaries and colonial officials. African initiatives were further coached by European psychiatrists for whom new evidence from Africa helped to strengthen their claims about the universality and intellectual respectability of the discipline back in Europe. The scholarship that emerged thus often served to consolidate deeply heterosexist understandings of sexuality. These in turn promoted racial, gender, and class identities that were expedient for the dominant colonial political and economic interests in both Africa and Europe at the time (white versus black, African versus Arab, savage versus civilized, gentleman versus working man, man versus woman, etc.).

As well as being often transparently self-serving, much of this discourse was arcane and jargonistic. Yet in at least one case—colonial psychology—it resonated into popular culture in a significant way. This was through a pseudo-Freudian interpretation of the early-nineteenth-century Zulu leader Shaka. A thread runs through the historiography of southern Africa from the

1920s that uses the notion of disturbed sexuality to “explain” Shaka’s violent and ultimately self-destructive behavior. This psychohistory has in turn been used to justify various political claims both for and against apartheid and neo-colonialism elsewhere on the continent. In one of the many ironies I expose in this history, that same fundamentally homophobic and arguably racist thread has in recent years been picked up and co-opted by black gay males in Africa and North America. In that twist, Shaka emerges as emblematic of primordial, heroic black homosexuality.

The earliest epidemiological and other scientific studies of HIV/AIDS (or slim disease, as it was first known in Central Africa), tentatively raised, but very quickly dismissed, the possibility of male-male sexual transmission of HIV. Men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay or bisexual were hastily written out of the investigation, and science served once again to confirm the old ethnographic stereotypes as unchallengeable truths. Here I closely analyze the methods, unspoken assumptions, and language of the major research contributions at the onset of the epidemic in the leading English-medium scientific journals. The focus is on a short but critical moment in time, from 1982, when the first alert about the new disease was specifically directed to medical practitioners in Africa, up to 1988. In that year Ugandan and South African medical professionals with the backing of their respective governments adopted comprehensive—*except for msm*—strategies to contain HIV/AIDS. Today nonheterosexist research is being achieved under daunting circumstances, offering potential lessons for HIV/AIDS campaigns. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider the findings in depth, but I do include some discussion of the new research to underscore the point that it can be done. Africans will admit to and talk about same-sex sexualities when approached in sympathetic ways.

Throughout this entire period of an emerging hegemonic African sexuality, alternative evidence and representations were available but largely overlooked or dismissed. Subtle references to same-sex sexuality in African fiction often belied public claims of homophobic intolerance in African societies and in some cases even offered pointed critiques of Western stereotyping of African heterosexuality. African authors and filmmakers themselves began to destabilize the stereotypes—mainly from the 1970s but in increasingly explicit and gay-friendly terms since the early 1990s. The varied masculinities and femininities they describe underscore the irony of Western intellectual investment in maintaining the old stereotype. The irony is deepened by the fact that today in debates about sexual rights it is often African intellectuals citing Western sources who authenticate African customs and supposed family values that were absolutely and essentially intolerant of homosexualities.

These sources include, above all, Christian theologians who pepper their attempts to justify discrimination with a small number of verses from the Bible, with quotes from ancient European saints, and with selections from colonial ethnographies.

The irony that African theologians have taken up the cudgels against gay rights using carefully chosen Western sources has a bitter edge to it, and sometimes deeply dispiriting consequences. The resurgent rate of HIV infection in Uganda, for example, has been linked to an alliance of Christian fundamentalists in North America and Uganda pressing an abstinence campaign that has curtailed the supply of condoms in the country and that has propagated harmful stereotypes and silences concerning sexuality (H. Epstein 2005; Cohen and Tate 2005). The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission even alleges that American taxpayers through USAID have directly funded faith-based groups in that country which incite hatred against gays and lesbians.<sup>34</sup> But a positive side to the irony exists as well that I hope to steer the conclusion toward—notably, where the righteous wrath of some African Christian leaders condones or even demands family ostracism of gay and lesbian children, the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) today places the highest priority in its counseling service on healing family rifts. Oral testimony from out lgbt in the African diaspora suggests that loyalty to family honor is one of the most compelling values they share.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, this history holds implications that extend far beyond the exegesis of dusty old texts or the politics of small solidarity groups. The history exposes an unsavory side to scholarship that presented itself as rigorously scientific. It shows that a seemingly small element in an ideological construct of identity can have big, long-term, insidious effects on culture and health. It also suggests potential constructive outcomes if awareness of history is incorporated into, for example, HIV/AIDS prevention and education campaigns or strategies to empower women and youth. If an African sexuality that denied Africans' full humanity, and still denies their rights to sexual knowledge and sexual health, can be made in the first place, then it can also be unmade.

This lesson is not intended simply to apply to activist struggles, but is aimed as well at colleague African and Africanist scholars across a range of disciplines. Social history, the history of women and gender, health and science studies, political history, cultural studies, and no doubt many other fields of enquiry could surely be enriched by careful attention to the subtleties of sexual meaning and tension hidden within the dominant discourses of African studies. Moreover, disinterring subaltern African perspectives on these issues can potentially enrich queer and other sexuality studies in the West, where ethnocentrism or tokenism toward African evidence remain evident. The hope

is that researchers and activists working to end the stigmas and stereotypes that so clearly exacerbate HIV/AIDS worldwide might consider this little piece of the puzzle of the disease in Africa as they frame their research questions in the future.