



Review of Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 317 pp.

Phillip A. Cantrell, II

For any reader interested in the history of non-normative sexual relationships in southern Africa, it would be difficult to find a more illuminating or well-researched book than Marc Epprecht's *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. Assistant Professor in the Department of History and the Development Studies Program at Queen's University, Epprecht has written a thorough history of sexuality in pre-modern southern Africa and considers how same-sex and other non-heteronormative relationships in present times have been shaped and impacted by the various manifestations of the colonial experience. *Hungochani* is Epprecht's second book; his first being *"This Matter of Women Is Getting Very Bad": Gender, Development, and Politics in Colonial Lesotho*. In addition to his academic work, Epprecht works with the Outreach Program of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe.

The book's title, *Hungochani*, means *homosexuality* in the indigenous chiShona language of Zimbabwe and was adopted for common use in the 1990s by gay rights activists to underscore a "proto-queer identity firmly rooted in history" (p. 4). Epprecht demonstrates that similar linguistic constructions have been adopted and used in other indigenous southern African languages, all of which are suggestive of homosexuality as "a state of being . . . rather than an opportunistic lifestyle choice" (ibid). Such constructions lend political capital to those fighting for equality for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons in Africa.

Epprecht's book supports this thesis by demonstrating the various ways in which "same-sex sexuality was known in pre-modern southern Africa" (p. 224). While admitting that "contemporary homophobes in the region are substantially correct when they assert that heterosexual reproduction was of paramount importance in pre-modern southern Africa," the author explains this by noting that "homosexuality as an identity or lifestyle choice did not exist when the pressures to have sex for reproduction were so over-determined by material, political, spiritual and other cultural considerations" (ibid).

Nonetheless, through the marshaling of voluminous evidence, evidence that includes prehistoric cave paintings, court forensics, literary deconstruction and oral interviews, Epprecht demonstrates that southern African peoples have, from the earliest of times to the present, engaged in an active accommodation with all manner of sexual expressions. The book begins with a consideration of how same-sex relations were understood and realized in pre-colonial southern Africa and carries the examination through the colonial experience. Various chapters analyze how the changing landscape of colonialism often facilitated new forms of male-male sexual relations, such as the "emergence of 'mine marriage' in the Johannesburg

area” (p. 21). Chapter three shows how the development of colonial urbanization and the prison culture fostered new expressions of female sexuality as there were “considerable numbers of women and girls in southern African prisons” (ibid). Remaining chapters consider the emergence of homophobic attitudes in the colonial context with a particularly interesting focus on how African nationalists sometimes accommodated and sometimes condemned same-sex behaviors to advance their political struggles. The book finishes with an examination of the gay rights movement that emerged in Zimbabwe and South Africa in the 1980s.

Apart from being a groundbreaking study of a topic that has received a paucity of attention in prior histories of Africa, few books could be timelier than *Hungochani*. Bombastic statements in recent years by African leaders in both the church and state have denounced same-sex relations as a “Western vice,” suggesting that homosexuality was unknown until white colonialists introduced it with the concomitant HIV/Aids epidemic. First among these was Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, who, in 1995, equated homosexuals with “pigs and dogs.” Though most concerned with Zimbabwe, Epprecht notes that several African presidents have issued similar homophobic diatribes in the years since.

Interestingly, after demonstrating the existence of multiple forms of non-heteronormative sexuality in pre-modern Africa, the author turns many of these contemporary arguments on their head by asserting that “dogmatic revulsion against same-sex behaviors, acts, relationships, and thoughts (that is, homophobia) was introduced into the region by European colonialists and preachers” and that “Africans were encouraged through these discourses to equate homophobic constructions of sexuality with civilization and progress” (p. 225). In short, *homophobia* is the Western import, not *homosexuality*.

Epprecht’s book has considerable relevance in light of recent events in the global Anglican Communion. In January 2000, the Anglican Archbishop of Rwanda, Emmanuel Kolini, presided over the creation of the Anglican Mission in America, a missionary province in the United States whose purpose is to provide ecclesiastical oversight to a currently estimated 15,000 American Episcopalians who left the Episcopal Church-USA over its growing acceptance of same-sex relationships, culminating in the 2003 consecration of Gene Robinson as the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. Actions similar to Kolini’s have followed in recent years from the Anglican bishops of Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda.

As these initiatives have continued to grow and attract American followers, they have opened up debates in both the media and in church congregations over the nature of African sexuality. This reviewer is concerned that many American Christians erroneously conclude from these debates that African culture is inherently *heterosexual*. As such, and in light of the recent divisive statements issued by African leaders and in consideration of the growing HIV/Aids epidemic in Africa, clear and un-biased analyses of African sexuality are sorely needed. Marc Epprecht has gone far in providing this in *Hungochani*.

Phillip A. Cantrell, II
Waynesburg University/USA
e: pcantrel@waynesburg.edu