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Spronk, R.

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SEX, SEXUALITY AND NEGOTIATING AFRICANNESS IN NAIROBI

Rachel Spronk

‘For us, life is about having a fluid disposition. Nairobi is a shot of whisky.’¹

Patrick and I met at a friend’s party in 2001. We were leaning over the balcony staring into the Nairobi night while the sounds of the party made up the background noise. He asked what had brought me to Nairobi and we engaged in a discussion about the lifestyles of his generation (he was then aged twenty-eight). His generation, he said, was marked by a spirited approach to life, ‘hip and ambitious’, a generation he also characterized as ‘dangerously nearing Westernization’. He got somewhat agitated and started fulminating about the dominance of ‘the West’. Somewhere along the discussion we started talking about female circumcision, and he got very upset. He said:

Female circumcision is part of our African culture. You do not know how important it is for women themselves, they are not forced to do it in my community [the Abagusii ethnic group]. While they want to be circumcised, it is criminalized by outsiders, Westerners. Where I come from, the place is infested with NGOs trying to estrange the women.

I kept quiet so as not to anger him further. At the time I met Patrick I was living in Nairobi, engaged in a year-long study of the lifestyles of young professionals like him. I wanted to find out how sexuality was embedded in social relations and meanings and therefore how sexuality was related to processes of social transformation. I had undertaken to study the love lives and sexual lives – both the ideas and practices – among this group of twenty- to thirty-year-old professionals.

Two months after our first meeting, Patrick agreed to participate in my research. Again we discussed the matter of female circumcision. This time he said:

You know I cannot marry a circumcised woman because I want us both to enjoy sex. Female circumcision is no option for me, it’s barbaric. How can I have a fulfilling sexual experience while my girlfriend cannot? I don’t think I can have sex with a woman who is cut, I would feel like – I exploit her because it would be for my own satisfaction only.

RACHEL SPRONK is a post-doctoral researcher in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She has been engaged in research on Kenya since 1997. Her research interests include middle-class formation, globalization, gender and sexuality.

¹ Binyavanga Wainaina, *Discovering Home* (2003: 39).

Why had Patrick and I, within a matter of minutes, come round to the topic of female circumcision when we were discussing the lifestyles of his generation – two topics that hardly seem related? Why did he express such a different opinion about this cultural practice when we discussed it in relation to his personal life? This article sets out to answer these questions by positioning the lives of young professionals such as Patrick in the context of modernity.

Sexuality is a public as well as a personal affair – since intimate details of private experience are structured by larger social relations. As we learn from Patrick's account, sex can be a matter of ideological debate as much as a source of pleasure. Moreover, sexuality is crucial in the development of contemporary notions of selfhood among young urban adults; as a realm of exploration, pleasure and agency, it is related in particular ways to their lives as young professionals. The young Nairobi professionals I worked with represent an emerging social group which is not clearly defined, but nonetheless recognizable.² Members of this group tend to have short-term or temporary sexual relationships, with their careers taking precedence over marriage. Within the society they are often labelled as 'Westernized' or 'un-African' because of their implicit and explicit criticisms of conventional gender roles. The accusation cuts deep, as they consider themselves to be very conscious and proud of their cultural identity. They comprise a group that sees itself as being in the vanguard of social changes, which is therefore an ideal group through which to explore the social complexities of sexuality in the context of modernity (Spronk 2006).

This article is part of a small but developing field of research on sexuality that seeks to correct the hegemonic trend of simplifying sex in Africa in instrumental terms, de-eroticizing it to an act devoid of meaning.³ It sets out to explore how sexuality and issues of cultural belonging or identification are interrelated in the lives of young professionals, and how they experience these issues personally. To do so requires a dialectical perspective on the personal, intersubjective and social aspects of sexuality. Sex is a medium for a variety of feelings, emotions and needs; people have sex for fun, to fulfil a desire for

²The size of the group of young professionals is difficult to estimate because no hard data are available. I would estimate the group I describe here as numbering a couple of thousand. They straddle the lower and upper middle class while excluding the elite: their families can be defined as the group of people who have salaried incomes from lower to higher white-collar and technical employment in commerce, services, light industry and government, ranging from secretaries and nurses to managers, higher civil servants and business people. They do not share the backgrounds of either the majority of Kenyans or the economic-political elite that has ruled Kenya since independence.

³Whereas sexuality studies in the global West have created a niche in mainstream anthropology, most work on sexuality in the global South is conducted within the health and/or development framework, studying sex as a sub-theme of reproduction, gender, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, etcetera. The largely ahistorical and generalizing tendency is to study sex as a problem and to use sexuality in a self-evident and instrumental manner. Any approach which views sexuality primarily as a societal problem only highlights one aspect, while ignoring others such as intimacy, the desire for affection, and the aspect of pleasure or eroticism (Spronk 2007).

intimacy, for a physical thrill, to procreate, to exert power, to humiliate, and much more. Sex is thus a vehicle for powerful feelings that are experienced very subjectively. As an inter-subjective exchange between people, sex is also a symbolic and sensorial interaction between people and this inter-subjective exchange implies intimacy. Last, sexuality is a particularly sensitive conductor of cultural influences and hence of social and political divisions. It is fundamental to a community or culture—hence the moral order—because the social organization of sexuality, through rituals such as marriage or circumcision, is based on conventional gender and sex roles. By exploring the intricate interface of public understandings and personal experiences of sexuality, the intersections between sexuality and culture can be explored (cf. Parker 1991; Wekker 2006).

YOUNG AND AMBITIOUS IN NAIROBI

Young professionals are an unusual group to research in African Studies, but they are particularly interesting because they can be seen as successful results of post-colonial transformation. Further, the group studied were more occupied with issues of Africanness⁴ than other groups in Kenyan society, which suggests that they experience modernity as particularly problematic.

In the debate about post-colonial subjectivities, Werbner advocates that we examine how people realize their subjectivities ‘existentially, in the subjects’ consciousness of their personal or intimate relations’ (2002: 2). Sexuality is useful in studying how people realize their subjectivities, because it serves as a prism through which to analyse how social developments generate (new) notions of self (Foucault 1990). Similarly, Bayart (2000) calls for specific attention to processes involved in the constitution of the self, rather than foregrounding structural factors to which people in Africa are subjected and which influence various identities. In order to capture how young professionals are engendered as self-conscious *subjects*, as well as *subjected to* social conditions, it is helpful to take into account the ‘genesis of new communities of taste, sentiment and other markers of inclusion’ (Meyer 2004: 4). Young Nairobi professionals are engaged in different processes of subjectivation and identification—as professionals, as Africans, as Kenyans and as cosmopolitan citizens, as well as women, as men, as lovers and partners. An elaboration of this group’s lifestyle is important to show how modes of being are engendered, since technologies of the self—such as fashion or progressive attitudes—become key aspects of self-identification.

⁴In this article the term African (without quotes) is used in referring to a geo-political rather than essentialist sense, the term ‘African’ (in quotes) indicates Kenyans’ use. The term Africanness indicates the emic innate sense of ‘being African’ as a shared history, ‘race’ or ‘culture’.

The study involved 24 women and 25 men, whom I followed closely and interviewed intensely for seven to thirteen months. I met them through friends from my previous research in 1997–8 and through a posting in the popular *Saturday Magazine*, the pull-out of the *Daily Nation*, where I mentioned that I would like to meet with young professionals for interviews on contemporary life in Nairobi. Apart from a few, the majority did not know each other and they generally belonged to separate social circles according to their professions, residential areas and ages. I met with them separately to record their life stories (interviews were organized according to themes, starting from childhood, family background, puberty and adolescence in order to end with their current intimate lives, and took on average six to eight meetings) and I joined them in their social lives – going out, attending funerals and weddings, or just hanging around with friends at their homes.

The group of young professionals that I encountered were born and raised in Nairobi, by parents who were able to provide their children with an educational background suitable for pursuing a professional career. The label ‘young professionals’ applies to a relatively small group of young adults who are not part of the larger impoverished population, nor are they part of the small political-economic elite. Although they come from backgrounds that range from lower to upper middle class, these differences tend to level out once they enter their professional fields. Their parents have typical middle-class occupations such as teachers, lower-ranking managers, or civil servants, while the young professionals themselves mainly seek careers in the private sector.

A characteristic background pattern is that their grandfathers were among the first migrant labourers to Nairobi or to settler farms, while their grandmothers had stayed behind at the rural homesteads. Male labour migration affected marriages, sexual patterns, family life and community participation considerably (cf. Kanogo 2005; Mutongi 2007; Robertson 1997; White 1990). This grandparent generation was eager to educate at least a few of their children, and many sent children to mission schools in the rural areas. These mission-educated children, the parents of the young professionals in this study, were among the first group of Kenyans to receive formal education, which allowed them to work in the administration of the newly independent nation state. Many of them migrated to Nairobi to work, while maintaining a bond with their rural ‘homes’ – giving a helping hand, participating in local organizations, or building their own house in the family compound as custom required. Within this parent generation the pattern of the nuclear family was strengthened as they became more and more involved in life in the city, while their bond with their rural ‘homes’ weakened. For the children of this second generation, the young professionals studied, bonds with their rural homes were even weaker. Their parents’ efforts to incorporate them into activities at ‘home’ diminished as the focus on city life grew. For example, the majority of the people in this study recalled how they would visit their

grandparents during their school holidays, but how this lessened as they grew older. The young professionals are therefore the products of particular favourable circumstances that were only applicable to a small emerging middle class in post-colonial Kenya (Spronk 2006). This emerging group can be defined from early post-colonial times as having a particular level of education, salaried incomes, and an increasingly urban-based life focused on the nuclear family (Stichter 1987), and as having become well-entrenched as a group through time.

There are remarkable features of the group of young professionals in this study that illustrate a pattern I have observed more widely. What is notable is that a significant number of the young professionals do not speak an ethnic language, since from childhood onwards their parents spoke to them in English or in Kiswahili, the *lingua franca* of East Africa. Among themselves they speak English, Kiswahili and *Sheng* – the slang of the youth sub-culture – which is made up of different ethnic languages together with Kiswahili and English. Dana (aged 29 in 2001), for example, was taking Kikuyu language lessons at the language school of the Anglican Church. She explained her move by asking: ‘How can I be African and not speak an African language?’ The basis of young professionals’ social life and professional lives is inter-ethnic, as are their neighbourhoods and churches.⁵ However, within their parental families, they are less vocal about their inter-ethnic attitudes since the older generations tend to be more mono-ethnically oriented.

Another significant pattern is that the majority of these young professionals are unmarried, preferring to delay marriage until they are around thirty, for reasons such as the need to work on their careers first, to save up for a middle-class married life, or because they prefer to delay the responsibilities that come with married life. This leads to prolonged dating and the maintenance of casual relationships. Dating is, in fact, an important element in their lives and they actively date people from different ethnic groups. Importantly, their financial independence from their relatives, due to their relatively stable jobs, translates into freedom of choice to live on their own and enjoy a consumer lifestyle.

Members of this generation see themselves as modern because they operate in a sub-culture that is part of a global world. Nairobi is the regional headquarters of international banks, international non-governmental organizations and transnational corporations; it is a major site for accounting, legal and informational services. The cityscape is dominated by office developments, shopping malls and hotels, and white-collar employment is expanding, as are the residential areas of the middle class. The lifestyles of young professionals are a celebration of cosmopolitan possibilities ushered in by globalization processes,

⁵The conflicts and so-called ethnic clashes that followed the disputed election results in December 2007 caused what one friend called ‘a ripple in our otherwise calm ethnically plural sea’. Different young professionals e-mailed me that in the midst of the conflict in their circle people tended to look at one another somewhat apprehensively, and they all decried the ‘disease of tribalism’. By March, it seemed that the situation had returned to normal, ‘as we sit together at the bars joking into the night again’.

what Appadurai terms a 'new cosmopolitanism' (1996) that unites the cultural, financial and political flows within and between non-Western and Western societies.

As a group the young professionals have created a sub-culture in the clubs, bars and restaurants that dot the urban nightscape. Although not all of the ones in this study went clubbing on a weekly basis, the majority did. An enjoyable evening out can include *nyama choma* and *ugali* (roasted meat and pounded maize meal) in an open-air restaurant, to be followed by dancing in one of the many stylish clubs, while others prefer to go to a hip bar or watch a late-night movie at the cinema. Often, people meet after office hours to have a drink at popular bars. A significant majority work out in the gym, or swim in one of the many pools of the international hotels. Exercising, however, depends on their incomes and is therefore indicative as to how far they have been able to develop their careers. They have unlimited access to the internet and hence communicate with friends and relatives abroad. They stay in tune with global trends by surfing the internet, reading magazines, listening to music and watching films. Theirs is a bustling world of 'sophistication' and lifestyle options with its own signifiers and representations of a present-day identity (Nyairo 2005). Young professionals are cosmopolitans, not because of a cultural orientation to the West, but because of the convergence of global and local 'cultural compliance' (Ferguson 1999) that they embody. They articulate a cosmopolitanism with a particular Kenyan flavour of which they are proud. Fashionable dressing, going out and progressive attitudes are important markers of their modern personality.

An interesting pattern of young professionals' lives is that their sub-culture legitimizes sex as an intrinsic feature of socialization into contemporary personhood. These relationships are possible since sex, with the use of contraceptives, does not lead to reproduction. Young professionals lead in the longer-term shift in Kenya towards a more personal approach to partner choice, based increasingly on values of companionship, egalitarianism, the couple's relative autonomy and the sexual satisfaction of women, as opposed to reproduction, ethnic compatibility or customary jurisprudence. A fundamental element in the crafting of modern relationships and personhood is the perception that intimacy is both a means to self-realization and an important criterion in a successful relationship (Spronk 2009; cf. Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). For this group, the importance of having sex has its roots in the positive discourse on sex as an expression of a 'fast life'. Going out and having 'fun' – the consumption of leisure – is celebrated to the full in Nairobi's nightlife. In the evolving erotic frame of reference of a 'fast life', sexual pleasure for both women and men becomes fundamental to dating. Sexuality reflects a space for them to re-enact femininity and masculinity by claiming entitlement to sexual pleasure as the young, the hip and the ambitious.

However, as the visible results of social change they are easy targets of discontented elements in society. They are accused of 'Westernization'. Their interpretation of sexuality is considered to break with normative

notions of sexuality and gender, which equate sex with procreation and the maintenance of gender hierarchies. They make explicit the fact that attitudes to gender and sexuality continue to shift, despite general views that this is a recent phenomenon, and that this shift is to the detriment of existing gerontocratic power structures.⁶

'KENYA HAS BECOME A SOCIETY INFLAMED BY SEXUAL DESIRE'⁷

In contemporary Nairobi, the pervasive presence of AIDS has led to an explosion of volatile moralizing reactions (Nzioka 2000). Public debates decry societal disorder, with AIDS seen as a sign of the times, the consequence of sexual permissiveness and the breakdown of the family. Because debates on Africanness articulate the loss of cultural singularity that is experienced by many Kenyans, these sentiments are shared by many different social groups. Images and rhetoric of Africanness are invoked and used by diverse factions of society because of the widespread notion of loss of culture. The representation of sexuality in Kenyan public debates remains limited to invocations of chastity based on images of a glorified past and a defiled present. 'Immorality' is often mentioned in the same breath as 'Westernization'.

The following letter to a newspaper, titled 'I am disgusted by modern youth' is a typical example of the zealous efforts of 'concerned Kenyans', as they often call themselves, trying to reach others by writing to newspapers, or speaking at funerals, *harambees*, church services or family gatherings:⁸

In traditional African society, the situation was different [to how it is now]. There were values of spiritual uprightness and ethics, which guided society in its sexual behaviour. Sex before marriage was a crime and virginity was a virtue. But today, the traditional way of life governing African societies has been thrown out the window and such values are discarded. What you see now is that young people smoke, drink and have sex (Ochomo 2001).

This quote is typical of the sentiments I have often heard expressed at social functions or at times when I have tried to explain my research. These views are commonly articulated in public debates preoccupied with issues of African heritage, gerontocratic power relations and conventional morality. There is a conviction that culture has lost its grip on sexuality, resulting in sexual chaos or 'bad sex'. Sexuality is

⁶Thus young professionals are among a number of groups who have played a role in the reconfiguration of gender and sexuality since colonialism (Mutongi 2000; Robertson 1997; White 1990). The critique of young people's immorality is also directed at youth in rural areas or poor urbanized youth.

⁷*Moral Issues in Kenya: a personal view* by Marjorie Oludhe-Magoye (1996: 1).

⁸A *harambee* is a fund-raising ceremony in the form of a party where the organizers take care of guests in the expectation that the guests will make a financial contribution. It can be held for a wedding, a hospital bill or a communal goal like building a church.

understood as a natural force that needs to be channelled by rules and moral uprightness. What is called 'bad sex' is believed to be caused by changes in the positioning of sexuality within cultural institutions like marriage.

It is thought that, before, premarital sexual intercourse was not approved of, and this disapproval was endorsed by powerful sanctions. From the time when Kenyan cultures were still 'authentic' until the present, a growing process of 'immorality' is supposed to have gradually taken place, along with the breakdown of traditional influence. This glorifying notion of a lost culture that strictly regulated sexual behaviour and sexual patterns reveals a nostalgia which invariably postulates 'African' in opposition to 'Western' and employs the notion of 'Westernization' as an amoral disposition which comes about from being 'non-African'.⁹ Ochomo (the letter writer) goes on as follows:

The behaviour of Kenyan youth makes me loathe. As you roam town streets past cinemas, theatres, discos, video halls, churches, schools, universities, and public offices, you cannot avoid seeing the latest hairstyles and clothes. The young people are always smoking and drinking, and I shed tears as I see them dressed in transparent clothes just because the attire is fashionable (Ochomo 2001).

In public debates aired via the media or in churches, and in discussions between people from different walks of life, it is implied that 'Westernization' influences sexual desire in a direct way. It is repeatedly stated that movies, pornographic material, advertisements, soap operas, dress and music are the corrupting influences. The term 'exposure' is often used to indicate the problematic relationship between (Western) media and commodities and their reception into local systems of meaning. People point to video clips, movies, music or dress, mentioning their suggestive qualities, or (sometimes) their openly sexual display. The notion of 'external influences' is used to refer not only to material aspects, but also to ideas regarding sexuality, divorce, or gender roles.

For example, in 2001, the issue of divorce flared up when a minister sneered in a parliamentary debate that his female colleague 'is a divorcee anyway', implying her improper status as a defective wife, while conveniently forgetting that more than half of the male ministers do not live with their wives and that the President himself has been divorced for decades (see also Oriang' 2001). Opponents insulted the female (divorced) minister as a 'shame of African womanhood', whereas the defenders, such as the young professionals in this study, cited the case as an example of 'a hypocritically sexist society'. The

⁹The glorifying notion of a lost culture that strictly regulated sexual behaviour and sexual patterns has also been analysed by various Kenyan scholars (Ahlberg 1994; Chege 1993; Kenyatta 1995 [1938]). Such studies are partly the result of existing discourses, and tend to grant authority to discourses on lost culture.

general reaction, however, led by church, community and political leaders, cited the female minister as a bad example for the younger generations. Divorce is often criticized in public as 'un-African' and a result of Westernization but this case shows how selectively it is brought into play. Such sentiments reveal the experience of loss and anger by a generation and/or social groups who cannot participate in more cosmopolitan lifestyles, and whose social foundations are under attack, couched in sentiments about African heritage.

In many societies social discontent is articulated via preoccupations with matters of gender and sexuality (cf. Weeks 1985). The social transformations of family life, gender and sexuality since early colonialism have always given rise to heated public debates about the possible loss of African culture. These debates encompassed long-standing concerns about the decreasing influence of patriarchal and gerontocratic controls on women and young men. There is a powerful tradition of linking prostitution, urban life and independent working women in Kenyan history (cf. Mutongi 2000; Robertson 1997; White 1990). This discourse finds current expressions: for example, in 1998 my room-mate spent a night in police custody after being arrested at 6 p.m. in the town centre during a raid aimed at 'prostitutes and hawkers who spoil the streets'. When I went there I found a police station filled with female white-collar workers employed at one of the many offices in the centre district. The dress of female young professionals is often a point of debate. Similarly, there have been periodic panics about pornography and popular literature (Geisler and Prince 2007; Odhiambo 2003). In the case of Kenya during the early twenty-first century, young professional women *and* men are viewed as prototypes of 'moral decay', and people like Ochomo point to their 'blatant sexual behaviour' and 'immoral' music, or their presumed disrespect for authority. Young professionals are breaking down old boundaries while exploring new ones. They exemplify a shift in existing social hierarchies – between elders and youth, women and men – which are experienced as fundamental to community and culture by many Kenyans. As a result, young professionals are caught between debates about cultural norms and their role as agents of transformation, especially because by definition they consider themselves to be 'Africans'.

'BEING AFRICAN THE MODERN WAY'

Where, in that first encounter, did Patrick's fierce defence of female circumcision come from? According to Patrick it was a response to my presence as a foreigner, a Westerner. However, there was more to it. As he indicated in our first meeting, and as became clear during our later interviews, his defensive attitude was related to anxieties arising from the issue of 'Westernization' and 'being African'. He framed female circumcision not as an ethnic Gusii custom but as part of 'African culture'. As such, he was defending a custom to

which he actually objected. This contradiction was related, on the one hand, to the importance of proclaiming cultural authenticity in the light of what he derisively called 'Westernization'. On the other hand, according to his own norms, he could not be considered 'authentic' himself. When, years before, his grandfather had scorned him for being a foreigner to his own culture because Patrick could not speak the family's vernacular, he experienced a deep sense of humiliation. 'He [the grandfather] is right, I am an embarrassment to him.' Not being able to speak a local language implied that he was bereft of a cultural 'knowing'. He, and many like him, used the notion of 'African culture' to represent a cultural knowing that is essential to their sense of cultural belonging. Despite the common feelings that they lack a cultural fluency, Patrick's case exemplifies a pattern I observed more widely: that young professionals possess a general familiarity with particular customs and ideologies, but cannot incorporate (all of) it in a meaningful way in their lives.

The term 'African' is used by many young professionals in a reified manner to essentialize cultural particularity. Africanness means testifying to an African or black commonality that they are proud of; it is about a kind of sociality which they celebrate by cracking jokes about each other's 'tribes', claiming entitlement to certain ethnic customs as part of a larger African universe, or dressing in elaborate West African dress. They see themselves as 'African' by definition because to a certain extent they transcend Kenyan ethnic rivalries, and have more in common with young professionals from other African countries than with the majority of Kenyans. However, the notion 'African' is a polemical tool in debates about cultural authenticity.

Dorcas, aged thirty in 2001, for example, shows how notions of cultural authenticity can also be used against young professionals. She was a very successful woman working as a sales manager in a large multinational. She told me she had succeeded in her sales management career 'through hard work', because her first degree was only in accountancy. She had her own apartment in Kilimani, a middle-class neighbourhood, which she furnished simply but luxuriously with expensive electrical appliances, furniture and art. On many evenings she could be found in the more upmarket bars with colleagues and friends who shared the same work rhythm. She had had several 'casual' relationships and one 'committed' relationship, which ended in 1999. She recounted how gradually she and her ex-boyfriend Samwel developed a 'strangling' relationship that led to a break-up.

After a first 'happy' year, Samwel had lost his job and became depressed, as he could not find another similar position. Dorcas would explain his bad moods and irritation as a consequence of his joblessness, and just hope for better times. Meanwhile, Samwel moved in with her because he could not afford his own apartment, and they started life as a couple. In the beginning, she enjoyed living together because 'I was ready to become a wife and start a life with someone.' However, conflicts arose. According to Dorcas, Samwel became more and more impossible to live with because 'he wanted to control my life'. He

disliked it when Dorcas met her friends in bars and he disapproved when she had to work overtime.

At first, I would try to suit his anxiety by trying to do as he wished, but he became only more demanding! He started accusing me of being un-African because real African women would not behave like I did. It would be so humiliating to be called un-African that I would try to suit his ideas [by being more at home]. Eventually he became violent and started beating me. Do you believe that I let myself be beaten?!

Eventually, with the help of her brother, she left Samwel. She told me that men like Samwel 'have attitudes' and behave like her father, something she disliked as her father was directly associated in her mind with her mother's subdued manner. After the difficulties with Samwel, Dorcas said she had become 'wiser' and 'stronger', and would no longer 'pretend' that she was anything other than a modern young woman.

Samwel's behaviour shows a man trying, through emotional blackmail, to force an independent woman back into the normative social mould. Like Dorcas, many other women I interviewed discussed the tensions they experienced as professional women, on the one hand, and as girlfriends, future wives and mothers on the other. They tried to balance conventional understandings of 'African' womanhood – which stood for submissiveness and domesticity – and professional and 'modern African' womanhood – which stood for egocentrism and not being family-oriented – with their personal notions of modern African womanhood – which stood for autonomy in a framework of egalitarian gender relations.

From the experiences of Patrick and Dorcas, and others like them, it became clear how issues of cultural heritage, social expectations, lifestyle options and cultural identity reflected a field of tension and ambivalences, sometimes resulting in feelings of anxiety. This field of tension comprises four interrelated but sometimes contradictory issues: young professionals perceive themselves as explorers of a contemporary identity of which they are proud; they exhibit half-hearted attitudes towards customary ways of living; they reject 'Westernization'; and they advocate Africanness as a mode of identification.

For young professionals identification as 'African' has several layers. There is a particular pride to being Kenyan and many refer to the vibrant popular culture in Nairobi and its leading function in the region. Pamela, aged twenty-two in 2001, phrased it as follows: 'Kenyan: I am Kenyan in the first place, but that means of course being African.' Others, like Maurice (then aged twenty-seven), would problematize the label Kenyan: 'I am African, I belong to Africa, calling myself Kenyan does not cover it all, Kenyan is a British invention.' According to Nyairo, 'the idea of Kenyanness is its inherent diversity and contradictions' (2005: 10), which is exactly what young professionals embody. Feelings of Africanness are reinforced in the context of Western cultural dominance, in the presence of Westerners, or when describing their sub-culture or in-between position in Kenyan society.

However, their sense of Africanness is contradictory. On the one hand, it is related to an impulse to glorify traditions as truly authentic, while, on the other hand, they identify themselves as African because of their inter-ethnic backgrounds and/or lifestyle and progressive attitudes. So their Africanness is far from self-evident, and their supposed Westernization is not self-evident either. Their difficulty is that while they are very critical of what they call Western cultural imperialism, they are also part of global cosmopolitan processes that are often interpreted as Westernization. The contradiction is complete when the same processes that enable them to pursue certain lifestyles are also interpreted as causing 'erosion of tradition'. Their confusion is compounded by the fact that in public discourse Africanness is defined as being in opposition to being modern, with sexuality placed at the centre of the debates – 'true Africans' are portrayed as upholding conventional morals. This is exactly the nexus of the tension between the pleasure and the anxiety of sexuality for young professionals; as progressive advocates of Africanness, they challenge the gerontocratic hierarchy and its associated morals.

The challenge young professionals face produces anxiety about their cultural identity that typifies 'being modern the African way'. Young professionals get caught in a web of reifying the notions 'African', 'tradition', 'modern' and 'Western' (see also Reid 2003; Nyamnjoh and Page 2002). According to Sahlins, cultural structures are reproduced through the actions of intentional subjects who do not necessarily 'use existing categories in prescribed ways' (1985: 145). As such, ideologies provide the terms of debate for members of society, and although these social categories may be contested they maintain the social structure nevertheless. The accounts of Patrick and Dorcas show how intersections between sexuality and the politics of culture can cause feelings of anxiety that typify their particular social group. Sex, as central to self-expression, is somehow associated with 'being modern', while at the same time it feels 'natural' because, eventually, sex comes down to a sensory experience.

'SEX MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND'¹⁰

As a 'modern' man, Patrick cannot agree to female circumcision despite his call for Africanness. He could not marry a circumcised woman, as there would be a physical inequality between them that would undermine their relationship. To him, mutual sexual pleasure was essential, something he related to the notion of 'modern relationships'. Sexuality was thus a mode for identifying himself as a contemporary

¹⁰ 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 questions. Madikizela-Mandela is the well-known ex-wife of the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela.

person. Such an 'articulation of identity', where sexuality becomes central to self-perceptions (Weeks 2003: 4), is characteristic of this emerging generation in middle-class Nairobi society.

Patrick used to say he was 'rather philosophical' about relationships, and that he had 'thought a lot' about them. Despite his respect for his parents, he wanted a different, more egalitarian, kind of relationship: 'True love exists between equals and not when one looks up to the other,' he used to say. When he had to apply his philosophy to his incipient relationship with his girlfriend Nsiza, theory and practice did not always correspond. In the beginning he was insecure, as Nsiza maintained an elusive attitude when having sex that made him feel apprehensive. Her attitude and his response created some distance between them because, as he put it, he was looking for 'something deeper' – a 'love relationship'. Sex was essentially 'good' because it was enjoyable and because it made him 'feel man'. However there was always a strand of anxiety related to exposing himself emotionally and he wondered, in our interviews, whether he was not 'letting go too much'. Since, generally speaking, men in Nairobi are expected to be initiators and achievers in sexual encounters, he risked losing control by aspiring to another approach to a sexual relationship. Through time, the sex life of Nsiza and Patrick improved as they became more 'involved emotionally'.

The following account of Martha similarly shows how sex becomes central to self-understanding and self-expression. Martha, aged twenty-four in 2001, was living on her own in a tiny apartment in the lower-middle-class area known as South B. In the year we met, she was working as an accountant for an international tourist company, living frugally to save money to continue her studies. She managed to secure a scholarship for one year and left for an air pilot school in Sidney, Australia, later that year. She anticipated that flying would give her an immense sense of freedom – her dream was to work for Médecins Sans Frontières in Kenya. Both her parents came from the Meru ethnic group. Among some of the Meru, it is customary to circumcise women and several of Martha's cousins were circumcised, as were her mother and aunts. Her parents had decided not to circumcise Martha and her sisters, which made them conspicuous among their relatives. According to Martha, she and her sisters stood out, some cousins regarded them as 'inferior', and their difference also made them 'independent of mind and in our walk in life'.

I never saw Martha with a boyfriend or a lover. She talked about male friends but always made it clear they were platonic friends. Through extensive e-mail correspondence Martha and I were able to establish an enduring communication about her sexual contacts.¹¹ After several

¹¹ After 2001, when Martha left Nairobi, we communicated by e-mail and telephone. Martha sent me long letters by e-mail about her adventures and disappointments in Sidney. In 2008, I assembled almost eighty printed pages – a unique document that I hope to publish in cooperation with Martha.

months in Australia, she wrote to me:

You see there is the part of me that is not satisfied of just being a xtian [Christian] and having casual sex becoz biblically sex is for a married couple. So some days [I] am guilty but other days I feel it's a part of life. However I always say in my heart that if I met a man and was really in love with him, and deemed a good man, then I could have a sexual r/ship with him and I would be satisfied with it and not guilty coz I will know that is someone I would like to spend the rest of my life with. Yes, I can relate to the mental idea that if you are normal, you are sexually active. For me it was actually one of the first things that drove me to sex. I began to think that I was not normal, that I was primitive and naïve, that it was a shame to be a virgin at 22. I can honestly say I succumbed to pressure as much as desire to find what it is all about. (23 February 2002)

For Martha, a very self-confident woman, eager to make something of her life, 'African womanhood' was an important point of reference. Her sense of self was grounded in a version of womanhood that was independent, critical and persevering. 'African women learn to find confidence in being someone's wife, mother or sisters,' she said, hissing between her teeth. 'With due respect to my mother, my sisters and me cannot live like that.' She said that her earlier job with the tourist company had enabled her to appreciate herself in a new light: 'It was as if an undiscovered part of myself was explored. I was valued for my work and it made me a proud woman. I started to dress up and I enjoyed it. I had learned to hide my body and now I learned to be proud of it. I am a beautiful woman and I should enjoy that!'

She came to believe (as indicated in her letter) that 'if you are normal, you are sexually active' and it was 'adventure' that 'drove her' to have sex. Through having sex, she got to 'appreciate her body' in an ultimately positive sense. This appreciation of her female physique made her an even 'stronger' woman because she discovered aspects of her womanhood she had not known before. She also learned to appreciate herself as a professional, which reframed her gendered sense of self positively. In short, she began to approach sexual desire as a sub-set of her sense of self. According to her, through time, she distinguished between 'real intimate sex which involves my emotions, body and soul' and 'convenient [lustful] sex'.

Similarly, Pamela, aged twenty-two in 2001, considered herself a Christian and she valued premarital virginity. Throughout 2001 I saw her changing; as a result of desiring to be identified as a woman, she progressively started to engage in behaviour that she had previously denounced as 'sinful', such as kissing the French way and getting undressed with her committed boyfriend. Three stages characterized Pamela's situation. First, establishing a relationship with Emmanuel provided her with the status of being someone's girlfriend, a sign of being appreciated as a woman. Second, becoming emotionally and, gradually, also physically involved with Emmanuel, she got to 'feel

sexy'. This was a positive experience, it made her 'feel like a woman' and in contrast to what she had been taught to expect, it 'did not feel bad'. She liked it that Emmanuel appreciated her body and would comment on her shape. Third, feeling appreciated as a person and as a woman contributed positively to her sense of self. As a result, she felt encouraged to explore sexual pleasure).

The sensuality of sex – literally, how sex is experienced through the senses – is often taken for granted in sexuality research, so that sexual pleasure tends to be an under-reported aspect of sexuality. According to Abramson and Pinkerton, pleasure is the 'missing conceptual key' in much sexuality research (1995). The group of young professionals reflected positively that sex is above all about sensual pleasure or the promise of pleasure. 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 recognized as a powerful 'natural' force. Having sex makes people feel 'good!', 'happy', 'alive', 'in love', 'sexy', 'loved', 'strong', and much more – or, as Martha expressed it, 'making love connects my body and soul'. Many in the group experienced sex as a vitalizing force, and considered having sex to be literally and metaphorically healthy.

Nonetheless there are invariably paradoxes in relation to the meaning of sex. Whereas, on the one hand, sex is seen as a 'need' or as a 'natural' force and a self-evident aspect of adulthood, on the other hand, there is a lack of discourse on female sexual desire. Dominant discourses in Kenya represent female sexuality only in relation to procreation. Married motherhood is perceived as the ultimate womanhood, and women who are married and/or mothers have the status of respectability. Accordingly, female sexual pleasure is represented as non-existent before marriage, and as passive thereafter. Any talk about women's sexual desires exists either in terms of their capacity for reproduction, or else as something devouring and lethal, as in the case of 'prostitutes'. Women's sexual reputations are framed around these notions. Women take care not to appear sexually assertive, which is interpreted as a typically aloof attitude that is articulated as 'playing hard to get'. However, women like Martha acknowledge female sexual desire independent of procreation and hence make sexual desire intrinsic to femininity.

The biographies of women who took part in this study are structured by a popular story of 'falling in love'. In this discourse sex is linked to love. Women define love mostly as intimacy, companionship, mutual trust and sexual passion. In such a construction of sexuality, women have to develop a personal narrative reflecting their preferences and justifications in relation to sexual practices and ideas. In the absence of a positive discourse on women's sexual desires, women appropriate notions of sexual desire and pleasure by actively invoking the discourse on love. The way they define intimacy as a bodily experience contributes to the way sexual desire becomes a matter of

the self, of the sexual subject. Sexual pleasure, then, becomes a positive self-identifier for a contemporary independent woman. Nevertheless, all the biographies attest to the tension between sexual modesty and the new forms of intimacy these young women desire.

Among male young professionals the matter is somewhat different. For them, the issue is not about acknowledging sexual desire but about redefining it. Normative notions on masculinity represents sexual prowess as constituting masculinity. Men, therefore, define their sexual desire as a 'need', and regard sexual activity as 'natural'. On the other hand, however, men's 'need' for sex is paralleled by notions of having to curb their sexual desire as a means of showing male self-restraint, another defining feature of masculinity. Male sexual pleasure is therefore not strictly defined in relation to having sex with another subject, in the sense of sex as a mutual experience, because it reflects more on the individual's accomplishment.

The lack of a positive discourse on men's sexual desires in relation to intimacy has left young professional men in a state of uncertainty. This inter-subjective definition of sex undermines the notion that male sexuality is self-evident. David, for example, aged twenty-four in 2001, did not know how to incorporate women's expectations. Without explicitly telling me so, he came to confide his uncertainties by asking my opinion. First he would ask about 'female matters' in general but increasingly he needed advice for his intimate relations with women, such as what to do or say when his girlfriend had asked him to be more romantic when having sex. Most men, on the other hand, had a sense of what was expected of them but felt insecure about it. The men interviewed experienced this contradiction in their ways of self-definition, by communicating contradictory understandings of what it means to be a man. All of them recounted how intimacy is crucial for maintaining a 'committed' relationship. However, many men explained how they could not yet engage in a committed relationship because of other demands placed on them, mainly the pressure to develop a career and acquire wealth.

Nevertheless, the majority of biographies of men in this study show how men negotiate the meaning of sex by invoking the notion of 'modern men' through which sexual pleasure becomes redefined in relation to intimacy. Maurice, for example, aged twenty-seven in 2001, explained his decision not to start an extra-marital affair when a woman showed interest in him and despite his friends' encouragement, as a result of his love for his girlfriend:

I didn't manage [to start an affair]; within one week I told Nyambura about this girl and she was mad with anger that my friends had been encouraging me; she felt betrayed. I don't know, I couldn't, I would feel guilty [to have a sexual relation with another woman], she would find out at once because I cannot lie to her. And why would I want it? I am happy with her. According to others I was weak when I explained why I didn't take the chance, even to an extent that I started wondering about my own decision, doubting myself.

That shook me a little, but I still didn't want it. We, the men of these days, have to make choices. We cannot live any more like our fathers, I believe it's not right to be polygamous. I am a modern man.¹²

In short, many of these young professionals, both men and women, saw sex as constitutive to their gendered sense of self, as well as a mutual pleasure that augments an emotional bond between lovers. Sex literally and figuratively brings women and men together. Sexual pleasure was a symbol of a good sexual relationship, reflecting notions of contemporary womanhood and manhood and hence becoming an identity badge for an emergent generation.

However, there is always a flip side. When probing the personal narratives, pleasure and anxiety emerged as two sides of the same coin. From the young professionals' 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 and ambivalence. Feelings of shame, fear of losing or disappointing the partner, fear about violation of trust, anxiety about failure to enjoy sex or have an orgasm, fear of arousing suspicion—all these were experienced by both women and men. For example, many women deliberated endlessly about whether or not to initiate condom use because they were afraid that would arouse suspicion in their partner that they were promiscuous. Men recounted similar anxieties, mainly in relation to their capacity as skilful lovers. 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-problematized. Nevertheless the tension remains in these young people's personal lives, a tension exacerbated by debates about Africanness that position sexuality at the centre of proper personhood.

CONCLUSION

Young professionals in Nairobi picture themselves as Kenyans with a cosmopolitan attitude, calling themselves Africans. Africanness to them means testifying to an African or black commonality that they are proud of; it is about a kind of sociality by which they claim entitlement to Kenyaness as part of a larger African universe, dressing in elaborate West African dress or enjoying *nyama choma* (roasted meat) and a Tusker (local beer brand) before going out. Nicknaming, greeting practices, the rich popular culture, food preferences, flirting practices, and sexual pleasure are identity badges that signify the particular Nairobi culture that is their life-world.

According to Ferguson (1999: 214), it is 'dangerous' to be 'fashionable' in Africa because of the disrespect that this implies for non-fashionable modes of being. As the historical reconfigurations of gender and sexuality coalesce in a particular way in the lifestyles of the

¹²It has become commonplace to associate extra-marital affairs with polygamy.

young Nairobi professionals, it can be said that they embody emergent new subjectivities. Sexuality has become central for young professionals as part of their self-expression as modern subjects, but at the same time conventional social actors also place sexuality centrally by connecting 'proper morality' with cultural heritage and Africanness.

In Kenya, the debates generated by social transformations are about the very constitution of people as belonging to a cultural group, as women or men, as family members, or as citizens. Foucault suggested that the project of modernity results in sex becoming the 'truth' of the subject's authenticity. Although the parallels with the analysis provided here are striking, there is a difference. The preoccupation of young professionals is Africanness. Contrary to what is often described in the literature on post-colonial subjectivities, for young professionals in Nairobi the heart of the project of modernity is not so much about being modern as a preoccupation with being African. The focus on the tension between pleasure and anxiety of sexuality helps to understand the source of young professionals' ambiguous position. Sexuality not only entails the promise of pleasure and entitlement to modern personhood, but also harbours a potential for anxiety because of the risk of being considered un-African. For young women, this is because the dominant discourse understands female sexuality in relation to reproduction, and associates African womanhood idealistically with motherhood, wifhood and the gerontocratic gender order. When sex is disconnected from reproduction, it threatens their reputation as 'proper women' and hence their sense of themselves as respectable African women. For young professional men, the anxiety is of a different kind. The dominant discourse of male sexual behaviour has its roots in ideas of primordial Africanness that connect virility and sex. For young men, the new interpretation of sexuality sees sex not as spontaneous, but instead as controllable and partner-oriented; and if perceived thus, sex has the potential to jeopardize their masculinity.

The vantage point of sexuality enables us to analyse how sex is central to self-identification, as well as to the moral order, and to discover how these are interconnected with being 'African'. A crucial aspect of modernity in Kenya, however, is that sexuality has become romantically linked to Africanness. And thus, as the 'African avant-garde' in Kenya, young professionals find themselves in a paradoxical position. They are conscious of their position and their role in engendering alternative modes of being, and their quest is which course to take in what they call 'being modern the African way'.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents two themes: how young professionals personally experience sexuality and issues of cultural belonging or identification; and how these issues are interrelated in their lives. I identify ways in which 'young professionals' as a social group are in the vanguard in respect of societal reconfigurations of gender, sexuality and culture. I argue that this group embodies post-colonial transformations concerning reconfigurations in gender, sexuality and culture. I work out the complexities of sexuality and culture by focusing on public debates about African heritage, gerontocratic power relations and conventional morality, on the one hand, and personal sexual relationships, intimacy and self-definitions on the other. Finally, I explore how sexuality has become central to self-expression and how cultural self-identification is an ambiguous concern for young professionals.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente deux thèmes: la manière dont les jeunes professionnels vivent leur sexualité et les questions d'appartenance ou d'identification culturelle, d'une part, et la manière dont celles-ci s'articulent dans leur existence, d'autre part. Il identifie en quoi les « jeunes professionnels », en tant que groupe social, sont à l'avant-garde en matière de reconfiguration sociétale du genre, de la sexualité et de la culture. Il soutient que ce groupe incarne des transformations postcoloniales concernant la reconfiguration du genre, de la sexualité et de la culture. Il étudie les complexités de la sexualité et de la culture en s'intéressant aux débats publics sur l'héritage africain, les relations de pouvoir gérontocratiques et la moralité conventionnelle, d'une part, et les relations sexuelles personnelles, l'intimité et la définition de soi, d'autre part. Enfin, il explore la place centrale qu'a pris la sexualité dans l'expression de soi et la préoccupation ambiguë que constitue l'auto-identification culturelle pour les jeunes professionnels.