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John Caldwell et al., "The Social Context of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa"

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In the early 2010s I struggled with the question of *why* (hetero)sexuality in my Tanzanian field site (2010–2021) struck me as being so very different from the middle-class (hetero)sexualities I grew up with in small-town California and later encountered in Finland. The presently discussed article, henceforth "The Caldwell paper," was the first (and last) that echoed my intense intellectual curiosity on this topic. Roundly condemned by Africanist anthropologists, sociologists, and gender scholars for being ahistorical, deterministic, homogenizing, ethnocentric, and colonizing (see, e.g., Nyanzi et al. 2008), it became a shorthand reference for everything that a serious ethnographically-oriented scholar in Africa should never do.

I argue that critiques against the Caldwell paper effectively shut down intellectual curiosity about the nature of sexual *difference* between societies on the African subcontinent and societies with Eurasian roots. Although research into African sexualities continued, it remained thereafter localized and particularistic, eschewing questions of origins and cross-continental differences. Differences in sexual practices, it is true, have been used in the service of sexist, racist, and imperialist agendas, interpreted in the global North as a sign of Africa's "degeneration" from an ideal norm. Yet without explicit attention to difference, Eurocentric perspectives remain the default approach to sexuality in Africa even though they have proven to be of little value in understanding the diverse richness of attitudes and behaviors on the sub-continent.

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My intention here is not to critique other critiques, but to give a cautionary example of how criticism of any flawed-but-pathbreaking work can quickly shut down avenues of inquiry into sensitive subjects, as reviewers strive to stay on the "safe side" of a subject (as I did for roughly a decade) and therefore willfully ignore evidence in their data. In my research as in the Caldwell paper, evidence has been persuasive in viewing *difference* as an integral part of a (ideally theory-generating) system.

The Caldwell paper's sources consist of over 120 ethnographically-oriented studies of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as their own field research from 1960s' and 1970s' urban Nigeria. In the year the paper was published, the grievous extent of the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa was just beginning to be understood. The authors sought to understand the reasons behind the AIDS crisis, and their main theorem was that high HIV rates could be linked to a single, unitary pan-African sexuality. They argued for the importance of sexual networks in HIV infections (a view shared by later scholars), and for the existence of a pan-African sexual system in which virginity, abstinence, conjugal ties, and "controlling the morals and mobility of women" (Caldwell et al.: 222) were less desirable than in the so-called Eurasian system. The authors' stated purpose in writing the paper was to demonstrate the "aggression" and misguidedness of anti-HIV campaigns in the region and to show "that the sub-Saharan African population is not a morally backsliding Eurasian population that can be returned by exhortation and educational campaigns to a pattern of sex occurring predominantly within marriage" (224–225). Despite accusations of ethnocentricity, the Caldwell paper in fact criticized previous research on sexual behavior in sub-Saharan Africa for departing from the historical peculiarities of European and Asian sexuality and for focusing "too much on the African system as the one that has to be explained" (191). The paper's authors made the key point there is no such thing as a "neutral" vantage point for studying human sexual behavior.

In my research on heterosexual residents from 35 different ethnic groups living in two urban, low-income neighborhoods of Tanzania (where many persons still suffer and die from AIDS), I have been struck by the open transactionality of men's giving money in return for physical intimacy with women. While the transactional nature of intimacy is by no means easy to navigate for the partners involved, in itself, transactionality was not seen as cause for shame or disapproval. There is a rich literature on transactional sex in sub-Saharan Africa, but the Caldwell paper is one of the very few to note that the "transactional element is widely present within marriage as well" (204). They also suggest that transactional intimacy and "parallel relationships" such as the long-term relationships between married men and 'outside' women known in many parts of Africa (215) can be seen as the less formalized continuation of the older practice of polygyny. In all, my interview data featured roughly 20 aspects that were also prominent in the Caldwell paper, including widespread transactionality; the importance of sexual networking; communities' tolerance of girls' premarital sexual freedom (even among Muslims);

sex as a legitimate source of self-esteem and pleasure for both men and women; and impotence experienced by men as a terrible stigma.

These similarities prompted me to ask: Are there differences between sub-Saharan Africa and mainstream Western societies in the ways that physical intimacy, emotion, social organization, and resources are organized? Why is money in sub-Saharan Africa *not* seen as the cold, rational instrument of exchange in intimacy that it is in Europe and North America, but instead as an expression of caring and affection, as the best gift that a lover can give? Lastly, how is this entanglement between love and money in sub-Saharan Africa linked to social and biological reproduction?

The Caldwell paper suggests where to look for answers to these questions by giving an environmental-historical explanation for how sexual behavior and attitudes are linked to patterns of social organization they call a "system." In this explanation, the Caldwell paper draws on anthropologist Jack Goody's work regarding cultural aspects of production and reproduction in Eurasia, which Goody defined as extending from the Mediterranean to South Asia, with China added (191). The authors drew on their sources to build their own contrasting model of production and reproduction in sub-Saharan Africa. The overall contours of their model, especially the value placed on *people as wealth* on the African subcontinent rather than *land as wealth* (as has historically been in Eurasia), resonate with the works of both earlier and later anthropologists of Africa who have emphasized the importance of having "wealth in people" and being attached to others in networks of economic dependence.

The authors' interpretation of Goody's model goes like this: In Eurasia, the good soils for agriculture and the development of the plow drawn by draft animals enabled a significant surplus of food. The land that produced this surplus was thus strategically desirable, and property and inheritance laws developed to guarantee access to it (191). Families who maintained and defended these plots of land sought to preserve and consolidate land holdings by preventing any claims of inheritance by children not born into same-class marriages (191–192). This was done by controlling female sexuality to prevent births out of wedlock: "Female sexual purity was maintained by degrees of seclusion and by males forgoing potentially useful female assistance in many areas [of life] in order to maintain it (192)."

In Africa, by contrast, the soils were mostly poor. "Plows were of little value, and, over great areas, the tsetse fly prohibited the use of draft animals" (192). Productivity in agriculture, therefore, could not be achieved through control over *land* but instead through greater labour input, which necessitated control over people. Lineages therefore welcomed additional children, "even those of uncertain paternity" (200). The emphasis on lineage rather than on the conjugal bond as a means of consolidating resources and bolstering family prestige meant that more importance was placed on female fertility than on virginity at marriage, or even wives' fidelity inside marriage. By offering one historical explanation for the importance of "wealth in people" in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caldwell paper laid the

foundations for a closer examination of *what is being transacted* in acts of sexual intimacy beyond money and pleasure.

The Caldwell paper admittedly suffers from a number of lacunae. Phrases like "African society" (193, 199) or sub-Saharan Africa as "an alternative civilization" (222) are gross overgeneralizations that were deservedly rebuffed by critics. The paper engages in an abundance of speculation and presents evidence that contradicts its main claims. Researchers having a closer ethnographic acquaintance with the diversity of the largest subcontinent on earth were right in pointing out that the article's claim of a "distinct and *internally coherent* African system embracing sexuality, marriage and much else …" (187, emphasis mine) could never hold much water.

The study was also critiqued for its methodological flaws. Le Blanc, Meintel and Piché (1991) rightly point out that the authors did not explain the criteria by which they selected their source data, and that they excluded from their analysis some studies that would have provided evidence for a broader variety of sexual patterns in sub-Saharan Africa.

Not all critics engaged in an equally close reading of the paper, however. Ignored were the numerous qualifiers in the Caldwell paper and the authors' admission that much of their argumentation was "hypothesized" given the scarcity of culturally sensitive data in the late 1980s. Critics accused the authors of gender bias, of neglecting a female perspective and focusing primarily on women's role in sexual networking, even when the authors had explained that the data on women's experiences was sparse. The authors were critiqued for using words like "permissive," "immoral," and "promiscuous" (Ahlberg 1994; Arnfred 2004) to describe sexual relations in Africa when in fact they had only used these words when quoting or referring to previous researchers with whom they disagreed.

Interestingly, most critics completely bypassed the authors' use of Goody's Eurasian model. Instead, they objected to the fact that Caldwell paper—already over-long at 49 pages—did not include the aspects of sexuality in which *they* were most interested or that were most prominent in *their* fieldwork data: for example how sexuality was historically influenced by indigenous and colonial religions or the prominence of modesty rules and kinship taboos regarding sex and marriage, points intended to counter the Caldwell paper's supposed assertions of African sexual "permissiveness" (Ahlberg 1994; Heald 1995).

In my data, sexual and material pleasures are intertwined, especially for women. For them, sex was not—as it has never been—just about libidinal desires. Sex was a way to eat and pay rent. It may matter to people in Eurocentric societies, but not necessarily to urban Tanzanians whether sexual desires "ultimately" derive from desire for genital-related pleasures or from the desire for food for self and children, or for the clothes that grant social dignity.

Persons of both genders also looked for something from sexual intimacy not easily articulated in interviews: they wanted their partner to help them manage their social reputations as respectable and useful members of society and to achieve socially normal personhood. I was told that for men, it was vital to be able to

penetrate, provide for, and pleasure a woman sexually in order to be considered a "real man" and receive social respect. A neighborhood resident who was impotent knew that his children were fathered by a neighbor but kept silent because keeping up the appearance of his own fatherhood was more important than reacting to his wife's infidelity. For young women, having a male intimate partner provide for her (in or out of wedlock) was seen as an important way to be "independent," to gain the respect of neighbors, and to *not* be financially dependent on relatives. Moreover, even if marriage was often unattainable due to male unemployment, giving birth to a child allowed young women to build their own uterine families—families fed through the mother's sex work.

Rather than simply for reproduction or pleasure, in Tanzania sexual relations can be analyzed as a social "glue" in exchange bargains in which men and women seek to prove that they are able-bodied, "normal," and "functioning." Sex becomes the mechanism—simultaneously symbolic and physical—by which such bargains are actualized and through which they are understood. Since men generally have more access than women to the resources needed to survive, money channeled from men to women enables this "glue" to maintain its hold. In neoliberal Tanzania, *money and sexual relations together* thus become a way of linking people in networks to create wealth in people. In this context, sexual education and anti-HIV campaigns based on Western ideologies have had little impact, just as the Caldwell paper predicted.

Researchers of what is called sexuality in any society need to understand how all its elements play out in relation to each other and how the differences across regional areas arose globally. The Caldwell paper authors (188–189) showed the possibility of broadly imagining how a regional *system* implies that different elements *co-create* each other. In the end, researchers of African sexuality could have used the Caldwell paper's idea of a system as a starting point for exploration, disagreeing with some elements and proposing caveats about the extent to which the system's features were culturally shared across and within communities on the African subcontinent. Instead, they rejected it outright for reasons that, upon closer reading, do not seem entirely defensible.

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