

*African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the late Nineteenth Century to the Present.*

Edited by Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell

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*African Masculinities* is an important contribution to a growing field: "critical men's studies" or gendered writing on men in Africa. This field includes asking how African boys are socialized to become men in specific historical and cultural contexts, why men behave the way they do in order to identify or to be seen and respected as masculine, and what aspects of cultures of masculinity need to be challenged or deconstructed in order to make more effective interventions toward sexual health or against male violence against women. Although they do not explicitly identify as pro-feminist, the editors and contributors are clearly working from that basic theoretical and political starting point as elucidated by women of colour (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991 and Nnaemeka 1998, for instance). The work of Robert Connell (1995) provides another major theoretical guide. Several of the contributing authors also invoke Frantz Fanon. While acknowledging his sexism and homophobia, they draw inspiration from his precocious insights into the effects of colonial racism upon African masculine identities.

The introduction begins by lamenting the paucity of close empirical studies to follow up on Fanon's insights. In this the editors overstate themselves a bit, noting only Ouzgane (2002) and Lindsay and Miescher (2003) but neglecting to mention a considerable range of monographs and articles that pioneered the field: Moodie (1988, 1994), Harries (1990, 1994), Campbell (1992), Shire (1994), Nauright and Chandler (1996), for example. Even co-editor Robert Morrell's seminal work is overlooked (1998, 2001a, 2001b, among others). Numerous other pertinent studies in the past few years reflect a great deal more vibrancy currently within the field than Ouzgane and Morrell suggest. *African Masculinities* fits comfortably with, for instance, recent contributions by Heald (1999), Niehaus (2000), Hayes (2000), Delius and Glaser (2002), Dunton (2004), and Reid and Walker (2005). There has also been a burgeoning of scholarship on same-sex sexuality in Africa which, while often ostensibly inclusive of African women, in practice tends to focus mostly on the historical construction of men's sexuality. Noteworthy examples in that

regard are Murray and Roscoe (1998), Gear and Ngubeni (2002) and Epprecht (2004).

The editors next justify their choice to refer to the whole of Africa in the title. A two-page history of pan-Africanism and Africanist scholarship may strike some readers as potted. It is nevertheless an important gesture given the long history of Western scholarship that homogenizes Africans or treats Africa as a “country.” *African Masculinities* is careful in that regard to balance specificities with commonalities. In my view the grand scale ultimately makes sense since so many issues around patriarchal culture, colonialism, and postcolonial difficulties are shared or closely analogous across the whole continent.

Unfortunately, despite the repeated acknowledgement of Africa’s great diversity and the need for geographically wide-ranging studies, the bottom line is that the 17 chapters are not well-distributed in that respect. More than half are focused on South Africa or within an easy drive from Johannesburg. Three discuss Egyptian themes, a welcome inclusion that bucks the tendency to draw a hermetic analytic seal across Africa at the southern edge of the Sahara. But only one chapter refers to Africa’s most populous country and only one other, an extended interview with the Guinéen (France-based) filmmaker Mohamed Camara, to elsewhere in West or Central Africa. This creates an oddly lop-sided collection.

The introduction next locates its frame of analysis in relation to African feminisms. This includes a judicious critique of both Western feminism (for under-estimating the role of racism in colonial cultures of sexism and misogyny), and those African female scholars who sharply reject Western feminism. The latter (mostly Nigerian scholars) accuse Western feminism of imposing eurocentric categories on Africa (like gender) and for being anti-male or exclusionary of men. Yet as Ouzgane and Morrell point out, much of the African feminist or womanist scholarship that claims to be male-friendly in practice largely ignores African men and masculinity.

The editors aim to find an anti-essentialist path through the blindspots and polemical extremes of both sides of that debate. Without overestimating the abilities of academic research, they hope that this measured line of enquiry will contribute to forging an effective politics of gender transformation that is specific and sensitive to Africa today.

The book as a whole largely succeeds in its goals, sometimes in quite interesting and boldly-stated ways. Margrethe Silberschmidt, for example, argues that men’s violence against women in structurally-adjusting Tanzania and Kenya is to a significant extent derived from their feelings of disempowerment. A critical step to empowering women against gender violence and economic marginalization would therefore logically be to empower men. Given jobs and realistic prospects for attaining a sense of human dignity, men are less likely to feel threatened by women’s needs for autonomy, dignity, and security.

The individual chapters come from a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Several are abbreviated republications from a

special issue of the *Journal of Men's Studies* edited by Ouzgane (2002). The majority, however, are original and display a high standard of research. In the first section of the book ("Interpreting Masculinities"), they include Arthur Saint-Aubain on early efforts by European and American scientists to categorize black Africans as essentially different from other branches of humanity ("Niggerology" in the startling language of one prominent US pioneer in the field); Glen Elder on post-apartheid marketing of Cape Town as a gay, middle-class, largely white male space, contrary to core principles of the liberation struggle; Beti Ellerson's interview of Camara about his remarkable feature film, *Dakan*, depicting a male-male love affair (Camara 1997); and Frank Salamone on how "men who talk like women" among the Hausa (*yan 'daudu*, sometimes translated as transvestites, homosexuals or male prostitutes) play a role in defining ideals of masculinity for the majority population, especially along the fringes of Hausa ethnic and Muslim identity.

The second section of the book ("Representing Masculinities") looks at changing ways that men have been portrayed in print media over the past century. It begins with Lindsay Clowes' analysis of the influential urban-style magazine, *Drum*. She shows how hegemonic black masculinity shifted from a father and family orientation to an individual, consumerist one over the course of the 1950s to 70s. Subsequent chapters examine the treatment of men and masculinity in specific works of literature. Meredith Goldsmith (on South African journalist and actor, Bloke Modisane), Kathryn Holland (on Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's male characters in her novel *Nervous Conditions*), Sally Hayward (on Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*) and Wilson Chacko Jacob (on the Egyptian soldier/colonial administrator Ibrahim Fawzi's memoir, *The Sudan of Gordon and Kitchener*) all provide succinct interpretations of the struggles around sexuality, power, and masculine pride in specific colonial and post-colonial contexts.

The third section of the book ("Constructing Masculinities") contains four chapters. Paul Dover's anthropology of Goba patriarchy highlights the role of women's approval in conditioning boys and men to certain behaviours that, in the present context of HIV and AIDS, seriously threaten women. Silberschmidt, noted above, analyzes men's impoverishment in urban East Africa as a feminist issue; Deevia Bhana interviews Zulu boys, girls, and teachers in a contemporary Durban school to understand male violence and the culture of conformity; and Rob Pattman discusses the relationship between class, xenophobia and rival masculinities among students at the University of Botswana.

The final section ("Contesting Masculinities") includes Goolam Vahed on struggles by the highly exploited and marginalized Indian men who were imported as indentured labour in colonial Natal; Victor Agadjanian on men who, because of chronic unemployment, have begun moving into historically female occupations in Maputo (with mixed effects upon and gender relations); Robert Morrell on men's movements that seek to defend male privilege, to challenge gender inequality, or to

cope with the pressures of being masculine in post-apartheid South Africa; and Marcia Inhorn on how Egyptian husbands and wives, and doctors and traditional healers, attempt to deal with the manifold problems arising from male infertility.

My personal favourite among all these was Jacob's treatment of Ibrahim Fawzi's memoir, published in 1901. Fawzi was a direct observer (as participant and victim) of the corrupt Egyptian regime of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Madhist revolt in Sudan, and the ruthless expansion of British imperialism in northeast Africa. His ethnographic material and commentary on key personalities provide an Arab perspective on these tumultuous events, something that is only rarely available in English. Jacob's translation and exegesis using a masculinity lens is a real gem, shedding light, for example, on "how a metaphor of sodomy [wa]s deployed to symbolize the moral decay of Turco-Circassian rule" (159 – an early example of homosexuality as un-African discourse).

There are some typos and missteps, some of them amusing. Arthur Saint-Aubain, for example, refers to 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific studies of African men's "pencil length" (34). In other cases the error is more serious in that it contributes to a misleading, hyperbolic pessimism about the situation in Africa. It is not true, as Morrell asserts in contradiction to his own earlier statistics (272, 284), that "most" black South African men are unemployed. It is also incorrect to categorize the Treatment Action Campaign as a "gay organization" (281).

That noted, *African Masculinities* is nonetheless full of important new evidence and suggestions for further research. It enriches our understanding not just of gender but of other intransigent inequalities in African societies.

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