

# Review

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*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa.* Edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005

*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men & Ancestral Wives* confronts the millions of Africans that have lived in denial of the existence of lesbianism on the continent with a reality shock. Its contents sit very uncomfortably within a culture that treats same-sex relationships as taboo, alien, unnatural transgressions. Not only do African societies treat any form of homoeroticism (same-sex love and desire) with disgust, considering it a grave pathological sin, but it is also listed as a criminal offence in most countries. Absurd as it may sound, if the law finds two consenting adults of the same sex making love, it would subject them to imprisonment (in countries like Uganda, for life).

*Tommy Boys* demonstrates the hopelessness in enforcing a “victimless crime”. The rich narratives of various lesbians from six African countries provide a rare peek into the complex personal lives of lesbian individuals. Participants were interviewed from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland. Through their voices, the reader learns a great deal about the lives of African lesbians – from the way some of them play out the dominant gender roles, including violence, to the delicate ways that they make love. The narratives include captivating stories of “lesbian men” who impregnated their lovers, female *sangomas* (medicine people) that secretly make love to their “ancestral wives”, and exploratory “mummy-baby” boarding school relationships. Each of the ten chapters opens with a photograph from the brilliant collection of South African lesbian rights activist, Zanele Muholi, which adds to the appeal of the book.

This pioneering book clearly highlights the different ways in which African lesbians face multiple oppressions on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, class, race and religion. It provides rich data to reveal the

complexity and diversity of lesbian experiences and relationships. Specifically, it explodes some stereotypes while reinforcing others. When Nokuthula, a South African pastor, talks about her commitment to her lesbian lover, for example, we discover that it is possible for individuals to live at peace with both Christianity and lesbianism (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 208-9). At the same time, Hans' (Namibia) construction of herself as a male lesbian who takes care of her girlfriend "because as her superior, as her boss, I have to take care of her so she must look good" (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 161), simply reinforces societal perceptions of the lesbian butch-femme role playing. In the pages of this book, the reader becomes privy to the feelings, attitudes, emotions, roles, beliefs and behaviours of lesbians from various African cultures. Each chapter is neatly structured to cover related topics such as community, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, same-sex practices, etc.

From the book, it is easy to discern the commonalities that run through the lives of lesbians across Eastern and Southern Africa. For example, the bigotry and homophobic tide that floods all aspects of the lesbians' lives (including South Africa where the constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation). The reports from different countries are not balanced, as some are more detailed and compelling than others. Namibia and South Africa, for instance, cover two chapters each, while Uganda takes only eleven pages of the book.

The most problematic issue with *Tommy Boys* lies with its methodological and conceptual approach. Readers that expect "deep" sociological analysis and conceptual insights woven into the narrative descriptions will be bitterly disappointed. The fact that the book was conceptualized and primarily driven by two white women who also co-authored each of the chapters written by the black researchers, is not lost on any critical reader. For example, in the introductory chapter of the book, we are informed that, "The project which forms the basis of this book was conceptualized... around Ruth's kitchen table when Saskia was spending a few days in Johannesburg en route to Namibia... The problem was that we could not identify sufficient African woman researchers working on female same-sex practices" (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 11). We are further informed that once the African researchers had been identified, both Wieringa and Morgan proceeded to conduct a training workshop for them in methodological, theoretical and analytical issues related to life history research on same-sex relations. The research itself was conducted in three quick months, in time for the 2003 International Association for the

Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) conference. The findings were subsequently disseminated in a conference session on African lesbianism organized by Wieringa and Morgan.

While the rewards of interracial, interdisciplinary and intercultural research are not disputed, it must be pointed out that a book on African lesbianism that is steered by allegedly altruistic impulses from researchers in the North (yes, Morgan is from South Africa but her “white privilege” places her on a different power plane structure from that of her nonwhite counterparts) imports several problems of perspective, positioning and conceptualisation beyond the specific topic under analysis. It is well known that most Africans misconceive lesbian practices to be a decadent unAfrican import from the North, and this has been the dominant approach of pundits, politicians and preachers opposed to same-sex relations. In this particular case, the approach adopted by Wieringa and Morgan only helps to fuel the misconceptions and myths surrounding the topic. When the two authors/editors make reference to “the respondents in our project” (Morgan and Wieringa, 2005: 324), it becomes very clear that the project was not “owned” by the African participants who engaged in it. The whole top-down approach is starkly bound up in what can only be described as manifest p/maternalism that smacks of racism and imperialist politics.

Regardless of the noble intentions that Wieringa and Morgan may have had, the end product value of this project was significantly watered down by the dominant Western voices that overshadowed and marginalized the otherwise important non-Western dialogues in the book. It has the inadvertent and unfortunate effect of “westernizing” the realities and experiences of the African lesbians who were interviewed for the study. The fact that the generic chapters on “historical reflections” and the final tying up of the case studies in the concluding chapter titled, “Present-Day Same Sex Practices in Africa” are exclusively authored by Wieringa and Morgan speaks volumes of the relations of power and intellectual hegemony that infuse every aspect of the project that led to this book. The review of the literature in chapter 9, though incisive, lies on the ethnocentric premise which ends up reinforcing the “othering” legacy of African women. Indeed, while over the past twenty years Western feminists and scholars have generally heeded critiques of their colonizing representations of non-Western women, it is quite evident that such sensitivity is yet to reach scholarship in queer studies.

The methodological blot aside, *Tommy Boys* represents an important milestone in the study of same-sex relations in Africa. It has opened the door

for a more comprehensive, integrated and balanced study of the important link between same-sex sexuality, gender oppression and African feminisms. It is certainly a welcome addition to the much-needed scholarship on African women's sexualities.