

sanctions. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki employed an American public relations firm to convince the USA to establish a base on Eritrea's Red Sea coast, and when that failed, he appealed to the Gulf States. Meanwhile, Ethiopia permitted its young women to be abused by wealthy Gulf employers so that the country could gain badly needed foreign currency. While there are exceptions, the relationship of the Gulf and Horn states gives meaning to the old Ethiopian adage of 'bowing at the front and farting at the rear'.

Ylönen considers Ethiopia 'the desired partner' of the Gulf States and Türkiye, but that is easier to do when he does not consider Sudan. While the Red Sea has been the focus of enormous attention in recent years, unlike Sudan, Ethiopia does not have access to the Red Sea – and hence Abiy Ahmed's current efforts to acquire such access. Nor is there anything comparable in Ethiopian experience to the interference that the Gulf States, Türkiye and Egypt played in the internal affairs of Sudan when they attempted to influence the outcome of the 2018–19 Sudanese popular uprising. Moreover, unlike Ethiopia, Sudan is part of an Arab-Islamic cultural milieu.

Ylönen's emphasis on the growing significance of middle powers is an important corrective, as is the view that, with their long-shared history, the Gulf and Horn should not be considered two distinct regions. Also insightful is the argument that weak states in the Horn have led to non-state actors assuming a critical role in foreign relations, and that narrow realist statist perspectives fail to grasp this important dimension. But he does not appreciate that the recent heightened engagement of middle powers and non-state actors in the Horn is a product of the declining power of the USA in the context of an emerging multipolarity, the most significant development in international relations thus far in the twenty-first century.

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Besi Brilliant Muhonja and Babacar M'Baye (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in Kenyan Societies: Centering the Human and the Humane in Critical Studies*. Washington DC: Rowman and Littlefield (hb US\$111/£85 – 978 1 66691 747 5). 2022, 256 pp.

This volume offers an inter- and multi-disciplinary approach, exploring conceptions and representations of sexuality and gender in oral tradition, literature, film, civic spaces and digital worlds. It also provides ethnographic studies that prioritize people's experiences in their everyday lives. As outlined in Muhonja's introduction and M'Baye's conclusion, the two editors curated a selection of essays by authors inclusively drawn from Africa, Europe and America using an *utu/ubuntu* critical framework that values inclusivity, empathy, intersubjectivity and the humane, centering a shared human condition.

As a whole, this volume emphasizes the significance of humane scholarship in critical knowledge production and approaches to African cultures, societies and living experiences. In her thoughtful and self-reflexive chapter, Betty Wambui rereads the Gikuyu mythological stories of Mumbi and Wangu, two female figures, with

the goal of queering the categories of woman/women, gender and sexuality to highlight their fluidity. She shows how the two mythological women simultaneously embrace and challenge gendered and sexual regimes, incorporating paradoxes and contradictions. The importance of this chapter also lies in affirming the power of orality and storytelling in the genre of biographies and autobiography as 'legible modes of theorizing' (p. 24). Similarly, George Paul Meiu uses the term 'queer' not to define the subjects of his research, but, like Wambui, as a tool of analysis that 'seeks critical potential in emic historical constructs of nonconformity, disruption and subversion' (p. 62). In his ethnographic study of multi-situated subjectivities that moves between Mombasa coastal tourist resorts and the Samburu district, Meiu succeeds in capturing subversive practices that link age, temporality and sexuality, analysing how such practices create potentiality for alternative futures while at the same time reaffirming normativity.

Rachel Spronk's essay shares with Wambui a methodological focus on biographical narratives, as well as an aptitude for reflexivity as a theorizing tool. Central to her diachronic ethnographic exploration of a group of young urban professionals in Nairobi is a departure from the more widespread positions that approach gender and sexuality solely as products of patriarchal and normative structures. Her study instead highlights how people who do not necessarily conform to normative expectations nevertheless rework such expectations according to their own life projects in free and creative ways. Following on from some of Spronk's insights, Joya Uraizee, in her compelling analysis of the film *Rafiki* and the three short novels that inspired the film, departs from the analyses of Africana and postcolonial literary scholars who focus primarily on the inequalities, violence and oppression of non-conforming sexualities. By adopting the notion of 'Afro-bubblegum', she highlights aspects of young women's affection, desire and love, celebrated as positive, and on the performative power of imagination and happiness to open up new future scenarios for queer subjects. Further studies about the relationship between queer cultural production and the Kenyan political economy would be helpful to understand how these potentialities could be realized.

Resonating with Wambui's chapter, Muhonja invokes the need to engage with motherhood in situated cultural contexts, rather than relying on universalistic definitions prevalent in Western feminist approaches. In her study of the Avalogooli in western Kenya, the author succeeds in highlighting, through respectful terms, the depth of power and agency of woman-mothers. In dialogue with Muhonja, Matthew K. Gichohi's analysis of the Kenyan political arena, and of male leaders' attacks on female candidates, shows the problems with separating women from their social status when their claims to social and political inclusion are not based on the assertion of gender equality, as in the Western language of rights. Instead, their demands are grounded in the social and moral status that comes from marriage, which serves as proof of responsible gendered adulthood and is an essential process in achieving personhood.

Miriam Jerotich Kilimo's essay shows how women's gendered and sexualized bodies became progressively invested with political significance in the debate around female circumcision between 1930 and 2011. Unfortunately, the analysis – which is focused on debates over cultural and human rights – emphasizes the conflict around political authority without taking into account economic inequality issues: through

the criminalization of this particular form of rural custom, political elites are able to weaken some ethnic groups' claims to land, undermining local livelihoods, their continuity and authority. In this way, elites delegitimize rural families' efforts to produce kinship, and, through it, belonging and citizenship, while maintaining their economic and social status. Dorothy Owino Rombo and Anne Namatsi Lutomia apply content analysis to LGBTI-themed interviews in Kenyan media, using such frameworks as *ubuntu* philosophy, which 'embodies an alternative mindset to the Neo-colonial after-effects of colonialism in Kenya' (p. 123). Despite challenging Western notions of homosexuality, which link sexual behaviour to sexual identity, they continue to use the acronym LGBTI, which recalls the logic of enumeration and often reduces people to their sexual orientation or sexual practices as an immutable identity.

In sum, this collection includes many valuable offerings for scholars interested in gender and sexuality in Kenya. The book shows how gender, rather than sexuality, is foundational for one's gendered sense of self in Kenya. It also argues that Western conceptions of personhood offer limited frameworks for understanding Kenyan experiences. The central role of intimate relations in the *ubuntu* philosophy of personhood also emerges throughout the collection. The employment of the human-affirming philosophy of *utu/ubuntu* as a methodological and epistemological principle poses a challenge to the current hierarchy of academic production, underlining – implicitly or overtly, depending on the author – indigenous knowledge systems and practices. However, a concern remains in reference to the failure to historicize the concept of *utu/ubuntu*, which the authors often treat as unchanged over centuries of colonial and postcolonial history. Readers are left uncertain as to its roots, its relation to Christianity, and how its values and norms have evolved (uncontested?) in relation to political, economic and social reconfigurations. Despite this minor weakness, the volume constitutes a political act of ethical significance. It is also an invitation to Western scholars to feel foreign in their conceptual assumptions. *Gender and Sexuality in Kenyan Societies* encourages them to expand human archives and to take African methodologies and theories seriously, which is actually what most anthropologists try to do.

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George Paul Meiu, *Queer Objects to the Rescue: Intimacy and Citizenship in Kenya*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press (hb US\$99 – 978 0 226 83056 8; pb US\$27.50 – 978 0 226 83058 2). 2023, 239 pp.

Every so often, a scholarly text bursts onto the scene and not only challenges existing knowledge and academic practices but also redefines the boundaries of intellectual inquiry and adds a splash of novelty to the canvas of scholarly engagement. George Paul Meiu's *Queer Objects to the Rescue: Intimacy and Citizenship in Kenya* is one such text. While many studies on queerness in Africa focus on human subjects