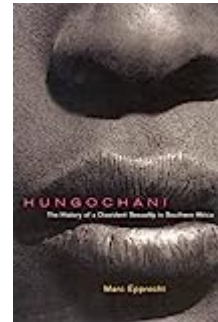




**Marc Epprecht.** *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004. xxv + 317 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-2751-5; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2750-8.



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## “An Honest Revision of the History of Homosexualities”

“Africa and Africans should not respect or entertain homosexuality in any form or fashion. Gay recognition and rights is a Western thing. African culture and tradition does not support nor encourage such things.” So wrote one respondent to a 2002 BBC News online forum, “Homosexuality in Africa.”[1] Even as same-sex marriages were made legal in South Africa in 2006, a number of politicians and prominent Africans have repeatedly, in the past ten years, denounced homosexuality as “un-African.” Mugabe’s attacks, which gained wide publicity with his public denunciation of same-sex relations at the 1995 Zimbabwe Book Fair, are well known. In Botswana, as in most sub-Saharan countries, homosexuality is illegal.[2]

The online respondent is, though not in the way he thought, right. For in the past decade, even as homosexuality has been dismissed as a foreign scourge or even unheard of on the continent before the arrival of Europeans, a number of books and films have come out which show that same-sex relations in Africa not only predate colonialism, but confound Western notions of sexuality in their complexity. Most people may pay lip service to

the notion of a spectrum of sexuality but still see homosexuality and heterosexuality as monolithic, fixed identities (e.g., a man who has sex with a man is gay). Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe’s collection *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* (1998), in particular, revealed the striking panoply of sexual roles and relationships in various parts of Africa; same-sex sexuality in Africa, particularly “pre-modern” Africa, was often situational and usually accepted so long as it did not preclude marriage and children. What we think of in the West as homosexuality or homosexual did not, strictly speaking, exist as such in Africa, which has long been home to homosexualities. If anything, Western influence has simplified and erased much of the diverse non-heterosexual relationships—so influenced by politics, culture, and money—that could be found in African societies.

Marc Epprecht, a contributor to Murray and Roscoe’s intriguing collection, has now published his own, more focused study of homosexualities on the continent. The cover of his 2004 book shows the pink title *Hungochani* on the bottom of a black person’s lips, with the subtitle (*The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*) in

white against the darkness of the slightly parted mouth. This is a book about the importance of oral history, the power of speaking out, and the necessity of telling the truth to those in power. Epprecht's book not only counters the Western notion of gayness, but offers an honest revision of the history of homosexualities in Africa at a crucial time, as the destruction wrought by AIDS on most of the continent is exposing marginalized sexualities to public scrutiny.

In his introduction, Epprecht deftly outlines the long history of words referring to non-heterosexual roles and acts in various southern African dialects; notes the ways in which African rulers have blamed homosexuality on the corrupting, pernicious influence of others; or how European colonizers used it to justify taking care of corruptible, infantilized Africans. Epprecht's writing is, at first, occasionally stiff and inactive, in sentences such as "Understanding the construction and contestation of African sexualities is also demonstrably germane to those in the West who seek to develop strategies to humanize capitalism in a global sense" (p. 11), and "All-important in a good wife's demeanor was achieving her right to sexual self-satisfaction" (p. 31). And he slips on some sloppy racial ground when he writes of "African physical features" (p. 44). Epprecht's prose, however, becomes more relaxed, casual, and clear as he explains how fluid and ever-shifting sexual mores and norms are, from culture to culture; points out that the notion of a "homosexuality" is as simplistic and misleading as the idea of an essential "Africa"; and explains that "transphobia (fear or anger of public transgression of gender norms)" (p. 16) is a more appropriate term for the crude, ignorant opposition that so many have expressed for Southern African homosexualities.

Epprecht's aim is to reveal how sexuality is a "key component of gender relations" and that southern African homosexualities are increasingly affected by "racial capitalism" (p. 11). In the recent tradition of queer theory, he proposes to untangle the "facts" of lived experience from the spun, biased "tropes" (p. 12) of the European colonizers who took down accounts of sodomy and vice in southern Africa, and from the many scholars who have rather uncritically continued their simplistic, racist judgments.

Epprecht certainly succeeds in unraveling the rich, colorful threads of some of the fabric of southern African homosexualities, interwoven as they are with race, class, gender, and the pre-independence and post-independence of nation-states. In chapter 1, "Traditions,"

he traces the various sexualities and sexual relations within Shona, Ndebele, and Ngoni societies, in what was essentially pre-modern Zimbabwe. While Epprecht's remarks on Bushmen communities thousands of years ago are largely conjecture, he is on firmer ground with his evidence that, within the Shona class and dowry system, non-normative sexual behavior was politely masked and rarely condemned. Sexual relations were largely determined by economic practices and cultural beliefs in magic and spirits. As the colonial powers carved out the region in the 1800s, Europeans whitewashed the subtle, intricate variety of homosexual relations—the taking of a boy-wife (*ingotshana* or variation thereof) in the mines, for instance, was determined by a mix of cultural tradition, gerontocratic values, economic and geographic pragmatism; the avoidance of long-term social obligations to women; and a fear of STDs—with denunciatory religious and legal language. The occupiers could better justify their caretaking of passive and childish natives who learned "sodomy" from exotic Easterners such as the Portuguese or Arabs.

Epprecht is less successful, however, at dissecting the biased language and tropes of the colonizers' reports. While he notes that Glenn Learys and Henry Taberer's 1907 report, "Confidential Enquiry into Alleged Prevalence of Unnatural Vice amongst Natives in Mine Compounds on the Witwatersrand," is riddled with leading questions and biases, he fails to do a close reading of parts of the report and explain the various rhetorical ways in which the authors skew their report. He leaves an overview of the rhetorical blanks and traps that scholars face when reading such documents for appendix 1. Epprecht's chapter on same-sex relations in prison would be better served by such complex accounts as that which closes the section, wherein a prisoner recalls a *wyfie* relationship with a mixture of regret, matter-of-factness, and affection.[3]

While Epprecht clearly outlines the methodology and aim of each chapter at the outset, individual chapters could flow more smoothly, both historically and geographically; moreover, there is little about same-sex female relationships. The glossary, while adequate, does not include explanations for such words as *gure* or *kuruvherera*; the index leaves out certain keywords. The photographs that are included would have been more effective if they had been placed in appropriate places throughout the book, while the map of colonial southern Africa, which notes the location of various peoples, is helpful.

Epprecht's cautious foray into court documents, which concern charges of indecency and sodomy (though he does not adequately explain why such complaints were made until appendix 1) and thus suggest the extent of same-sex male relationships in colonial Zimbabwe, is thorough, raising caveats, noting gaps, and answering skeptics' questions with aplomb. He sees through legal language to get at a sense of various same-sex relationships and situations, ranging from near-prostitution to loving bonds and often involving concerns about money or increasing one's *muti* (magic). Yet Epprecht bizarrely and vaguely undercuts this chapter, in which he exposes the loud "silence around [a] male-male sexuality" (p. 127) that was sometimes "functionalist" (p. 130) in what was Southern Rhodesia, with his concluding, digressive remark that adult male-male sexual behavior was probably "rare before colonial rule but became common soon after, at least in certain contexts" (p. 129). Epprecht makes a strong case that Europeans, in fact, introduced homophobia to southern Africa, which had long allowed transgressive sexualities because private sexuality and public gender identity were not conflated. Christian missionary zeal was, in part, responsible, along with many "subtle cultural influences arising out of European discourses around sexual morality, economic progress, and science" (p. 154), not to mention cultural anti-gayness, as gleaned from imported Hollywood films, for instance. 1950s South Africa saw "Moffie-bashing," a notably homoerotic abuse of gays by gangs who would corner their victims and insert pig-tails "up their backsides" (p. 141). Open homophobia has long been exploited for crass political gain, as Epprecht shows in an account of an Anglican priest's public shaming in the Orange Free State during tensions between the Boers and England in the 1860s. And with colonial independence, mild transphobia became vicious homophobia (and brutal misogyny) as the frustrations of national masculinities and fears about AIDS swelled, changes that Epprecht charts by focusing on Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

Epprecht seems well aware that, as a North American academic (a professor at Queen's University), he is writing from a safe distance, and his conclusion not only ties together the many strands in this book (which consistently avoids Western-centric bias and cultural condescension), but outlines the importance of gay rights struggles to human rights battles in an Africa beset by hegemonic masculinity, AIDS, oppressive governments, and capitalism. Epprecht notes that the many ways in which GLBT groups have fought aspects of global capitalism (patents, developmental programs, trade laws)

should remind Western gay-rights groups that "the criminal inequities of the global political economy ... underwrite much of Western gays and lesbians' sexual freedom" (p. 227). Yet Epprecht does not gloss over the paradoxes and struggles within gay-rights groups themselves; he notes that Mugabe's statements have helped GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe) focus their opposition even as some members use Mugabe's raging-outsider-identity as inspiration, and outlines some of the conflicts and divisions within GALZ in the past.

Epprecht explains that less academese-sounding versions of this book will be made available in parts of southern Africa; and his small efforts to pave the way for a more grassroots, activist application of scholarship are inspiring. Appendix 1 offers an account of The Gay Oral History Project, including encouragement and tips for researchers in decoding "the self-censorship, opacity, subtlety, double entendres and (sometimes) crude hostility" within official and unofficial accounts of non-normative sexualities (p. 229). Appendix 2 offers sample interviews for the project. Together, these appendices call for more scholarship on and stories about African homosexualities, by Africans and for Africans.

As a leader of Legabibo, in Botswana, recently noted, "people say things to us like, 'Are you crazy, do you think we have such people in Botswana?' ... They say, 'Being homosexual is something you adopt from people in European countries.' And I have to tell them that it has been in Botswana through history. That you have always had women forced into marriages, but they have had secret relationships. That it's nature and they have to accept these people." [4] The more accounts, like those in appendix 2, that Africans can offer, the more diverse and truthful a picture of African homosexualities will emerge, tearing down Western constructions of uniform, act-based sexualities. *Hungochani* is a remarkable and invaluable work because its detailing of the complexity of African homosexualities, African homophobia, and even African gay-rights struggles demolishes the stereotypes and fixed notions of homosexuality that so many of us still unconsciously cling to.

#### Notes

[1]. See "Homosexuality in Africa," June 28, 2002: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/africa/2002/africalive/2072057.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/africa/2002/africalive/2072057.stm).

[2]. See Stephanie Nolen, "Gays Take Cautious Steps to Come out in Africa," *Globe and Mail*, April 22, 2006.

[3]. *Wyfie*, literally translated, means “female,” but here it is used more in the sense of “effeminate” or “gay.”

[4]. Nolen, “Gays Take Cautious Steps.”

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