



## Review

Sara Matchett

*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa.*  
Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, eds.  
Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2005

The title of this book evoked paradoxical images that made me want to discover what lay between its covers. The provocative title is accompanied by one of Zanele Mubholi's striking images; these also serve to mark each chapter of the book. A lesbian myself, I was curious to discover what being a "lesbian man" entailed. I easily related to the idea of "tommy boys", having been identified as one as a young girl growing up. The notion of "ancestral wives" is also one I had encountered before.

*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa* is a culmination of a much longer process – the African Women's Life Story Project – that involved editors Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa working with a group of nine lesbian activists from six countries in Southern and East Africa. The women attended an initial workshop in Johannesburg in March 2003, where they were trained in ethnographic research methodologies, including collecting personal narratives, using audio-taped recordings and photography. After the training, the women went back to their countries where they carried out research into female same-sex practices. Three months later, they returned to Johannesburg for the second workshop. This involved writing up their presentations for the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) conference, themed "Sex and Secrecy". Morgan and Wieringa later edited eight of the presentations into book format. The ninth presentation, from Botswana, had too little material to be included in this publication (14). Even though the back cover notes that the book documents female same-sexuality in East and Southern Africa, my perfectionist self would have liked the title of the book to be more specific about this location. Africa is a large continent and when I first looked at the front cover, I thought the book would deal with the continent in its entirety. A tall order, I admit, but nevertheless, I felt the editors should have been more careful in titling the book. Will the next project extend into West, Central and North Africa?

The African Women's Life Story Project was initiated around Ruth Morgan's kitchen table as a forerunner to the 2003 IASSCS conference, held in Johannesburg (11). One can understand why the editors felt that hosting a forum on female same-sex practices in Africa would be a vital inclusion in the conference that was being hosted by an African city. I also agree with Morgan and Wieringa's claim that African lesbians are doubly oppressed (11). In a continent that has produced homophobic leaders such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, former Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi, Winnie Mandela, Ruth Mompati and others of South Africa,<sup>1</sup> all of whom have been vocal in their declaration of same-sex relations as a crime and un-African, one can clearly see how lesbians in Africa are subjected to patriarchal prejudices that render them marginalised and voiceless.

The leaders listed above have all clearly adopted colonialist discourses in their public discussion of same-sex practices in Africa. By declaring it an un-African import from the West (11), these leaders have ironically fallen into the trap of their colonial predecessors. They conveniently ignore the strong history of sanctioned same-sex relations between women in certain communities in Africa (see Chapter Nine of the book) and fail to see that they are merely "perpetuating colonial policies in denouncing same-sex relations" (13). By breaking this particular silence, *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, and indeed the broader African Women's Life Story Project, are instrumental in starting to reclaim and entrench an identity for lesbians in Africa. Chapter Nine, which comprises historical reflections, notes that in the past, research in this arena has been conducted by researchers from outside the local context. This book, however, is the first of its kind in that it integrally involves African lesbians as researchers.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first eight are co-authored by either Wieringa or Morgan and each of the researchers/activists. The last two are by Morgan and Wieringa. Chapter Nine, as has been indicated, deals with historical reflections on previous research; and Chapter Ten supplies the conclusions of the study.

While I found this book to be important, pioneering and timely, I felt that each chapter was too similar in its findings. While it could be argued that lesbians in Southern and East Africa experience very similar challenges (and I am sure to some extent they do), the formulaic nature of the documentation could also be attributed to the training that preceded the actual fieldwork. Given the diverse contexts of the countries involved, it seems plausible that the latter could be the case.



Without wanting to undermine the African Women's Life Story Project, or the processes that led to the participants collecting their research material, it seems to me that the subtle nuances of each specific context eluded the contributors. Perhaps the first training workshop needed to focus more specifically on enabling the participants to generate interview questions that were relevant to their particular contexts. I offer this as a strategy because the formulaic responses suggest that the researchers/activists were presented with or decided on a generic set of questions to take into the field. I stand to be corrected.

The second aspect that concerned me, given that I have extensive experience in facilitating processes that involve women accessing their personal narratives, was the apparent lack of thought and planning involved in sending the researchers out with stills cameras and audio recorders. The editors, with hindsight, state that these technologies became an obstacle for the researchers (16). I would suggest that if the African Women's Life Story Project continues, more training into ethnographic research methodologies should be conducted, and that particular focus should be given to exploring the creative arts as alternative participatory research methods.

I also felt that exploration into the women-identified respondents' gendered identities while growing up was lacking, while much attention was paid to the male-identified respondents' gendered identities in childhood. However, the editors themselves noted that this was "one of the silences in the interview material" (311).

Among the highlights of this book were Zanele Muholi's photographs, which accompanied each chapter. Her work has the ability to evoke a story in the body of the viewer, who responds viscerally, and this in turn elicits an emotional response. I found these photographs, though disturbing at times, powerful visual accompaniments to the written material. I was therefore perturbed to note that apart from the photo credits attached to each photograph, nothing is mentioned about the important activist work Muholi is engaged in as a photographer. Perhaps she could have been included at the end of the section on the authors?

Having been present at the original conference presentations, I was delighted to learn that a publication had resulted. A project of this nature is important on many levels, but the most important achievement for me is that this work begins to provide a platform from which marginalised voices can claim their right to be heard. A book like this expands this platform, enabling these voices to claim their spaces within mainstream academia and activism.



*Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female same-sex practices in Africa* is an immensely important read, and I hope that it leads to further work and publications initiated by the African Women's Life Story Project and other like-minded organisations.

## Footnotes

- 1 According to *Tribute*, a glossy magazine aimed at a black middle-class readership, "South African political leaders such as Winnie Mandela, Ruth Mompathi, Strini Moodley, and Bennie Alexander have openly stated that homosexuality is not part of African culture. They have argued and implied that homosexuality is a cultural import from affluent white Western cultures and a kind of disease that should be cured and a spin-off of the capitalist system" (August 1994, 54).



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