

DECOLONIZING AFRICAN SEXUALITIES: BETWEEN CONTINUITIES AND CHANGE

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...Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness ... and darkness is not a subject for history.³

ABSTRACT

In recent times, gender and sexuality have increasingly become a focus of academic studies, within diverse disciplines and as well as feeding into interdisciplinary studies in Africa. This field presents new theoretical and methodological challenges to contemporary researchers in many ways. In this paper, we argue that much secrecy prevail[ed] in the area of human sexuality that restricted open discussions and exchange of information on the subject. We argue that such Africa's secretive morality has increasingly led to much confusion, misinformation and misrepresentation of actual sexual dynamics in the region. Moreover, investigation on pre-colonial and colonial attitudes towards sexuality often reveal wider social anxieties and tensions. Drawing primarily on theoretical literature from the social sciences, we reveal how notions of gendered and sexualized identifications in sub-Saharan Africa can affect the very production of history and other analysis in African sexuality.⁴ It is hoped that, the theme of silences and secrecy and its connections to matters of sex and sexuality will provide a new window from which to explore these and other issues.

Keywords: Decolonizing, Gender, Sexuality, Sex, Silences, Secrecy

1.0 ERASURE AND RESURGENCE: THEORIZING SEX AND SECRECY

The selection of the theme *sex and secrecy* has been inspired by two major developments in African sexuality research: The IASSCS and Amanitare initiatives - all took place in Johannesburg South Africa. First, was the IASSCS (International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society) Conference that was held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from 22 to 25 June, 2003. This was the first time such a huge conference was being hosted in Africa. Its aim was to break through the most kept secrets

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³ Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe," *The Listener*, Vol. 17, No.2 November 28, 1963, p. 871.

⁴ We use here the term 'African sexualities' not because we claim that there exist African people's heterogeneity, but as an aspect of cultural ideology shared among majority of people within the geographical region named 'Africa' and also used politically to call attention to some of the convergences and shared historical legacies inscribed in cultures and sexualities by colonialism.

surrounding various forms of sexualities in various cultures across the world. Organized around the theme of “Sex and Secrecy”, the conference generated debates around a wide range of topics, from the politics of sexuality, sexuality and HIV/AIDS, histories of sexuality and prejudice, religion and sexuality, to gender-based violence and so on. The issues of the conference sought to engage with pressing concerns originating from the African circumstances, while simultaneously resonating with and, encouraging international scholarship in the field of sexuality, it provided a forum to re-examine social, cultural and historical dimensions of sex, sexual practice and sexuality. In coupling sex and secrecy, the conference was a breakthrough in addressing issues of power, stigma and silence.⁵

The second development (but took place earlier than above) came from a feminist group that called itself *Amanitare* coming under the auspices of African Partnership for the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and Girls, that took place between 4 and 7 February 2003, Johannesburg this association again organised a workshop in South Africa and brought together the ‘voices’ individuals across Africa working on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights...compelled by the need to confront the devastation of HIV/AIDS, the disturbing prevalence of sexual violence...among other gendered thorns in the side of Africa's development. Coming after the decade of African feminism-1990-2000, this conference was significant in that it provided a momentum for local activism and African women to break silences surrounding sexuality and ‘claim the ownership and control of their own bodies’. It was a commitment to challenge normative concepts of culture and tradition that impinged on the rights of women and girls.⁶

As a historian, therefore, these two events challenged us to rethink about the role of secrecy in the ‘dark age’ of African history-the pre-colonial era and even beyond. We believe that this is one of the periods that has received scanty attention, scandalously neglected in African studies. Interestingly, *both* African and Africanist scholars have given little devotion to issues of gender and women studies in this period and more so, role of sexuality in the evolution of African history. Therefore, in this paper, we ponder the question whether silences and secrecy surrounding African sexuality, affects how we produce historical and other social development research in the region.

It should be noted that most of the decisive research discoveries have often been informed by a history of breaking silences through an emphasis on voice and speaking out in the research endeavors. But moments of secrecy and silence are less often addressed. This gives rise to many questions. What are the silences, secrets, omissions and socio-political consequences of such moments? What dilemma or constraints do they represent? What are their implications for research praxis? Are such moments always indicative of voicelessness or powerlessness? Or do they constitute a productive moment in the research encounter? What are the theoretical and empirical debates about epistemology, subjectivity and identity in research?

⁵ For detailed analysis of the conference presentations, see Graeme Reid and Liz Walker, “Sex and secrecy: The 4th conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society Johannesburg, South Africa, June 22–25, 2003” in *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, January 2004, 1:98 <http://www.iasscs.org/previous-conferences/> accessed on 29/04/2021

⁶ For more details about *Amanitare* visit see Jessica Horn, AMANITARE and African Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights found at http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_2_profile_2.pdf retrieved October 21, 2016

In general, different dimensions of sexuality studies would include sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations. As such, it goes without saying that sexuality touches on a wide range of other 'secret' that includes pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence. Therefore, it is an encompassing phenomenon that involves the human psyche, emotions, physical sensations, communication, creativity and ethics. As such, researching would be a challenge, since as Emídio Gune and Sandra Manuel puts it: "anything having to do with sex causes a great many people to feel embarrassed "sexual practices always involve some degree of privacy, and the ethical implications of their scientific study and of the publication of findings are myriad"⁷

In his unprecedented work, Gilbert Herdt tries to 'expose the secrecy' of Melanesian male cults by sharpening his insights into what he termed as ...reveal breathtaking and provocative secrecies... He does this by defining trajectories of his study arguing thus study of secrecy concerns... understanding not only what a people believe in, but also what they fear and doubt; not what they celebrate in public ceremonies but how their mistrust is transferred into hidden acts and whispered stories behind the stage of society.⁸

Quoting Natasha Trethewey's conceptualization of silences, she speaks to her incarcerated brother, Joe, in 'I am keeping a silence, to protect myself from knowing'.⁹ So often this is what the *silences*—in families as well as in the public discourse of difficult events—are all about: *If something isn't spoken*, it isn't fully known, and we can absolve ourselves of the responsibility that knowing entails".¹⁰ Yet, "secrecy," says American fiction writer, Robert Heinlein, "is the beginning of tyranny". It is the abode of darkness, ignorance, prejudice and confusion. Because whatever is held in secret is like something held in the dark- it can be anything, it can become anything. It can, too become nothing. There are such countless instances throughout African history and literary studies. No wonder, Harley's argues that "the absence of something must be seen to be as worthy of historical investigation as its presence."¹¹

Therefore, through the lenses of history, this paper provides an opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges-gaps and omissions in African sexuality research. As such, there is need to broaden existing horizons in the realm of sexuality research in Africa by including issues that expand the focus of enquiry beyond public health, stereotypes and multi-faceted roles of men and women in the realm of sexuality-these are some of the issues that has preoccupied studies in sexuality for long. Achile Mbembe points out that sexuality in African studies continues to emphasize the pathological and problematic rather than on the productive, pleasurable and

⁷ See Frith, H. Focusing on sex: Using focus groups in sex research. In *Sexualities*, 3(3), 275-29, 2000

⁸ Gilbert Herdt, *Secrecy and Cultural Reality Utopian Ideologies of the New Guinea Men's House: A compelling study of male ritual secrecy and its impact on the cultures of Melanesia and Papua New Guinea* (Michigan, University of Michigan, 2003),65

⁹Natasha Trethewey *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (Georgia University of Georgia Press, 2010),p.23

¹⁰ Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, p. 102

¹¹ Harley, J. B., *Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe.*(*Imago Mundi*, 1988.), 57-76

powerful forces of sexuality in the African social and cultural domain-they are unfortunately all folded deep into mystery of secrecy.¹²

Unfortunately, sexuality, where it has features as part of social science enquiry has tended to do so in a context of development discourse that has focused almost exclusively on the experience of women. The “universal female subordination” hypothesis has formed the theoretical basis for important scholarly work and feminist activism.¹³ This theoretical framework has informed approaches to the empowerment of women in oppressive patriarchal and gerontocratic social systems. However, this model, which has been highly influential in gender and development discourse, has often been transposed and applied to diverse situations in Africa as if it has universal applicability, and without recognizing the cultural biases that inform this understanding of the nature and circumstance of women's subordinate social position.

While it is true that many cultures across the world have in the past been pre-occupied with the regulation of sexuality, for the African cultures, this was much more evident. Exert over cultural, political, economic and even psychological controls on how people talk about sex: when, where, with whom and why-was totally controlled in many cultural respects. These barriers to sexual communication were created for a variety of reasons—notably, gender power, the structures on childhood sexual and gender development, the regulation of the development of pleasure, the social control of adult morality and the inhibition of sexual behaviour that violates norms in such fundamental areas as premarital and extramarital sex. Unlike many forms of sexuality in the west, Africa matters of sexuality were commonly folded into social relations, and their expression, were carefully metered by custom, rituals and taboos, than most of European or even American mores. Most of African cultures, however, structured tendencies to hide sexuality, through social organisation and speech through the mechanism of ritual secrecy—a high form of utopian male culture that produced sexual hierarchy and exaggerated gender differences. The form that sexual objectification took place in a particular society reflected, refracted and reproduced the conditions of discursive control.¹⁴

Therefore, taboos, secrecy and access conditions as well as the right to transmit hidden or so-called secret forms of knowledge are all deeply rooted in the history of numerous cultural, religious and political systems and were connected with notions of ownership, control, power, empowerment, status and prestige. It is not, of course, accidental that the restrictions imposed on the transmission of such knowledge remains crucial factors in the practice of

¹² Achille Mbembe cited in Graeme Reid and Liz Walker, “Conference Report Sex and Secrecy: The 4th Conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society Johannesburg, South Africa, June 22-25, 2003’ in sexuality research & social policy Journal retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1525%2Fsrsp.2004.1.1.98.pdf> on 4, January 2017.

¹³ See for example, Ortner 1974, Is female to male as nature is to culture? 1974 In: Rosaldo M, Lamphere L, eds. *Woman, Culture and Society* Stanford CA Stanford University Press 67 87 <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=3030> accessed on 21/04/2021

¹⁴ Silvia Tamale, *African sexualities: A reader*. (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 26 also found at <http://www.sxpolitics.org/sexuality-and-politics/pdfs/volume1/2.pdf>

magic; for magic has been traditionally steeped in secrecy, restrictions and taboos.¹⁵ *Secrecy therefore, can be said to be the scaffolding of the illusion of normalcy that reinforces the marginality and powerless of some and strengthens the power hold over them by others.*

With the establishment of colonial rule, such secrecy in African sexuality thus provided window for the European speculation and curiosity and in our view metaphorically linking Africa to 'a dark' continent, because of shielded information that was strange, murky, secretive and dark. Likewise, reasons for such beliefs and stereotypes lies in the fact that African sexuality during this period was shrouded in deep mystery and often hidden from the public thus making it difficult to collect narratives of sex for the purposes of recording.

In reference to darkness, *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926e), Freud wrote, about a *dark continent* to connote a geographic space that is murky and deep, one that defies understanding. Freud borrowed the expression from the African explorer John Rowlands Stanley's description of the exploration of a dark forest—virgin, hostile, impenetrable. Dark continent depicts silence, ignorance and obscure. However, since secrecy had long been suspect—a source of subversion, abuse of power by brokers and wicked agents of the state, and social ill... colonial agents provided force when necessary to support missionary zeal in the destruction of secret cult objects and practices. Therefore, antisocial cynical and romantic views of male ritual secrecy in these societies continued to belabor and undermine their very foundation of historical interpretation.¹⁶

In contemporary literature and academic scholarship, various forms of expressions of African sexuality such as paedophilia, rape, adultery, circumcision, homosexuality, abortion, sodomy, incest, pregnancy remain silent, secret and unexplored. Thus, scrutiny into acts, identities, practices, relationships, and desires that were considered elicited and illegitimate, proscribed and hidden are difficult to study. Specifically, conducting oral research on such themes proves futile for historians and social anthropologists. It is widely believed that many people would not speak on these issues for the fear of the cost of exposure. Africans were acutely aware of their own vulnerability in the face of public knowledge of their sexual lives—the fear to breach the conventions of mainstream society. *For instance, Among the Kuria Kisii, Meru and Taita of Kenya, sexual organs were considered as gates of life. So that naked exposure or speaking loudly about these organs was prohibited and, in many cases, strictly policed and often tabooed.*¹⁷

Therefore, critical questions in this analysis, revolves around such questions as: What power did secrecy have on the society? For instance, in rituals, secret knowledge, initiation, power

¹⁵ For the notion and function of secrecy, restrictions and taboos in terms of the dissemination of knowledge in aboriginal societies see Morphy 1991, Keen 1994 and Kaima2000. For the connection of secrecy with certain social groupings, such as the so-called secret societies or with social processes like rites of initiation see Middleton 1987: 25–43. For the political function of concealment of information see Simmel 1950 and Tefft 1980

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis: (The Standard Edition) Mass Market Paper back* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 22-24

¹⁷ B.M Ahlberg, and A. Kulane, *Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*, 2011. In S. Tamale (ed.), *African sexualities: A reader* (Oxford: Pambazuka Press), pp.313–339.

exercised over individuals because of the cultural imperative to maintain silence and or secrecy. Confession and taboo: how people can talk about sex actions including those that compromise individual autonomy and disregard, agency and bodily integrity, hidden codes and local rules. These matters form the intellectual pillars of sex and secrecy. But *why are moments of secrecy and silences in Africa often less addressed?*

Western historians have long employed different types of methodological and theoretical approaches when evaluating African oral narratives. In many cases, they have often employed recording and analyzing texts produced for official or public consumption. But what about a thing not said, or stories, the statements only made in whispers or done behind closed doors, away from the eyes and ears of officials? What are we to make of statements that, by being offered in secret, defy the social consensus on what is appropriate, proper, and safe to discuss with insiders, outsiders, or both? An analysis of these secrets and silences can reveal a history of societal tensions of yet unresolved, the study of which is critical for understanding the history of official discourse about past. As "hidden transcripts" and a form of "cultural censorship," they illustrate the complexities of the African past.¹⁸

In tandem to the secrecy, actual sexual practices in Africa have had strong connections with darkness. Darkness therefore, becomes a space or a custody of secrecy. For instance, the Kuria of Kenya approve of sexual relations only at night in accordance with the laws of God. The Kalenjin believe that sex during the day will cause thunderstorms and deadly lightning, leading to drowning of not only the offending couple but also of other innocent people. West African Bambara believe that a couple who engage in sex during the day will have an albino child or even engaging in sexual relations out of doors will lead to the failure of crops.¹⁹

On the other hand, and ironically, in some instances, sex was literally made public. In Tanzania, some women were noted for their innovative means of publicly interlacing ideas of sexuality and pleasure into cloth design, music, and nuptial ceremonies. Erotic and desire were often unveiled through the ingenious, subtle messages embedded in local *kanga* cloth that these women wrapped loosely around their waists in public display. In Mbiti's philosophy, sex in African society, was known not to be entirely for biological purposes alone. It had religious and social uses too which made sexuality a public discourse.²⁰ Sex was a solemn seal, a sacrament, a sacred action, with inward spiritual values. As such it was deeply embedded in many socio-cultural relations.²¹

2.0 THE MISSIONARY POSITION: COLONIAL DISTORTIONS AND STEREOTYPES IN AFRICAN SEXUALITY

As already indicated, the core argument in this paper is therefore, that colonial inability to decipher secret codes and scanty information led to widespread speculation thus leading to misconceptions, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Africans sexuality. The

¹⁸ Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), 37-66

²⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York, Anchor Books Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1970), 41

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 35

immediate consequences on the part of colonial administration, was therefore, legal control and re-shaping of African expression on sexuality. African sexuality and its control and representations were central to ideologies of colonial domination.

In colonial annals, female bodies in particular, symbolized Africa as the conquered land, and the alleged 'hyperfecundity and sexual profligacy' of African men and women made Africa an object of colonial desire and derision, a wild space of pornographic pleasures in need of sexual policing-the practice of gendering the colonies as female and the use of gender and sexual metaphors to manage relationships with the colonies and the colonized. Interracial sexual relationships between European men and native women and European women and native men were strictly criminalized and controlled. Sexuality was used to maintain and to erode racial differences and as a process essential for the reproduction of human labor power for the colonial economy, both of which demanded close surveillance and control, especially of African female sexuality. All guided by both the "civilizing mission" and the categories of difference that underpinned colonial projects.²²

Consequently, much of the available information on African sexuality were often distorted by research intended to support the certain beliefs and stereotypes and or racial agenda, so that, there are common misconceptions about a variety of sexual practices such as the myths regarding polygamy, virginity, same sex relationships, sexual parts and so on. In the eighteenth century for instance, when African ethnic groups first began to be visited, extravagantly romantic views widely prevailed as to the simple and idyllic lives led by 'primitive' peoples. During the greater part of the nineteenth century the tendency of opinion was to the opposite extreme, and it became usual to insist on the degraded and licentious morals of savages. For instance, the widespread custom of lending the wife under certain circumstances was especially regarded as indicating gross licentiousness.

To cite Marlow's story in *Heart of Darkness* for example which takes place in the Belgian Congo-regarded as the most notorious European colony in Africa for its greed and brutalization of the 'native' people-the book depicts the monstrous wastefulness and casual cruelty of the colonial agents toward the African natives. The *Heart of Darkness* reveals the utter hypocrisy of the entire colonial effort. In Europe, colonization of Africa was justified on the grounds that not only would it bring wealth to Europe, it would also 'civilize and educate' the "savage" African natives. *Heart of Darkness* shows that in practice the European colonizers used the high ideals of colonization as a cover to allow them to viciously rip whatever wealth they could from Africa. But more significantly, for our interest here is the fact that from such works, it can be concluded that constructions of the pre-colonial peoples of Africa are strongly influenced by the phallogocentric prejudice that wrongly defines 'native as passive and subsidiary inferiors. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth-century, black skin came to depict sexual promiscuity and deviant behaviour.²³

Consequently, in historical works, there have been myriad stereotypical myths regarding the sexualities of "black" peoples. The rootedness of the investigation of sexuality in the

²²See for example Margery Perham, *Colonial Sequence 1930* (London, Blaisdon Publishing, 1967), p. 49

²³ E. Tsiftsaki H. *Heart of Darkness Marlow's story Thesis Presented to The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages University of Oslo Autumn 2007*

Victorian age explains many of these legends.²⁴ Unflattering portraits of sexuality in the developing world are legion, constructing this phenomenon as either “exotic, mysterious, [and] uncivilized” or as hypersexual.²⁵ Several authors observe however, that the beginnings of our knowledge about sexuality in Africa were shaped within conceptual schemes derived from colonial legacies and thought.²⁶

Indeed, scholars such as Arnfred, and Leclerc-Madlala²⁷ have indicated that contemporary conceptualizations of ‘African sexuality’ continue to be informed by earlier colonial and Western, Victorian-era imaginations. Within this conceptual framing, the portrait of sexuality in Africa that emerges often reflects “the unbridled black female sexuality, excessive, threatening and contagious, carrying a deadly disease”²⁸

A particularly reprehensible example of the ignorance that ‘offensive’ foreign sexuality engendered is the infamous case of the Hottentot Venus, which details how British colonial powers transformed one young African woman into an icon for racial inferiority and savage female sexuality.²⁹ Her consequent humiliation and degradation illustrate the racist mindset common in Nineteenth Century Europe and her image become a lasting symbol of Western colonial attitudes towards African past and present. Theorists of public morality in have noticed that apparently private acts of vice, when they multiply and become widespread, can imperil important public interests. This fact embarrasses philosophical efforts to draw a sharp line that distinguishes a realm of “private” morality that is not subject to law from a domain of public actions that may rightly be subjected to legal regulation.

The colonial state policed these behaviours alongside with missionary societies. The Anglican Church for example, strongly opposed female circumcision among the Kikuyu of Kenya, and it has been illegal since the colonial period. The campaign reached a crisis in 1929 when the Church of Scotland Mission made opposition a condition of employment and school entry.³⁰ This politicized the question and gave rise to the Kikuyu resistance, and the independent church and school movements. In sum, it has been our intention therefore; challenge the unfounded prejudices that underlie the conventional perception of African sexuality by using precolonial period as a point of reference. A misunderstood continent has attracted and

²⁴ Leclerc-Madlala, S. (2004). Field of sexuality studies: What is it? *Sexuality in Africa Magazine* 1 (1): 4-6.

²⁵ See for example, Gesheker, C. (1995). *Outbreak? AIDS, Africa and the Medicalization of Poverty*. *Transitions* 5(3): 4-14. Mama, A. (1996). *Women’s studies and studies of women in Africa during the 1990s*. CODESRIA Working Paper Series 5/96. Elliston, D. (2005). *Critical reflexivity and sexuality studies in anthropology: Siting sexuality in research, theory, ethnography, and pedagogy*. *Reviews in Anthropology* (34): 21-47

²⁶ Osha, S. (2004). *A postcolonial scene: On girls’ sexuality*. Paper presented at the 2nd Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series, Africa Sexuality Resource Centre, Lagos.

²⁷ See Leclerc-Madlala, *Field of sexuality studies: What is it?*

²⁸ Signe Arnfred, *Re-Thinking Sexualities In Africa* (Cape Town Almqvist & Wiksell Tryckeri 2004), 67.

²⁹ E. Koch, “Bring back the Hottentot Venus”, *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 15–22 June, 1995, 13.

³⁰ See David. M. Anderson, “Mau Mau in the High Court and the ‘Lost’ British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?” 699-716 in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, November, 2011

produced numerous myths, often reinforced by not seriously investigated history of sexuality in Africa. Unfortunately, contemporary style of academia does reinforce this invisibility.

Sexuality as a field remains an underdeveloped domain in sub-Saharan Africa, with few scholars demonstrating keen interest in, and focus on, the subject. However, as Michael Gomez posits that “Westerners label whatever they do not understand about non-Western societies and cultures as secretive and mystical; hence, the most important aspect of a phenomenon is its impenetrability or resistance to explication along conventional lines of analysis.”³¹ While there are many secretive institutions in the West there are millions in Africa.

In current research on sub-Saharan Africa “often donor-driven,” as Arnfred notes, not to mention program-driven—the conceptualization of sexuality has privileged a severely limited number of themes, including disease and reproduction.³² This should come as no shock, as much of what we have learned about sexuality in Africa has been stimulated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The content of this knowledge—drawn primarily from quantitative data in the population and public health fields—has not remained unquestioned, however extant works on African sexuality in African means that if Africans transferred various types of cultural signifiers, they would also transmit their practices of secrecy and other forms of withheld discourse within the literature and history.³³

Darkness is not a subject of history: The Conceptual Problems with history and African Studies

Using Pre-colonial history of Kenya as an example, we see the emergency of a discipline in the University of Nairobi in the 1970s. Ogot argues that since then, historical studies of Kenya have focused increasingly on African agency, reacting to both imperial and underdevelopment histories. While the former emphasized the progressive role of Europeans in Africa, the latter stressed the state-imposed structural obstacles to African progress that smothered earlier African initiatives. Like histories of other continents, there was very little on women, gender or even sexuality.³⁴

Such deafening silence has reigned on these matters, as historians have preferred to tolerate and draw their resources from the harvest of anthropological sources rather than to cultivate their own fields. Possibly inquisitive historians, naturally enough, have no craving to be tainted as ‘promiscuous scholars’ by the media paintbrushes or conservative historians, as well might befall them were they to admit publicly to such curiosity. The plain fact, though, is that the study of sexuality frightens historians: most genuinely fear deviating from their own professional tradition, and many fear subconsciously at what would gaze back at them

³¹Michael A. Gomez. Gomez. *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 370.

³² Arnfred, *Re-Thinking Sexualities In Africa* , 59

³³ see, for example, S. C. Watkins *If All We Knew About Women was What We Read in Demography, What Would We Know?* *Demography* Vol. 30, No. 4 (Nov., 1993), pp. 551-577

³⁴ C.f. Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, (Baobab, Harare, 1996), 1.

from the subterranean depths of these stories were they to peer too intently into the well of history.

Indeed, the main pre-occupation of early producers of Kenyan history in general like their reputable discipline just like imperial history that had constituted itself as the only history. The immediate concern was to prove that Africa had a history prior to its engagement with colonialism. This concern was heightened by the ranting of Hugh Trevor Roper who stated that the only history in Africa was that of Europeans in Africa. To him, Africa was indeed a 'Dark Continent' that deserved no studying, as darkness was not a subject of history:

Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness and darkness is not a subject of history. Please do not misunderstand me." Trevor-Roper said. "I do not deny that life existed even in dark countries and dark centuries, nor that they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and anthropologists, but history, I do believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too. It is not a mere phantasmagoria of changing shapes and costumes. of battles and conquests, dynasties and usurpation, social forms and social disintegration".³⁵

So that according to that line of thinking, African societies were described by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists alike as static, primitive, indigenous, native, or traditional, to use some of the common terms applied by such scholars in their studies of African societies. However, it has many drawbacks. Perhaps one of the most important of these is that too large a proportion of its pages are still devoted to the "East African invaders", to use Coupland's term, instead of to the East Africans themselves. But being the first to venture out into the unknown, the compilers of the volume were rather cautious in how they handled the new trend. To them the whole undertaking was an experiment which could either succeed or fail.

Off course, the desire was to prove Trevor Roper wrong. Further impetus to work on pre-colonial Kenyan societies emanated from the 'winds of change' and African nationalism that was sweeping East Africa at the time. There was need to prove to the world that Africans had civilisation and history prior to the arrival of Europeans and colonialism. Indeed, this also led to the formation of the committee of the UNESCO general History of Africa chaired by a prominent Kenyan historian, Bethwel Ogot.³⁶

Generally, therefore, there is very little strides that have been made in the study of pre-colonial history. Very few scholars dare this period because of methodological and problems with sources. It was in 1963 that Oliver and Mathew edited *History of East Africa, Volume One* as "an experiment", to use their own language. As a book dealing with the pre-colonial history of East Africa it was the first volume of its kind ever written with an attempt to put the African people, and not their European colonizers, in the foreground. It utterly neglected

³⁵The statement of Hugh Trevor Roper was widely quoted and elicited responses from Africanist and nationalist historians as they inaugurated African history as a counter to imperial history.

³⁶ See <https://en.unesco.org/general-history-africa> accessed on 16/04/2021 at 22.33

women sexuality and even any attempt discussion on gender. Regrettably, this text formed the basis of further reconstruction of the history of Kenya.³⁷

Since the publication of *History of East Africa*, was published in 1963 many more volumes dealing with pre-colonial history of East Africa were written-a large number of these by African scholars themselves. They include such works as B. A. Ogot's *History of the Southern Luo*³⁸, G. S. Were's *History of the Abaluyia*,³⁹ M. C. M. Kiwanuka's *A History of Buganda to 1900*,⁴⁰ R. S. Karugire's *A History of the Kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda to 1896*⁴¹, G. Muriuki's *A History of the Kikuyu to 1904*⁴², and W. R. Ochieng's *A History. ' of the Gusii of Western Kenya*,⁴³ to mention just but a few. Despite the fact that these studies were written in western style and ignored aspects of women, gender and sexuality, they were at least important in many respects.

First, these studies were carried out by emerging African historian who were genuinely interested in the history of their own people. This is very unlike the approach taken by colonial historians and anthropologists who studied African history as a way to understand the colonised people better they did not have a genuine desire to study African history for its own sake despite the fact that previously Coupland, writing on *East Africa and Its Invaders* had concluded that the only genuine African history was found along the coast where the indigenous population had come into contact with the outsiders such as the Europeans and Asians; in the interior there was only 'darkness':

Not many miles back from their [i.e. Europeans and Asians] settlements and ports and market-places [along the East African coast] a curtain falls, shrouding the vast interior of the continent in impenetrable darkness; Where ignorant armies clash by night. But the reader should remember that the East Africans, though invisible, are always there, a great background to the comings and goings of brown men and white men on the coast. In the foreground, too. on the historical stage itself, the East Africans are always the great majority, dump actors for the most part, doing nothing that seems important, so eclipsed by the protagonists that they are almost forgotten, and yet quite indispensable".¹⁰

³⁷ Roland Oliver and Mathew Gervase. *The History of East Africa - History of East Africa, Volume I.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), xiii, 500

³⁸ Bethwel. Allan Ogot, *History Of The Southern Luo.* (Nairobi: East African Pub. House, 1967),77-89

³⁹ Gideon .S. Were, *A History Of The Abaluyia Of Western Kenya 1000- 1930* (Nairobi: East African, Publishing,1967),67-69

⁴⁰ M. C. M. Kiwanuka's *A History of Buganda to 1900* (London, Longman, 1971),113-116

⁴¹ R. S. Karugire's *A History of the Kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda to 1896* (Oxford, Fountain Publishers,1971),76-89

⁴² Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900.* (London, Oxford University Press, 1975),70-78

⁴³ William . R. Ochieng's, *A Traditional History Of The Gusii Of Western Kenya From C.A.D. 1500-1914* (Nairobi, East African Literature Bureau, 1974),97-114

Equally, the famous explorer Speke, equated the Africans with the descendants of Ham son of Noah (found in the Book of Genesis in the Bible), whom Noah cursed to be a servant of his brothers Shem and Japhet. He writes:

If the picture [of 'naked Africa'] be a dark one. we should when contemplating these sons of Noah, try to earn' our mind back to the time when our poor elder brother Ham was cursed by his father and condemned to be the slave of both Shem and Japhet...."

With such attitudes colonial historians could not be expected to write any reliable history of the African people. In sum, a number of African intellectuals sought tirelessly to offer an apt alternative of reconstructing African History after centuries of tainted images of the African continent. This school of Africanist historians, emerging around the mid-twentieth century, left an indelible mark in laying the foundation of African studies in various fields. Such foundation works, also referred to as canonical work, are referred to again and again, and have formed conspicuous benchmarks in the reconstruction, reinterpretation and recompilation of intellectual realms of African history. The lives of authors of such foundation works have themselves become inspiring as they have emerged as heroes and heroines of the African cause. This has certainly changed with this crop of African historians into the scene. It however, is worthy therefore, to note that African historians kept matters of family, sexuality, reproduction, marriage, divorce away from history, yet some of these discourses were the fabrics unto which African history was made and produced. However, it was only the colonial anthropologists that made a stride towards the study of African sexuality although not to its entirety.

Research on African sexuality began to figure prominently in colonial anthropology since the formative years of the discipline. For example, work carried out in the 1920s and 1930s by anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski pioneered in studying sexual mores and customs of different ethnic groups in Africa and in legitimizing ethnography as a key methodological approach for the study of sexuality. However, in Kenya, such studies did not concentrate mainly on the subject but in studying ethnology for the colonial state's consumption.

In this regard therefore, in 1920s, a new school of anthropologists came into existence-the functionalist, led by Malinowski⁴⁴ and Radcliffe-Browne-mostly obsession with evolution, diffusion and racial theories, -studies of social change were approached in the same way and with the same kind of conjectural and confused consequences. They were interested in studying "tribes without history". Indeed, the tendency of functional anthropology was to assimilate indigenous history to the category-of myth, which was considered. Here they concentrated on marriage, circumcision, rituals and customs and not into depths of the anthropology of sex and sexual discourses.

In Kenya, the field continued to be dominated during most of the inter-war period by the amateur anthropologists. C. W. Hobley wrote his *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* in 1922⁴⁵ and G. J.

⁴⁴Bronislaw Malinowski, *The sexual life of savages in north-western Melanesia: An ethnographic account of courtship, marriage, and family life among the natives of Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929.),13-15

⁴⁵Charles William Hobley *Bantu Beliefs and Magic* (London, Cass, 1967),23-25

Orde Browne published *The Vanishing Tribes of Kenya* in 1925.⁴⁶ The latter had collected his material between 1909 and 1916 when he worked as Assistant Commissioner at various government posts in the Mt. Kenya region. Another administrator, G. W. B. Huntingford, began his long academic association with the Rift Valley region of Kenya with an article called "The Social Organization of the Dorobo", which appeared in *African Studies* in 1942.¹⁰ J. A. Maseam, another administrator, published *The Cliff Dwellers of Kenya* (1927),⁴⁷ which was an ethnographical account of the Elgeyo. Perhaps the most able of these amateur administrative anthropologists was H. E. Lambert, who was busy at this time assembling data on the Kikuyu that was to result later in two major works: *The Systems of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit* (1950) and *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* (1956).⁴⁸

But the field was not entirely restricted to colonial anthropologists and the administrators. Some of the missionaries such as W. E. Owen decided to try their hand at anthropology. The most elaborate of such efforts was the book by Father Cagnolo of the Catholic Mission of the Consolata Fathers called *The Agikuyu-Their Customs Traditions and Folklore* (1933).⁴⁹ Despite the preponderance of the amateur anthropologists, it was during this period that the first works by professional anthropologists and historians on the peoples of Kenya appeared. The first three professional anthropological studies were: *The Akamba in British East Africa* (1920)⁵⁰ by G. Lindblom, *The Social Institutions of the Kipsigis* (1939) written by J. G. Peristiany,⁵¹ and *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) by Jomo Kenyatta.⁵² Although published much later, Glinter Wagner's *The Bantu of North Kavirondo* (Volume I, 1949, Volume II, 1956), A. H. J. Prins's *The Coastal Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu* (1952) and *The Swahili Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast* (1961), *J. Stone Journal* (No. VII, 1949, pp. 24-40), belong essentially to the same scholarly tradition.

However, as seen, the concern of all these anthropologists was with social structure, which led to a disproportionate emphasis on kinship, law, government and cosmology. They all committed the fallacy of "the ethnographic present", and the overriding concern was with the accumulation of data. It was further feared that as the unequal encounter with the West became more intense, the so-called primitive cultures would disappear. It was therefore imperative to mount a kind of rescue operation to retrieve the social "facts" before all the "primitives" disappeared. As Rivers put it, "In many parts of the world the death of every old man brings with it the loss of knowledge never to be replaced." A similar kind of concern was later to inspire the collection of oral traditions from the 1960s.

⁴⁶ Major G. St. J. Orde Browne, *The Vanishing Tribes of Kenya: a Description of the Manners and Customs of the Primitive and Interesting Tribes dwelling on the Vast Southern Slopes of Mount Kenya, and their Fast Disappearing Native Methods of Life.* (London: Seeley, Service and Co., Ltd., 1925.),55-59

⁴⁷ J. A. Maseam, *The Cliff Dwellers of Kenya* (London Seeley, Service & Co. Ltd., London, 1927),34

⁴⁹ Father Cagnolo , *The Agikuyu-Their Customs Traditions and Folklore* (Nyeri, Mission printing school, 1933.),1-34

⁵⁰ Lindblom, Gerhard. *The Akamba in British East Africa.* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1920),57-87

⁵¹John G. Peristiany. *The Social Institutions of the Kipsigis,* (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1939.),54-56

⁵²Jomo Kenyatta. *Facing Mount Kenya,* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938),50-61

In sum then, Anthropology has often been seen to be unusually preoccupied with “exotic” sexual practices of other societies and cultures. However, as it emerges, early colonial studies in African sexualities did this in scanty, stereotyping sexualities of the African people. But as with many stereotypes, there are reasons why the subject has evolved. Despite a number of highly visible early works in anthropology that focused on sexuality did indeed receive a good deal of attention both within the discipline itself and in the popular media. This emphasis on the sexual meanings and behaviors among other societies as a kind of mirror that can be used to contrast with and often question the values of Western societies has been an ongoing theme in anthropological research, from early studies on the subject of sexuality on up to the present.

3.0 NEW TRAJECTORIES AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The attention of current scholars in African sexuality should be focused therefore on the historically hidden and those discourses that have been kept in secret. By adopting new methodologies and theories to uncover these stories, will certainly produce new knowledge and fertile areas of research. Pre-colonial period, however murky, should be able to show a path in in the re-thinking of modern African sexuality. To do this one has to engage him or her with the quest for inter-ethnic relations in such period.

Nevertheless, enormous gaps in sexuality literature in Africa remain. One reason is the uneven nature of the sources. Mostly, sources are oral and difficult to pass from one generation to another or even one person to another. Even good sources, however, do not guarantee good research. There is a political climate, both inside and outside the universities in Africa, that considered [d] sexuality trivial in comparison to other fields of study long made it difficult for scholars to get such research funded. Secondly the relegation of certain themes to subfields of history, such as sexual violence against women to the subfield of women's history, has led scholars in other areas, to overlook evidence regarding sexuality.

This I have argued, played a very significant role in African history. The migration and settlements of the Bantu and the Nilotes in the pre-colonial Kenya for instance, shed further lights in the search for the sexual practices that existed in the period. It is however, imperative to understand that, the Bantu were Matrilineal while the Nilotes were patrilineal. The contact between the two groups –Bantu shed off their cultures, Nilotic cultures dominated cultural history of Kenya till the beginning of colonial rule. As such the Bantu are more liberal with discussion s of sexuality than the Nilotes. More secrets are to be found in Nilotic sexual rites and while for the Bantu such details are often found in folklores and stories or even songs.

In sum, we take a look at one most decisive book that was recently written by Caroline Elkins of Harvard University titled: *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. The book that won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize. How did she research the two most sensitive and secretly guarded themes: The Mau Mau rebellion and Sexuality? Based on years of extensive interviews with elderly Kenyans and veteran British colonial officials, Caroline Elkins work focused on a military conflict known as the Mau Mau Rebellion, which took place in Kenya throughout the 1950s, at the end of British colonial rule.

The study revealed how the British government had secretly detained and tortured hundreds of thousands of Kikuyu people—then and now Kenya’s largest ethnic group—in an attempt to squelch their demands for independence. It is *inter alia* a tale of systematic gender violence and secrecy and high-level cover-ups. How did she do this? She says she spent many years conducting intensive field research in rural Kenya. You will need to be interested in what people think, and you need to find the right people to talk to you. One of the key components of the field research is contextual intelligence—the ability to apply prior knowledge to real-world situations and turn academic knowledge into real-world action.

To uncover deep seated secrets, one need patience and considerable time, before and during research work, unpacking cultural and contextual knowledge specific to area of research. Having such contextual intelligence even before researchers arrive makes them better global citizens, and better representatives. Over several years of meticulous evaluation, she discovered thousands of pages documenting the systematic torture, rape, and slaughter of thousands of Kikuyu. The evidence also revealed a chillingly official process for deciding which evidence to destroy and which to hide.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In pre-colonial Africa, there existed cultures of silence in matters relating to sex. As Signe rightly puts it, African sexuality has taken place through the proceedings that are often performative rather than informative. As such, this Africa’s secretive morality has caused so much confusion, misinformation and misrepresentation of sexual dynamics in the region so that now there exist is a strong link between African silences and western tales in reconstruction of African sexualities—that of stereotyping sexuality. Misrepresentation of Africa as a dark continent symbolises the secrecy and silences that beclouds African history in regards to sexuality. Africa as a ‘virgin’ continent symbolises the untapped sexual knowledge silenced and misunderstood African sexuality was embedded with deep religious undertones and therefore, its use had much significant sacred interpretation and trajectories unlike Caldwell claims of permissiveness – easy as eating and drinking. On the other hand, methodological challenges continue to pose a serious threat to the very understanding of African sexuality. Yet, African pre-colonial history is fertile with untapped and widespread varieties sexualities that are yet to be investigated and, or researched.

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