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Beyond Pain, Towards Pleasure In The Study Of Sexuality In Africa

By Rachel Spronk



A Woman Adorned With Beads
Credit : Waistbeads By Sewra 2008

The global Aids epidemic exposed the deficiency of our knowledge about the complexity and variety of sexual behaviour. As a result, there has been an impressive increase in research activities aimed at responding to this discrepancy. In Africa this has meant that the study of sexuality is mainly conducted in relation to HIV infection. One of the major consequences of this is that sex becomes de-eroticised to an act devoid of meaning and as a result, sex is studied apart from its sensorial power. The challenge of sex research is to understand the ways that societal factors organise sex and sexuality. It is important to note that sex is, above all, about the senses, and many times people engage in sex for pleasure. If we do not pay due attention to the pleasurable and sensorial aspects of sex we will continue producing deficient knowledge about

sexuality. In this article I will shortly reflect on the dominant trend of sexuality research in Africa, after which I will explore how to study sex beyond its painful realities and consequences and how to study its pleasurable capacities as well, based on my research on love and sex in Nairobi, Kenya.

The State Of Art Regarding Sexuality Research In Africa

There are two major flaws in the health-related approaches to studying sexuality. The first is that the term 'sexuality' has been used in a self-evident and instrumental manner, rather than being approached with due attention to the full variety and subjectivity of sexual behaviour. Studying 'the' sexuality of teenagers, for example, can mean studying their discourse on sex, their experience of arousal, their gendered expectations, their sexual identity or their sexual relations. Studies that do not take into account the imprecision of the term 'sexuality' start from a flawed position that sees sex simply as an obvious incident or action [1]. In reality it is far more complex than this. The word 'sex' refers to an act, a category, a practice, a gender. 'Sexuality' refers to the quality of 'being sexual', it is a concept depicting the social arena where power relations and moral discourses are played out, and

it also refers to sexual desire. These different aspects of sexuality highlight the need to define the term 'sexuality' in concepts such as sexual practices, categories, desire, identity, etc., in order to clarify what is being studied.

A second related-flaw is that a mainly ahistorical approach has been responsible for grossly simplifying notions of 'culture'. Much research has been limited by ideas that there is something peculiar about African cultures regarding sexuality [2;3]. Cultural 'traditions' and 'taboos' are the first things researchers tend to look for, to account for sexual behaviour, overlooking the more mundane aspects of life such as the influence of poverty or the emotional weight of sex. One such common assumption is that African men engage in multi-partnered sexual relationships because of 'their culture'.

A historical analysis of sexuality in Kenya offers an alternative explanation which is that, since the colonial period onwards, many married couples could not live together due to laws controlling male labour migration. In such situations of separation women and men would have engaged in other sexual affairs, all likely to be against 'cultural' conventions because adultery was a crime amongst many groups in Kenya [4; 5]. Since sexuality is often presented as embedded in 'age-old traditions', too little attention has been given to such historical and social explanations of particular contemporary sexual practices. This is especially important given the current colonization of the public debate in different African countries representing a glorified 'African' past where sexuality was trouble-free and healthy.

The challenge of sex research is to understand the ways that societal factors organise sex and sexuality, and finding out how these processes shape the experiences of people. How, then, do we study sexuality and at the same time respect the interface between the social

context and personal experience?

'Better Sex Makes Happier Couples'

In Nairobi (where I did my research on the love and sex lives of young adults), public debates about sexuality getting out of hand due to the loss of ('African') morals have flared up from late colonialism [6]. Debates about sexuality tend to articulate social discontent about social change, particularly when gender and sexuality are shifting because this occurs to the detriment of existing gerantocratic power structures [4; 5; 7]. The history of public debates about sexuality shows that current changes in gender and sexuality are part of a continual reconfiguration of gender and sexuality, despite common views that sexual morals or 'traditions' have been under pressure in the last decades only. Interestingly, the volatile discussions about sexuality in Nairobi occur side by side a positive discourse on sexuality that has found a niche in the media. A discourse has come into being, praising the vitalising force and bonding intimacy that comes from sex in relationships [8]. *Parent's* magazine is known particularly, among married and unmarried people, for its weekly column called 'Sex' or 'Sexuality'. Sexual practices and principles are dealt with in explicit terms. Sexual positions and the type of gratification that can be expected are described, while the topics of foreplay, fantasy and sexual variation to enhance female pleasure are written about regularly. The rationale of *Parents'* editor is reflected in the statement that 'Better sex makes happier couples,' claiming that sex is 'a couple's primary way to show love' (November 2001). In contrast to the conventional and religiously inspired idea that 'sex is a marital duty,' which is interpreted among many female young adults as enforcing the sexual subordination of women, the 'modern' duty is the fulfilment of a mutual orgasm. I do not mean that people did not have sex for pleasure before, but that the positive language of sex sex as love, intimacy, and pleasure- as it is espoused by magazines such as *Parents* provides a sounding board for couples to develop their sex lives.

The implication of mutual orgasm is that sexuality gains a new interpretation; female sexuality becomes redefined as pleasure and not necessarily as procreation, and male

sexuality becomes partly redefined in relation to female pleasure. This approach is new, exciting and more engaging for both women and men compared to conventional perspectives on sexuality emphasizing the procreative aspects of sex. For many young adults, to have a fulfilling sex life has become a symbol for a truly contemporary person. This does not necessarily imply that it is perceived as a green light to sexual permissiveness. Depending on the person's morals, a sexual life is developed only in marriage, while for others it is possible in premarital relationships as well. Both women and men are advised and encouraged to 'work' on their sex life, as it 'enriches' their personal sexual experiences as well as their partner's. Personal and mutual sexual happiness becomes an asset of individuals, as well as a symbol for a successful relationship:

**Better sex
makes
happier
couples,'**

'These days, we want our part of pleasure. I mean... We, women, know what to buy in this world and there is no way I could make love with a man and be left unsatisfied. It sometimes happened [that a man did not know how to satisfy a woman properly], men are not yet [as] up to date as women, and then I was so so disappointed. I mean, I don't even consider explaining [to] him what to do with a woman. Imagine! Some don't even realise!' (Dana, aged 29)

'OK, as a modern man you have to know how to satisfy a woman, there is no way to ... when you have sex, that only you get satisfied. You have to know what she likes, to postpone her coming, to tease her so that she begs you. Sometimes it's disturbing when you cannot make it, when you cannot satisfy a woman. I once had a girlfriend and she never had an orgasm, it disturbed me to have mine whereas she was left ...

nothing.' (Ruben, aged 28)

In general, young adults are searching for new definitions of sex. They want to give a positive meaning to sex in their premarital sexual relationships. Pamela, aged 22, for example, says: 'How can something be wrong when it makes me feel good?' In popular definitions of sexuality, sex is linked to love instead of to reproduction, ethnic compatibility or marriage as conventional discourse has it. What is most notable is that women, in contrast to conventional discourse, also recognise sex as natural, as an embodied element of growing into adulthood. They thus recognise sexual desire as crucial to their identity as women, instead of understanding sexual desire in relation to married motherhood. For men, sexual desire has always been understood as self-evident in conventional discourse; sex is normatively understood as individual achievement. But, as Ruben explains, there is now more to sex for men like him because his sexual potential is also connected to his partner's sexual pleasure. In the new definition of sexuality, then, sexual intimacy becomes a matter of the self as a sexual subject; intimacy becomes an intersubjective experience. 'Intimacy', therefore, is the name of the game. It has become a fashionable word in all popular self-help columns in Nairobi magazines advising on the art of good relationships. For young women and men, notions of romantic love and emotional intimacy are increasingly important criteria for selecting a lover or spouse. Their desire resonates with an emerging discourse on love that is shared among many factions of society, from religious understandings of marriage to popular understandings of dating.

In my research I worked out a step-by-step approach linking the personal and the contextual, and I was able to study sexuality from its diverse angles [9; 10; 11]. The personal aspect of sex focuses on sexual meanings that are individual and often have an emotional basis and are experienced through the body. Young adult women and men, like others all over the globe, reflected positively about the fact that sex is above all about sensual pleasure or the promise of pleasure and physical thrill. Being sexually active implies being sexually attractive or 'wanted', which contributes positively to women's and men's sense of self-worth. The sex act is

experienced as a moment of bliss, of physical energies that cannot be negated and sex is recognised as a powerful 'natural' force. Having sex makes people feel 'good!', 'happy', 'alive', 'in love', 'sexy', 'loved', 'strong', and much more, or as a woman expressed it: 'Making love connects my body and soul'. Many experienced sex as a vitalizing force, linking its power to its capacity as the source of life, literally and metaphorically. In 2001, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's phrase 'sex makes the world go round' (which circulated in the Kenyan media) was often used to joke about and to answer my never-ending questions¹. Sex is often perceived as a 'gut feeling' (referring to excitement, sensuality, and release associated with bodily sensations, and with more complex understandings like 'feeling wo/man' augmenting a gendered sense of self).

Whereas these meanings of sex are more centred on the individual, other meanings are relational, seeing sex as connected to love, affection, romance, in which sex is defined corresponding to one's relation to another person. For many people sex was a mutual pleasure that augments an emotional bond between lovers, whether it concerned a casual or committed relationship. Mutual orgasm as proof of success and/or intimacy in sexual relations has become an indicator among certain young adults. Moreover, experiencing orgasm is often explained to me as the primal urge to feel alive, to achieve the ultimate moment of self-awareness while simultaneously getting lost in the pleasure of orgasm. It is a positive experience for the individual as well as for the couple. Second, the intersubjective aspect of sex comes about because the moment of sex is a moment of exchange where the personal and the social merge.

Ambiguous Pleasures

For many women, experiencing femaleness through their bodies was a means to feel empowered and what they labelled as 'feeling sexy' was typically informed by wider shared notions of femininity. In spite of normative understandings that equate female sexuality with reproduction, they also

actively appropriated sexual pleasure as an index of their gendered sense of self. However, when pleasure and mutual orgasm become a standard, then sex becomes a new kind of obligation, generating insecurity. Several women recounted fear of failing as a competent sexual partner, either because of this new standard or because of the fact that they were never encouraged to perceive themselves as desiring sex for pleasure and therefore felt inhibited to do so. Most of the women as they got older became more sexually assertive, and bolder in taking a position against existing double standards. For all the men, having sex was a necessary aspect of being masculine, whereas for them also, the interpretation of sex as an

'How can something be wrong when it makes me feel good?'

emotional exchange of trust and companionship could lead to uncertainty because it contradicted the common sense idea that male sex is spontaneous. Some men's desire for sex was close to compulsion and for them sex was a means of feeling alive and virile, hence masculine. A minority of men resisted this hegemonic notion of male sexuality by drawing on the discourse on love, in the same way that a minority of women chose to delay sex till marriage. These experiences show that there is a thin line between pleasure and anxiety in sex; and that they are not unconnected or mutually exclusive emotions and experiences.

I believe that there can never be a purely physical, ecstatic or anxiety free sexual encounter. From the young adults' experiences (and underlined by other accounts described in the literature), it can be concluded that sex

is almost always imbued with some degree of uncertainty, ambiguity or anxiety. Feelings of shame, fear of losing the partner, fear of disappointing, fear about violation of trust, anxiety about failure to enjoy sex or have an orgasm, and fear of arousing suspicion, all these were experienced by both women and men, and only serve to highlight the precarious and complex nature of a sexual encounter. For example, many women endlessly deliberated whether or not to initiate condom use because they feared to arouse the suspicion of their partner about being promiscuous. Other women recounted similar qualms, as well as a fear of violating trust by initiating condom use. Men recounted similar anxieties, though less often.

Besides anxieties such as these that were related to social expectations, sex was also used to deal with a range of feelings, such as rejection, insecurity or anger, or to exert power or increase self-worth. For example, Thomas, aged 26 dealt with his fear of rejection related to his experience with his first committed relationship- by having multiple relationships: once he sheepishly said that sex 'boosts my ego'. Njeri, aged 24, however, would never phrase it in such a way and instead explained how she enjoyed the fact that her boyfriend was 'hooked to her' because of their 'great sex life'. In her sexual life the interface of pleasure and anxiety becomes clear in the way she enjoyed sex with her partner to the

full, which was important to her, despite the fact that the relationship was troubled with fights, mistrust and frustrations, which she claimed did 'not do me well'. It should be pointed out that pleasurable and anxiety evoking aspects of sex are not mutually exclusive and that, therefore, such uneasy aspects of sex should not be over-problematised. It highlights the fact that sex is fraught with ambiguity.

In sum, people's explanations about the importance of sex mostly relate to how sex augments a gendered sense of self. Gender ideologies influence how people understand themselves and how sex plays a role in their gendered identity. If sex is constitutive to people's feelings of being either 'woman' or 'man', then experiencing being feminine and masculine is partly related to normative expectations based on existing gender roles. Butler's notion

¹Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is the well-known ex-wife of the former president of South Africa Nelson Mandela.

of the 'paradox of subjectivation' [12] is helpful in pointing out how women and men both advocate new interpretations of gender because- young adults unsettle, in different degrees, the patriarchal understanding of sex and gender- as well as reproduce normative understandings of gender.

The hegemonic symbolic construction of women as moral caretakers, guardians of the family, and devoted wives, serves as the norm of femininity even when women deviate from it. It comes to women being encouraged to remain chaste and being severely judged when transgressing normative parameters. Women have therefore been compelled to adopt more secretive strategies when having sexual affairs compared to men. They have to be constantly negotiating between factors that are associated with deviance on the one hand, and aspects that would allow them to be considered respectable on the other. Nevertheless, women appropriated sexual pleasure as part of contemporary personhood, and many enjoyed doing so. In general, the older the women were, the more boldly they pursued sex for pleasure, whether it was via short affairs or by finding out about sex toys or toy condoms.

Men generally had, and have, more leeway to deviate from the norm. Although men are also encouraged to remain chaste, mainly by the Christian discourse, they are also encouraged to be sexually active, which is endorsed by the patriarchal discourse equating male sexuality with virility and social achievement. Public discourse is highly contradictory when it comes to manhood and morality, and this also impacts on men's sexual behaviour and their relationships with women. Whereas they perceive sex as constitutive to their sense of masculinity, men should also exercise self-restraint and therefore there is a (undefined) limit to sex. A man should not appear to be addicted to sex, because this implies being dependent on women and thus not being self-reliant. On the other hand, a man should not fail in having sex and, above all, being a good lover. In patriarchal discourse being a skilful lover is not considered crucial to men's sexuality, while in the new discourse it is. The new discourse, however, implies that sex is not as spontaneous as it is conventionally understood to be; instead, it needs to be 'worked upon' as sexual skills, like other skills, require knowledge and practice.

Many men recounted or hinted at their anxieties about failing to be skilful lovers. The new discourse on sex as central to emotional intimacy challenges conventional constructions of masculinity, and men struggle to balance and incorporate both in their lives as lovers. Nevertheless, the discourse of sex as being natural to men remains hegemonic and most men consider it their right to take pleasure in sex.

Young adult women and men in Nairobi maintain ambiguous attitudes towards each other because men occupy an ambiguous position in women's lives as lovers, friends and future husbands, as well as figures of authority and social control. As a result, both women and men communicate ambiguity towards their partners and potential partners. It turns out that many sexual affairs are not self-evident anxiety-free encounters. Especially in non committed relationships, sex is embedded in ambiguity because of social and cultural expectations, as well as the fear of arousing suspicion and violating trust. Further, Aids poses a realistic threat when having unprotected sex, which continues to happen although condom use is fairly high. The moralising discourses on Aids have further codified sex with a negative meaning in public discourse; 'bad' sex is 'immoral' sex, while 'good' sex has come to mean sex that conforms with normative cultural values. These social definitions of sex affect the very personal experience and sensations of sex.

Studying Sex In All Its Meanings, Sensations And Connections

In order to be able to interconnect the personal and social aspects of sex, I propose to use sexuality as an analytical tool with three foci. First, sex is a vehicle for powerful sensations that are experienced very subjectively. In other words, sex is *personal* and sex is a medium for expressing a variety of feelings, emotions and needs in a person. In all the biographical narratives I collected, the effects of sexual desire and conduct on the person stood out from the power of sexual attraction as an uncontrollable force, to the bodily craving for sexual fulfilment. Women and men reflected differently about these experiences depending on their relationships, their view on sex or intimacy, or their anticipation of gendered expectations. In my research group of 49 people, the differences

between individual people stood out. This is an important observation to make, since large scale studies, because of their methodology, cannot but generalise and therefore easily negate variety. Generalisation itself does not need to be problematic as long as the limitations of this approach are taken into account in the production of knowledge about sexuality.

Second, sex is more often than not an *inter-subjective* exchange between people; sex implies intimacy in the sense that mutually agreed sexual conduct always implies a degree of confidence or trust [13]. Sex carries a sense of emotional interaction that varies in its nature. The young adults' experiences show that sex is a means for the expression of different feelings, emotions and needs that are acted upon in relation with another person. People have sex for fun, to fulfil a desire for intimacy, as a physical thrill, to achieve social status, to confirm a gendered sense of self, to exert power, to express love, to humiliate, to conform to expectations, and much more. The emotions and the nature of intimacy can differ. Despite the popular connotations of the term, 'intimacy' does not always imply feelings of monogamous romantic love 'love-love' feelings, to use a man's words whose narrative showed how intimacy can imply friendship or financial care more than romantic love [14;15]. Perceiving sex as an inter-subjective exchange can be used as a direct call for further research studies to move beyond an essentialist analysis of sex as an obvious act.

Third, because sexuality is also a peculiarly sensitive conductor of social influences, cultural perceptions and political divisions, sexuality is also *socially* defined. These social aspects inform all the abovementioned emotions and exchanges. Every one of the biographical narratives I collected testifies to how social meanings frame people's behaviour, their understanding of themselves and their experience. The accounts of, for example, women's 'playing hard to get' to men's burden of needing to be seen as 'man enough', show how people acted in order to preserve their sexual reputation. Sexual ideology and practices are related to notions of gender, age, ethnicity or race, religion, social status, familial responsibility, ideas about intimacy, love and affection. Relations of power are typically translated into the organisation of sexuality (Arnfred

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2004), such as different perceptions regarding chastity defined by gender. The different biographical narratives elaborate how people's sexuality developed in interaction with these social axes.

In short, epidemiological studies and/or studies from a health perspective on sexuality have tended to ignore the construction of gendered and sexual identities, the cultural meaning of sexual conduct, and the erotic significance of variant sexual practices in distinct social settings. There is no way of avoiding the fact that accounts of sex, intimacy and sexuality eventually come down to studying personal sensations. These sensations are comprised of the complex conjunction between physiological arousal, erotic practices and interpretative processes; they are thus situated at the threshold where body and

discursive knowledge converge and merge.

The challenge of sexuality research in Africa is to bring into focus the experiential aspect of sex while continuing to work from a health perspective (which seems inevitable for as long as research remains dependent on 'development-related' finances, which is not the case for sexuality studies in the West). We should not compromise on a solid research epistemology despite pressures to do so such as the pressure to work towards solutions for so-called risk behaviour which tends to narrow down the research epistemology. This is easier said than done. It is why in this context Obbo calls for a certain degree of humility in the current explosion of Aids-related sexuality studies geared towards formulating answers and solutions [16]. After more than two decades of Aids

research, there is an urgent need to incorporate into the Aids paradigm that 'the hallmark of sexuality is its complexity: its multiple meanings, sensations and connections' [17].

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