

MASCULINITY ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Ouzgane, L and Morrell, R (eds) (2005) **African masculinities: Men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present**. Pietermaritzburg / New York: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press / Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 1-86914-063-X pbk. Pages vii + 308.

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This, somewhat ambitious, text makes an unusual contribution to the field of masculinity studies by engaging specifically with masculinity as it is lived, constructed and depicted on the African continent. As the authors point out in the introduction to the text, the aim of the book is twofold: firstly to “address the subject of masculinities in Africa” and secondly to “apply the concepts of critical men’s studies to the analysis of masculinities on the continent” (Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005:1). The book delivers on both intentions and offers a very diverse range of contributions on these two topics. Much of the material is framed within a post-structuralist or post-colonial theoretical frame and readers familiar with such kinds of conceptualization may find the material easier to read than those unfamiliar with this kind of social science scholarship. The authors include both African and other (American and European) scholars, all working on different subject matter relating to African masculinity. The writing describes the experiences of men and women and aspects of gender relations across a number of African countries, including Egypt, Nigeria, Zambia, Mocambique, Botswana and South Africa, recognizing that manifestations and expressions of masculinity are historically located and in many respects, culture specific. Although it appears that attempts were made to be as inclusive as possible, clearly some countries are better represented than others. For example, there are quite a number of contributions on or from South Africa, probably because of the familiarity of Morrell with scholarship in this country.

As indicated, the range of contributions is very diverse and the authors include writers from the human and social sciences who have different disciplinary orientations. Notably the contributors include literary theorists, historians, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists. While a number of chapters draw on aspects of psychological theory, primarily psychoanalytic ideas (for example in chapters 7, 8, 10 and 13), the material is not primarily psychological in focus, but broadly “cultural” and political. The text would therefore be of interest to those with an interest in gender and masculinity studies as understood

broadly within a social science perspective, rather than to those with a specifically psychological focus. The chapter authors take care to locate their material within physical, historical and political contexts and in this respect the social location of the actors is foregrounded with less emphasis on the possible interiority of gendered experience.

Given the broad spectrum of material addressed in the text it is not unexpected that it is difficult to draw out common threads on “African masculinity” and the chapters tend to stand alone rather than speaking to one another. The editors have grouped the material under various sub-sections which does help to shape the text to some extent. The 17 chapters are grouped fairly evenly under 4 key themes: Interpreting, Representing, Constructing, and Contesting masculinity. There is also a useful introduction in which the editors orient the reader to the aims and central premises that shape the text as well as motivate for the 4 themes and the content covered under each of these. Despite these attempts to create some textual coherence, the book as a whole should be read as a disparate collection of essays which are likely to hold different levels of interest depending upon the reader’s theoretical orientation and interest. The chapters are also somewhat uneven in terms of scholarship with some remaining rather descriptive (for example chapters 2, 10 and 12) and others offering interesting conceptual debate. This seemed to some extent to reflect the particular disciplinary traditions of the authors as well as differing writing styles. In some instances masculinity as the apparent focus of the text was under-theorized at the expense of other concerns, for example homosexuality, Islamic practices, fertility or colonial subjugation (for example in chapters 2, 3, 4, 9 and 17). While these issues are clearly relevant to an understanding of masculinity on the African continent, the emphasis of arguments was sometimes unsatisfactory and I wondered whether in an attempt to gather a sufficiently large body of material to warrant such a text the editors had needed to compromise on the centrality of the issue of masculinity. Some chapters read as if based on research that had been conducted on topics in which the interest in masculinity was a by-product rather than the primary focus of the research. Although many of these pieces were engaging in and of themselves, for a reader interested in masculinity in particular this was occasionally frustrating as one felt that the analysis of this dimension could have been taken further.

Overall, however, it is commendable that such a text has been produced at all given the largely Eurocentric focus of men’s and masculinity studies to date. What is strikingly apparent from the book as a whole is the way in which many African masculinities have been instantiated and performed in response to colonization and imperialism. The hierarchical construction of masculinity in relation to forces of race and class in particular is very apparent and many of the authors are able to make cogent arguments about the perversion of masculinity and its various forms in contexts of material and political repression. Although the idealization of traditional or pre-colonial gender patterns and enactments of masculinity is questioned, there is also an interest in examining how hybrid forms of masculinity may have developed in both conformity and opposition to oppression. Holland’s chapter on the book **Nervous conditions** set in Zimbabwe, Hayward’s on Egyptian masculinity as portrayed in **God dies by the Nile** and Vashed’s on indentured “Indian” labourers in Natal, all theorize such relations in thoughtful and compelling ways. There is also interesting theorization on how poverty affects gender enactment, in many instances preventing men from assuming powerfully patriarchal roles (as discussed in

Silberschmidt's chapter on East African men and Agadjanian's on Moçambican street vendors). This kind of discussion offers insights somewhat different from those concerning working class masculinity in Britain or America, and suggests that thinking about African masculinity/ies in context specific ways is warranted.

At the same time the power and impermeability of patriarchy and patriarchal relations across these vignettes of masculinity on the African continent is also striking. Almost without fail in all the chapters that address gender relations it is apparent that women still remain oppressed within the family, household and sexual arena. It is argued that women also often become the target of men's frustration at disempowerment under colonial and capitalist systems. To some extent it seemed that the displacement of relations of oppression by colonized men onto women was justified or at least understood within this kind of historical and political frame, with insufficient theorization as to why men's oppression by other men might "naturally" take the form of oppression of women, and in this respect few of the chapters are strongly feminist in orientation. To some extent the book as whole makes rather depressing reading and some of the material is shocking in its accounts of men's degradation of other men and men's degradation of women. Although the case for culturally and historically specific versions of masculinity is made in an examination of the chapters as a whole it is also sobering to extrapolate some of the patterns of masculine enactment that emerge across very different contexts. For example, enactment of violence, competition for dominance, sexual conquest of women and adherence to a sexual division of labour seems widespread. Although the final theme of the book is that of "contestation" it is apparent that challenges to patriarchal relations are few and far between.

African masculinities is complex pioneer text that hopefully will lead the way in encouraging further scholarship in this area. It offers worthwhile reading to those who are interested in being introduced to a range of ideas and debates on gender and masculinity on the African continent.