



Africa: Sub-Saharan, Pre-Independence

by Stephen O. Murray

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The myth of exclusive heterosexuality in indigenous black/sub-Saharan Africa was widely diffused by the 94th chapter of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781). Referring to homosexual behavior, Gibbon wrote, "I believe and hope that the negroes in their own country were exempt from this moral pestilence." Gibbon's fond hope was based on neither travel to Africa nor on inquiry of any kind.

A century later, Sir Richard Burton, who unlike Gibbon did know something of Africa, reinforced the myth of African sexual exceptionalism by drawing the boundaries of his "sotadic Zone," where homosexuality was supposedly widely practiced and accepted, in such a way as to exclude sub-Saharan Africa.

Especially where Western influences (notably Christian and Marxist) have been pervasive, there is now a belief that homosexuality is a decadent, bourgeois Western innovation forced upon colonial Africa by white men, or, alternately, by Islamic slave-traders. The belief of many Africans that homosexuality is exogenous to the history of their people is a belief with real social consequences--in particular, the stigmatization of those of their people who engage in homosexual behavior or who are grappling with glbtq identities. These beliefs are not, however, based on serious inquiry, historical or otherwise.

There are no analyses of the social structures of African societies written by indigenous people prior to alien contact. What is inscribed of "traditional" African cultures was written by some of the Northerners who disrupted African cultures, first travelers, then missionaries, colonial officials, and anthropologists. In many cases the observers inscribing "traditional" African culture did not understand that their presence as observers was itself a product of history and domination.

Nevertheless, the observing Europeans are the only source of data on homosexuality in Africa until the most recent few decades. Most of what can be learned about traditional African societies was inscribed in the last decade of the nineteenth century or later, when the continent had been colonized by European states. To keep down the costs of colonial government, European (and especially English) colonial regimes used "indirect rule," endeavoring to maintain customary laws, though attempting to ban some customary practices, particularly sexual ones.

The travel, colonial, and anthropological literature include reports of native conceptions and native practices of male homosexuality in many societies across every region of the continent. Documentation of female homosexuality is less abundant, but exists for many cultures. The contact and colonial era reports are critically reviewed in Murray and Roscoe's *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*. Here, only a few examples of each of the main social organizations of homosexuality will be mentioned.

"Boy Wives": Age-differentiated Homosexuality

In the central African Zande culture, before European conquest, it was regarded "as very sensible for a man to sleep with boys when women are not available or are taboo." English anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard was told that in addition to times when women were not available for sex, some Azande men had sex with

boys "just because they like them."

The adult males paid the families of boy wives, just as they paid for female brides. The two slept together at night, "the husband satisfying his desires between the boy's thighs. When the boy grew up he joined the company and took a boy-wife in his turn. It was the duty of the husband to give his boy-wife a spear and a shield when he became a warrior. He then took a new boy-wife."

One commander, Ganga, told Evans-Pritchard that there were some men who, although they had female wives, still married boys. "When a war broke out, they took their boys with them. . . . If another man had relations with his boy, the husband could sue the interloper in court for adultery."

The South African Thonga provide another particularly well-documented instance of a boy-wife role. A number of southern and western African societies also had female husbands, though whether these husbands had sexual relations with their wives is unclear in what has been written. (It seems that anthropologists studying the phenomenon did not ask that question.)

Gender-differentiated Homosexual Relations

Gender-crossing homosexuality has been discussed as common in the (Nigerian) Hausa *bori* cult (and in Afro-Brazilian offshoots of west African spirit-possession religion).

Among the Maale of southern Ethiopia, some males crossed over to feminine roles. Called *ashtime*, these (biological) males dressed as women, performed female tasks, cared for their own houses, and apparently had sexual relations with men, according to Donald Donham. One gave Donham a clear statement of the "third gender" conception: "The Divinity created me *wobo*, crooked. If I had been a man, I could have taken a wife and begotten children. If I had been a woman, I could have married and borne children. But I am *wobo*; I can do neither."

Among Swahili-speakers on the Kenya coast, particularly in the port of Mombasa, *mashoga* are transgendered prostitutes who have all the liberties of men and are also welcome in many contexts in which men are prohibited. The paid partner usually takes the receptive role during intercourse, but it is likely that his inferiority derives from the fact that he is paid to provide what is asked for, rather than from his undertaking a particular sexual role. The one who pays is called the *basha* (derived from "pasha," a high-ranking official and the local term for the king in packs of playing cards).

Among the Fon, the predominant people in Dahomey (now Benin), Melville Herskovits in the 1930s reported that, after the age at which boys and girls may play together, "the sex drive finds satisfaction in close friendship between boys in the same group A boy may take the other 'as a woman,' this being called *gaglgo*, homosexuality. Sometimes an affair of this sort persists during the entire life of the pair" (though he earlier referred to homosexual relations as a "phase" through which adolescents pass).

Egalitarian Homosexual Relations

Most of the reports of homosexual relations not involving differences in age or gender status involved young, unmarried men's sexual relationships with each other. Kurt Falk wrote about an especially intimate bond of association, *soregus*, among the southeastern African Naman that included sex both between men and between women (with mutual masturbation the most common form of sex, but also males taking turns at anal penetrations and females using dildoes on each other).

An "exceptionally reliable" Nykakyusa (a people living around what is now the Tanzania/Zimbabwe border) reported to Monica Wilson in the early 1930s that male friends, who live in villages of age-mates when not out herding cattle, generally sleep together. The Nykakyusa accepted that male friends who danced together would have sexual relations. "Even if people see them in flagrante delicto, they say it is

adolescence (*lukulilo*), all children are like that: they say that sleeping together and dancing is also adolescence," according to Wilson's elder. He reported that interfemoral intercourse is "what boys mostly do" and also reported anal and oral sex, ("some, during intercourse, work[ing] in the mouth of their friend, and hav[ing] an orgasm").

Female Homosexual Relations

Controversy continues about the purported chastity of female husbands in various African cultures. An Ovimbundu (in Angola) informant, told an ethnographer, "There are men who want men, and women who want women. . . . A woman has been known to make an artificial penis for use with another woman." Such practices did not meet with approval, but neither did transvestite homosexuals of either sex desist.

Among the Tswana (in addition to homosexuality among the men laboring in the mines), it was reported that back home "lesbian practices are apparently fairly common among the older girls and young women, without being regarded in any way reprehensible." Use of artificial penises was also reported among the Ila and Naman tribes of South Africa.

There is more surmise than documentation of sexual relationships in female compounds in various African societies, though there are attestations of female homosexuality in some of the same places in which male homosexuality was more intensively studied (including Mombasa and among the Azande).

The most extensive discussion is of "mummy" and "baby" (that is, age-differentiated) roles in Lesotho. Relationships are initiated voluntarily by one girl who takes a liking to another and simply asks her to be her mummy or her baby, depending on their relative age, according to Judith Gay. "The most frequently given reason for initiating a particular relationship was that one girl felt attracted to the other by her looks, her clothes, or her actions. . . . Sexual intimacy is an important part of these relationships." Over time, a Sotho may undertake both roles (with different partners) or play the same role with different partners.

Conclusion

With reports from hundreds of sub-Saharan African locales of male-male sexual relations and from about fifty of female-female sexual relations, it is clear that same-sex sexual relations existed in traditional African societies, though varying in forms and in the degree of public acceptance. Much of this same-sex activity was situational or premarital, though there were long-term relationships, too. The special Christian animus toward homosexuality was carried to Africa by Europeans and stimulated denials that "the sin not named among Christians" existed among "unspoiled" Africans.

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