

SEXUALITY IN AFRICA

Early Modern Period

AFRICA AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Africa, and the millions of people seized in Africa and sent to the Americas, constituted the final major instance of European impact on sexuality during the early modern period. European religious involvement in Africa was slight at this point, involving only a few conversions in coastal towns. There was little critique of indigenous African sexual habits in the early modern period, and no direct interference with established customs. European men who did operate in the coastal towns did frequently take local lovers and sometimes sired children with them, even though in some cases they had wives back home. This was of course becoming a familiar European pattern, but the numbers involved were not large and there was no major repercussion beyond the coastal enclaves.

The slave trade did however affect marriage patterns in West Africa. And sexuality was undoubtedly one of many areas where brutal conditions deeply influenced the sexual experience of slaves themselves, while generating some complex stereotypes among the users of slaves.

Polygamy. Within Africa, the main result of the slave trade was a rapid expansion of polygamy, though this was not entirely new. At least 63% of all the slaves seized were young and male, valued for their labor potential, and given the numbers involved this created a massive gender imbalance in West Africa itself. Polygamy was a widespread response, creating family economic units that could utilize and support the excess women. The main focus was economic, but obviously there could be sexual implications as well, including a greater male need to demonstrate dominance.

Sex by force. For enslaved Africans in the Americas, and particularly women, sexual exploitation became common. White masters assumed that they had full rights over their female property. Some of the women involved might acquiesce in hopes for better treatment for themselves and their children, but outright force was common. And while attention centered on unmarried younger women, wives of slaves were occasionally coerced as well. Rape of enslaved women, sometimes in front of family members, was a means of demonstrating dominance. At least in a few cases, female slaves were also forced into prostitution to make money for their owners.

Motivations. Some male planters kept records of the number of slaves with whom they had sex, taking pride in their overall rates. Exploitation in some cases was enhanced by the familiar gender imbalance among colonial Whites. In French Louisiana, for example, young White men, unable to marry until they came into property, routinely took one or more Black mistresses, making no secret of their liaisons. Some planters explicitly organized the sexual initiation of their sons through use of enslaved women. In other cases, as with Thomas Jefferson, a White planter might take an enslaved mistress after the death of their own wife. Among many owners, enslaved women were seen as a particular source of pleasure. A common motto among Whites in colonial Brazil intoned, "White women for children, mulatto women for sex, Black women for work."

In North America, exploitation of enslaved women was also motivated by a simple desire to expand the labor force, particularly after the effective end of the Atlantic slave trade early in the 19th century. Women were forced into frequent childbearing, with both White masters and selected enslaved men (compelled, in this case) participating essentially as breeders.

New imagery. The sexual context of Atlantic slavery gave rise to potent imagery concerning the sexuality of African Americans themselves, the product of a mixture of appetite and fear. African American women were seen as inherently lustful, or as one description held, "hot constitution'd". They "made no scruple to prostitute themselves to the Europeans." This imagery perversely reflected the result of coerced sex – and the contrast with the rules protecting the virtue of respectable White women -- and also the fact that,

in slave auctions, women for sale were often stripped for inspection. In some cases, White women, resentful of what they saw as temptation of their husbands and sons, contributed to the critique as well.

Imagery extended to enslaved men, in complex ways. On the one hand, the fact of slavery could seem to emasculate the men involved, particularly when they could not defend their women. On the other hand, there were active fears of African American male sexuality, including stories about the exceptional size of their sexual organs. This imagery prompted characteristically violent punishments for real or imagined assaults against the purity of White women – a theme that would carry on well after slavery itself was abolished. The imagery also prompted explicit efforts at further emasculations. On some of the larger plantations in the American South, for example, young adult males were not allowed to wear trousers, given a skirt instead as a means of emphasizing their sexual inferiority.

Perceptions of those enslaved. Sexual tensions within the enslaved community ran high. Men sometimes sought to punish their wives when they had been assaulted by White “masters”; this may have been the most common reason for domestic violence within enslaved families. Many women themselves lived in fear. As Bethany Veney, an escaped slave, put it: “My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother’s emotions as she clasps her newborn children...and when that child is a girl...from her own experience she sees its almost certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slave owner.”

Disease. One other feature of the sexual results of Atlantic slavery and colonialism deserves attention: the spread of higher rates of venereal disease, readily transmitted back to Europe by sailors and military troops (where for a time it was known as the “French pox”.) The term “venereal disease” was introduced in the 16th century, as doctors, particularly in France, began to study the problem more closely. Sexually transmitted diseases were not entirely new, but from the early modern period onward they became an increasing concomitant to certain kinds of sexual activity.

Study questions:

1. What were the effects of the gender ratio among those seized as slaves – both in Africa and in the Americas?
2. What were the various motives for the sexual exploitation of enslaved women?
3. Why were there so many contradictory elements in the imagery applied to enslaved men? How might this affect men themselves?

Further reading:

The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation. By W. H. Dunaway (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Many Thousands Gone: the first two centuries of slavery in North America. By I. Berlin (Harvard University Press, 1998).

Slavery Unseen: sex, power, and violence in Brazilian history. By Lamonte Aidoo (Duke University Press, 2018).

19th Century

SEXUALITY IN IMPERIAL AFRICA

European characterizations of sexuality in Africa, as imperialist conquests expanded in the 19th century, overlapped with those in India in many ways. Western assumptions of moral superiority combined with some genuine shock; the concerns of colonial wives, eager to keep their husbands under control, similarly amplified the attacks.

Western presence in Africa did differ from that in India in one crucial way: here, colonial political controls were joined with increasingly successful Christian missionary activity in a number of regions – Catholic and Protestant alike. For many Africans, Christian sexual strictures were more significant than any legal changes imposed by imperial governments. In other parts of Africa (also under colonial control), Islamic missionary efforts gained ground impressively, here too promoting changes in relevant traditions including styles of dress.

Limitations remained important, as in India. Colonial officials did not want to provoke local resistance, and hesitancy often trumped moral concerns. For example, in northeastern Africa, both British and French officials encountered a widespread practice of female circumcision, imposed on young adolescent girls as a mark of respectability and clearly aimed at controlling female sexual desire. Westerners uniformly disapproved, as they became aware of the practice; but official efforts to intervene only began after World War II, and then rather tentatively.

Critiques. Attacks on real or imagined African sexual habits ranged widely. One European noted blasted Africans for their “hot temperament, their fickle and licentious personalities.” “They can only restrain themselves with great difficulty, and once launched on debauchery, they maintain the most execrable voluptuousness.” Native dress, frequently involving bare breasts for women, drew wide comment. As in other regions, African men were attacked both for being effeminate and for being oversexed.

There were some distinctive themes, often reflecting and reinforcing a particularly vicious racism. A number of observers claimed that Africans frequently engaged in sex with animals, particularly monkeys. Belief that African men had unusually large, even animal-like sexual organs were matched by occasional claims that African women lacked hymens, which was said to account for their inordinate sexuality. On the other hand, blasts against homosexuality were less prominent than in India – though colonial regimes and missionaries alike sought to inculcate more explicit opposition to any same-sex practice.

As in other regions, Western critiques often involved considerable outright hypocrisy. The presence of Western military forces brought increasing reports of rape, particularly during the middle decades of the 19th century, as well as widespread use of prostitutes. These behaviors did not prevent vigorous assertions of Western moral superiority, supplemented later in the century both by suspicious colonial wives and the growing ranks of missionaries.

Finally, relevant European impact in Africa varied greatly with region. British efforts at sexual regulation in southern Africa, for example, were much more intense than in West Africa, where legal changes were more limited.

Impacts. In several colonies, Western officials tried to limit the practice of child marriage, with varying degrees of success – though Christian missionaries helped in some cases. Some African officials also pressed for change. Around 1900, for example, one local man appealed to colonial officials to help a young girl who was being compelled to marry against her will. “I hope you will help her in the matter...She should not be forced to marry anyone.”

Missionaries also worked to introduce new patterns of dress. Traditions of polygamy were also attacked in the Christianizing regions, though actual change came slowly even when, officially, religious conversions gained ground.

Colonial pressures could generate both compliance and opposition. Many Africans came to share a deep resistance to potential same-sex behaviors – particularly where Christian missionary activity was strong.

On the other hand, other local leaders could defend earlier customs as a matter of incipient national pride – even defending female circumcision as a valued tradition.

Economic change. In many parts of Africa, economic changes had more impact on sexual behaviors than colonial controls did. The rise of mining and other industries recruited a growing male labor force. In turn, when the workers returned to their villages, even for visit, flush with cash wages, they often pressed local girls into sexual activity. And young women who did move to cities, like their sisters in other regions, might have to resort to prostitution to support themselves.

Changes of this sort, along with the European criticisms of African sexuality, prompted a number of local efforts to impose new controls on female behavior, from the early 20th century onward. In Ghana in the 1920s, for example, local African officials increasingly arrested young women on suspicion of prostitution. One leader actually issued an edict requiring all young girls to marry. While colonial officials occasionally attempted legal reform aimed at assisting women – as in making it easier for them to divorce – quite commonly they joined in the effort to promote male family control.

Imagery in the West. One other feature of colonial sexuality is worth noting, though it involves the West itself: discussions of “native” sexuality, and even photographs of traditional dress, could intrude on Victorian respectability in Europe and America. Even when framed in terms of Western moral superiority, the images could, for some Western readers, suggest other opportunities.

Study questions:

1. What were the main similarities in Western commentaries on African and Indian sexualities? Were there significant differences?
2. How was colonial economic activity sexually disruptive?. How were gender relations affected?
3. Why were colonial officials often more hesitant than missionaries in seeking to change established sexual patterns?

Further reading:

Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context. By Anne McClintock (Routledge, 1995).

“Wicked Women” and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa. Ed. By D.L. Hodgson and S.A. McCurdy (Heinemann, 2001).

Lords of Humankind: European attitudes to other cultures in the imperial age. By V. Kiernan (Serif, 1995).

Queering Colonial Natal: indigeneity and the violence of belonging in southern Africa. By T.J. Tillie (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).