

The Genesis of *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*

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How two academic exiles (the euphemism is “independent scholars”) who grew up in a homogeneous, all-but-monolingual Anglo-American society with no experience of Africa came to write a book about African homosexualities, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* (1998), I can explicate if not explain.¹

I was a gay liberationist who read most anything I could find about homosexualities here, there, and everywhere. In 1974, in Montréal, I was one of the founders of the Sociologist Gay Caucus.² I was the one not doing research on homosexuality. I wanted to promote rather than do it, to read rather than write it.

As a graduate student at the University of Arizona, I had learned that research about homosexual men was seen as illegitimate advocacy. My first seminar paper bore the teacher’s remark that “no one is interested in your lifestyle.” This and some subtler pressure was supposed to turn my attention to other research topics, and neither my MA nor my PhD research focused on homosexualities. Nonetheless, I was perplexed that this pseudoradical sociology professor knew what my “lifestyle” was.

I can honestly say that I had no idea that I had a lifestyle. If asked in a more neutral way what my lifestyle was, I would have said, “That of a sociology graduate student restive at being turned into a certain—survey research—product.” I was not then even aware that much of what we did was “secondary analysis,” though the analysis was of US social materials.

Once relocated from Arizona to Toronto, I found at least tolerance of “gay topics” from my elders rather than automatic rejection and published my first “gay studies” as a graduate student in 1979 (based on data from Toronto).

As editor of the *Sociologists’ Gay Caucus Newsletter (SGC)* in 1979—having been chosen as someone with no particular theoretical (or political) axe to grind—I persuaded Barry Adam, who though born a year after me was de facto my older brother within the University of Toronto sociology department as well as being a cofounder of *SGC*, to write about the emergence of modern homosexuality. I was impressed by the typology of kinds of homosexuality organized by differences in age, or differences in gender, or not organized by status differences that he produced in a reply to my comment. As I looked at the available material from world ethnography, I thought that it fit his typology. I eventually decided that his fourth type, “profession-defined,” was not distinct from the age or gender stratifications of roles. (Others have suggested “class” and other categories.)

Crucial to my undertaking was encouragement of comparative thinking about homosexualities from Wayne Dynes, who so far as I could tell was the scholarship committee of the New York Gay Academic Union. He/they published my first critique of conceptions of (North American male) homosexualities *Social Theories, Homosexual Realities* in 1984 (there is a plural noun there, though not “homosexualities”), followed in 1987 by a book that was a model of the mix of analyses from me and some writings by others as *Male Homosexuality in Central and South America* (without the pluralization, alas).

Wayne edited the series in which the 1992 *Oceanic Homosexualities* appeared, as well as the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, and *Gay Books Bulletin*, welcoming entries and reviews from me. Moreover, he published a two-page bibliography on homosexuality in Africa that aimed me toward many sources in the eventual elaboration of his two pages into *Boy-Wives*.

I considered myself a “Latin Americanist” and had done some “research” on Latin American male homosexualities, added some by others to the expansion that became 1995 *Latin American Male Homosexualities*. (It established the plurality of the phenomenon being studied once and forever more in my writings.)

I also had accumulated folders of material on Dar al-Islam and sub-Saharan Africa. Expecting myself to be dead before the millennium was, I was concerned that I would not be able to turn these into companion volumes (I skipped over Europe, which I thought better covered, especially

by rising channels of historians' work, and persuaded the University of Chicago Press to publish *American Gay* [1996], which proceeded partly historically, but more topically.) At some point, I persuaded Will Roscoe to ensure that the Muslim and the sub-Saharan collections were brought through to publication. He did much to enhance readability and to spell out inferential steps that I tended not to explicate.

We worked on both books at the same time, though the publication order became Islamic then African entirely by the amount of time it took referees, editors, and publishers to bring out the books.

Will did not press, but he planted the notion in both me and the African text that role stratifications by age and gender were kinds of status, reinforcing the difference between each and what we called "egalitarian roles." The last has been interpreted as suggesting status equals across the boards, whereas what was definitional for us was the absence of a role hierarchy. What was popularly called "versatility in bed" or just the possibility of role-switching was sufficient for our analytical purposes. (The possibility of sexual relationships not being peripheral to self- and/or social identity was already central to Barry Adam's distinction of a "modern gay"/egalitarian type. There was never any belief that the "versatile" took the bottom role half the time, the top the other half—and some underestimation of intimacies not involving genitals, though I think the history of discourse has downplayed sex to talk about the less frightening (to social respectability) phenomena of "gender," so I have no regrets about my earlier goal of analyzing sex/sexualities.)

Along the way, Will's partner Bradley Rose translated some material published in German before WWII (though mostly after Germany's colonies were reappropriated after its defeat in WWI). (Then and more recently, I tried to figure out who Kurt Falk, who published two articles on same-sex sexual relations in 1925, was.)³

I remember that Will and I went to Stanford to hear a presentation by then graduate-student Rudi Gaudio on some of his research in Hausaland, which was of interest both as a Muslim and as a south-of-Saharan African setting.

I'm not sure how we met his Stanford graduate-student colleague Deb Amory, whose work was also interesting to us, not least in challenging the incoherent analyses of the same fieldwork by Gill Shepherd. I was puzzled by the different inferences Judith Gay drew about her material on Lesotho "mummies and babies" and that the difference in age was generally a few years rather than a generation. This fit with what we found elsewhere about homosexualities organized by age differences.

I can't ever remember being unaware that in one place (say Toronto), there might be a dominant discourse, but the other types also occurred (Barry Adam suggested as "minor traditions," though in this realm, the "great traditions" were not written ones, as in Robert Redfield's original contrast).

While we were delving in historical and ethnological records, some African despots, most prominently Robert Mugabe, were proclaiming that homosexuality (focusing on gender-defined relationships with denunciations focused on age) was "un-African" and was unprecedented recent seduction/corruption by jaded white devils. I don't know that anyone spoke quite so bluntly as that, but what we knew of early records, when there are very few white predators corrupting innocent black bodies, was that there were relationships between Africans who were like their same-sex sexual partners, including youngsters attracted to fellow youngsters.

We felt that we could make a contribution that was not just to scholarship but also to embattled practitioners of "un-African" perversion—and I think we did—with material from a range of places and times. The most persuasive and historically analyzed was what Marc Epprecht had started to do in the Rhodesian records, and I remember pleading with him to publish some of what he was finding in our book. He did so, and the historical material was supplemented by new material from the research of Amory and Gaudio after I heard a presentation at an American Africanist meeting in San Francisco.



A book leaves the hands of its authors and is read and used by others, especially those with lived experiences of what had been noted by hostile or by sympathetic outsiders (ethnographers from the global North).

Only two chapters of the book were told from the perspective of Africans with intimate familiarity with living same-sex desires in Africa: Nii Ajen's casual survey of expatriates and my own interview of the young Kikuyu who chose the pseudonym of Kamau. In that the Kikuyu was one of the societies for which the most extreme claims of "never among us" had been made, it gave me particular pleasure. I wished that I had met a Yoruba who could belie the claims made about the Yoruba, but even though the African Africanist Niyi Akinnaso to whom I was closest was Yoruba, he was unable to connect me.

The publisher of the book wanted a stand-alone title that did not highlight it as being a part of a series, especially a later part, so "African Homosexualities" was retitled *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*—a catchier

title, I guess, though she also burdened us with a hardcover that infuriated me by making any same-sex connections invisible to any but a few Africanists familiar with textiles. I was mollified by the paperback cover (with wooden figures rather than opaque textiles). I was bemused that the African book received less attention than the preceding Islamic ones; I thought the interest in Africans loving other Africans of the same sex was larger, constituting more of a potential market. If I was right, that market was untapped and the book not well marketed (while 9/11 increased interest in *Islamic Homosexualities* [1997], though that book has even less of then-current patterns than *BWFH*).

The geographical breadth has been noted (sometimes with cavils about getting “native terms” rendered right, a criticism to which I would reply that we covered many here—and many more in *Islamic Homosexualities*—and are not area specialists). (What were the area specialists doing? Not writing a better, more comprehensive book, though one was supposedly being organized at the time of the American Africanist meeting that included some other good historical research in addition to Marc Epprecht’s *Hungochani* [2004].) No one yet has refined the attempt to relate organizations of homosexuality with social structures, though I am well aware of the difficulty of statistical analyses in which an instance (that is, a society) might evidence all three values of the dependent value. That types A, B, and C coexist in society F is a problem for statistical analysis, but it remains a stubborn reality (“social fact”).

Beyond that, there remains much to document about communities varying in the extent of being silenced/suppressed (and their post-1997 histories), and I find there to be too little on which to model either a singular or a plural African homosexuality. Deciding what is useful and supplanting what is not are tasks of researchers who are now active.

I can say that I’m still more interested in reading than writing about these historical and cultural complexities! I wish there was by now a larger historical and ethnographic literature on sub-Saharan African homosexualities to be analyzed, and I may have missed significant work, but I still find the bases for generalization and comparison there as elsewhere inadequate.

To close, if there is a single moral of the story, it may be that kicking back at the claim, “there’s no there there,” and looking for it sometimes is rewarded by evidence that the “there” has been ignored and invisibilized but evidence nonetheless can be found. Certainly, the claim that “homosexuality is un-African” was and is not useful, and I’d go so far as to claim that it has been refuted by our book and the material it drew on.

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Notes

1. The Genesis of *Boy-Wives Female Husbands* was first published and copyrighted by Stephen O. Murray as a May 29, 2018, “*Tangents Online* exclusive.”

2. SGC, later SLGC et al.

3 According to the Namibian historian Dag Henrichsen (Basler Afrika Bibliographien/University of Basel), who has recently launched a biographical project on Falk (b. 1892), Falk hailed from western Prussia in Germany (now modern Poland) and, being trained in colonial agriculture, emigrated to German Southwest-Africa (modern Namibia) in 1912. From there he re-emigrated to Angola in 1922 where he committed suicide in 1924. Apart from the two essays on homosexualities published in this book, he also wrote about reptiles in these two colonies (personal communication to M. Epprecht on August 7, 2020).

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