

**A "NON- PARTICIPANT" OBSERVATION OF A SOCIAL GATHERING:  
DIFFERING ACTIONS, RESPONSES AND ATTITUDES OF WOMEN AND MEN  
AT A DISCOTHEQUE ( MONTE CARLO IN NAIROBI, KENYA, AND  
DEVONSHIRE ARMS, CAMBRIDGE, UK.)**

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**Introduction:**

This paper discusses the behaviour patterns of men and women in a social gathering. It is based on research conducted in Kenya ( Monte Carlo, Nairobi) and the U.K. (Devonshire Arms, Cambridge). Although the title of the research is "a non-participant observation of a social gathering", the very concept of "non-participant" can be deceptive since the author attended the sessions and participated in the proceedings.

In studies of gender, according to Sterling (1994), it is inherently impossible for any individual to do unbiased research. In this regard, the author takes full responsibility for any bias or lack of scientific presentation in this report.

Commenting about studies in gender, the psychologist Julian Sherman (1977) wrote: "It would be difficult to find a research area more characterised by shoddy works, over-generalisations, hasty conclusions, and unsupported speculations". In line with this observation, the author found a lot of difficulties in trying to be an unbiased "researcher" clearly differentiated from a "participant", more particularly on the days he has labelled "Campus nights" in Nairobi and "African nights" in Devonshire Arms. At the beginning of his research, he happened to be part and parcel of the most common conception of the psychology of gender which stipulates that women and men as groups have different traits; different temperaments, character, outlooks and opinions, abilities, even whole structures of personality. Some researchers such as Connell (1987) have called these differences "sexual characters". Talcott Parsons (1942) has distinguished this as "instrumental" versus "expressive" traits which are supposed to mark the two sexual characters that correspond to the male and female roles.

In theorising gender, the role theory is the approach to social structure which locates its basic constraints in the stereotyped interpersonal expectations. The basic idea in role theory is that being a man or a woman means enacting a general role definitive of one's sex—the "sex role". There are, accordingly, always two sex roles in a given context, the "male role" and the "female role". Connell (1987) reports that the insertion of individuals into social relations occurs through the process of "role learning", "socialisation" or "internalisation". The feminine character is produced by socialisation into the female role, masculine character by socialisation into the male role, and deviant character by some kind of failure in socialisation (p49). Connell's observation implies that the concept of biology as the character determinant is not sustainable. The author confesses that his orientation in his "gender studies" class was more of "women studies" than it was gender. It is also true that most of the books on gender see things from a feminine perspective rather than from a dualistic standpoint. In case his work falls in this category, he blames his past rather than his intention. However, his confidence lies in the fact that the pitfalls in the study of gender had been detected as early as 1910 when a psychologist Hellen Thompson Wooley wrote: "There is perhaps no field aspiring to be scientific where fragrant personal bias, logic martyred in the cause of supporting a prejudice, unfounded assertions and even sentimen-

tal rot and drivel have run riot to such an extent as here" (Quoted in Anne F. Sterling 1994). It is unfortunate that we still strive today to rid ourselves of the biases observed decades ago.

It was in the light of these generalizations, stereotypic assumptions and the belief that women are different and must perform different roles or conform to specific "sexual characters", that this research set out to confirm or disprove.

### Site Description

The name of the pub where this research was done in Nairobi is "Monte Carlo". The name itself is enchanting to those who frequent this watering place. It is not unusual to hear the ladies who are regular customers mentioning the term "monte" whenever a dub music piece or reggae music is being played. The name Monte Carlo referred to a renowned economist; and in the circumstances, the naming appears arbitrary. It is used simply as a favoured appellation. This pub is located in one of the most hustling and uproarious streets of Nairobi. It is along Accra Road perpendicular to Tom Mboya Street and parallel to Luthuli Avenue. A spectacular building located a short distance from this place is the Kenya National Archives, on the opposite side of Tom Mboya Street.

The Cambridge site is a place called Devonshire Arms on Mill Road, just before a bridge. Around this area is a chain of Indian shops that deal in a variety of foodstuffs from all over the world.

### Activities

Monte Carlo boasts of a chain of activities besides the usual drinking. Activities here differ depending on the particular day of the week. Mondays and Tuesdays are undesignated days without any spectacular activities apart from music and drinking.

On Wednesdays, they normally have ladies' night. On this day, ladies have free entry, and they are accorded special preferences on the dance floor, and the announcer showers them with lots of praises. On Thursdays, they normally have Campus night. On this day, university students are encouraged to attend. Although each of them is charged 50 Kenya shillings (50 pence) for entrance, they are accorded much respect by the announcer, and the dance floor is normally flooded by the few who attend.

It is on Fridays that this place is fully packed. On this day, they have what they call members' day. Most regular patrons come with their friends for drinks, entertainment and music. From Wednesdays to Sundays, there are always performances and various other forms of entertainment, such as acrobatics, fashion shows, dancing competitions and ballroom dancing. These activities normally send the crowd mad and they cheer up and give out tokens of appreciation to the actors, the dancers and the acrobats. These "shows" help to break the boredom and inject some form of enjoyment and additional entertainment besides beer and music.

The activities at Devonshire include music and drinks. The days here are christened "Reggae nights" (Fridays and Saturdays), Ladies' nights (Wednesdays) and "African nights" (Tuesdays fortnightly). Attendance here differs on the various days. What is also conspicuous here is the inter-racial contact and socialising. Most of the black population on Fridays and Saturdays come from the Caribbean. On the African nights, when Lingala music is played, the black patrons are mostly from the African continent. The white population appears constant, with slightly higher numbers on the African nights.

### The Findings

Kenya is in a process of rapid social change and it is, therefore, under the pressures, stresses and strains occasioned by such transition. Values and attitudes towards certain things are often shifting. Because these are shifting fast, they are also often conflicting, confused or confusing. Certain cultural, political and economic changes are taking place. Under the pressure of urbanisation, new relationships are emerging and being adopted. In short, because of our people's desire not just to survive but also to increase their survival chances in a modernising world, new adventures in all human activities, especially in the social domain, occur and will continue to occur.

Pubs provide a place for women and men to release their normally suppressed sexuality. These places are seen as representing "equal time" for females in an arena, where until recently, only men dared to tread (Brackley, 1980).

A majority of women in the audience transcend typical gender expectations and act much "like men" in similar situations. Their behaviour is sexually assertive, often aggressive and in some instances excessive and exploitative. This to the author, disconfirms the widespread misconception that perceives women as less sexual and less assertive in sexual matters than men. Perhaps, this confirms Moore's observation that: "it is not that women are silent; it is that they cannot be heard" (Moore, 1988:4). The images, attributes, activities and appropriate behaviour associated with women are always culturally and historically specific. It would be very important to adhere to the prescriptions given by scholars like MacCormack and Strathern (1980), Ortner and Whitehead (1981a) when they say that what the category "Woman", or for that matter, the category "Man" means in a given context has to be investigated and not assumed.

There has been a popular worldview that biology determines the inherent differences between these two sexes. However, as Brown and Jordanovan (1982) point out, biological differences do not provide a universal basis for social definitions. "What cultures make of sex differences is almost infinitely variable, so that biology cannot be playing a determining role. Women and Men are products of social relations. If we change the social relations, we change the categories "woman" and "man" (p.393). The author supports this view. The reason for this is that having been born a "man" in a society where the separation of the genders is strict and the socialisation process very particularly explicit, the products are thus different. Comparing his observations in Nairobi and in Cambridge, this view has been reinforced.

Moore (1988) reports that our discipline, anthropology, has struggled long and hard to establish that cultural differences are not about peculiarities and oddities of "other cultures", but rather about recognising cultural uniqueness while at the same time seeking out the similarities in human cultural life. She gives credit to anthropology for its contribution to the sustained analysis of gender symbols and sexual stereotypes. She laments that the main problem facing researchers in this area is how to explain both the enormous observable variation in cultural understandings of what the categories "Man" and "Woman" mean, and the fact that certain notions about gender appear in a wide range of different societies. Since Moore was born and educated in the West, her encounter with the extreme male-dominated Marakwet community in Kenya (where she did part of her field-work) must have taken her aback. In the author's case, just like Moore's, having been born and socialised in the male-dominated background in the Third World, his short stay in Britain and the analytical observation that began in Monte Carlo have tremendously altered his worldview.<sup>1</sup>

Sherry Ortner (1974) expressed this dilemma even more precisely in her essay entitled, "Is female to male as nature is to culture"? She said, "much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between two sets of demands: that we explain human universals and that we explain cultural particulars. By this canon, woman provides us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with. The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolisations of women are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points the universal fact and the cultural variation- constitute problems to be explained"(p.67).

It would not be far from the truth when we assert that biological differences take on significance only within culturally-defined value systems. From the literature the author has gone through taken together with his observations and experience, he believes that sexual ideologies and stereotypes vary, but certain symbolic associations between gender and many other aspects of cultural life occur across a wide range of societies .

The popular world-view which is in constant flux has in the past conceptualised the difference between men and women as a set of opposed pairs which resonate with other sets of oppositions. In this regard, men may be associated with "up", "right", "high", "culture", and "strength", while women are associated with their opposites; "down" "left", "low", "nature", and "weakness". These associations are not inherent in the biological or social nature of these sexes, but are cultural constructs, which are powerfully reinforced by the social activities which both define and are defined by them. Those who have been socialised in a different culture from that in which they are expected to live later are always at loggerheads with the prescribed norms.<sup>3</sup>

As far as dressing is concerned, women tend to compete among themselves. Barnes and Eicher (1992) observe that hardly any society exists where some form of alteration or addition is not considered essential as an emblem of the person as a social being. They say that decorative ornaments that are added to the body (earrings, bracelets and finger rings) or markings imposed (tattoo, cicatrices, or paint) show a person's position within the society. Dress, in many situations in this regard, here included defines a person's identity geographically, historically, socially and economically. The individual is linked to a specific community or social class. Dress serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group, but simultaneously differentiates the same individual from others. It "excludes" and "includes". Textiles and jewellery can acquire great value as expressions of personal or communal well-being. This is well exemplified in the Nairobi situation as we will see below. In this work, we are more concerned with the aesthetical value of dressing and its functional nature rather than dress as a body cover.

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<sup>3</sup>There are behaviour patterns that are not acceptable to women but very much acceptable to men in the author's community. For instance, no young lady is allowed to smoke, express affection in public and dress in particular "unacceptable" ways. Men on the other hand are free to do as they please. As concerns "acceptable behaviour", the author remembers two instances with nostalgia: One, when he was severely punished by his father for having been found cooking in the company of his sisters when he was twelve; secondly, when they were punished in school by the Headmaster for having been seen holding hands with female students from a neighbouring school during a debating competition. The reason for this was that they had behaved inappropriately.

In this situation, women tend to dress seductively in a manner that is sexually appealing and inviting. They dress in a manner likely to endear them to a partner. On Wednesdays, the number of women in attendance is normally higher than that of men. On this day, ladies literally compete for men. They employ a variety of strategies in their bid to win a man. The most pronounced one is their dressing mode as depicted above. Most of the ladies put on the most *brief* mini-skirts and blouses that expose more than they cover. Ndun'gu (*Daily Nation* 4th Feb. 1996:16) makes the observation that: "dress fashions are self-regulating and depend upon people's culture, economic and intellectual emancipation. Imbalance of sexual relations make women more conscious of their outfit so that they can look trivial and satisfying to the male ego". Women are believed to possess a marvelous power to excite sexual emotions. Men always become easy preys in such situations. As the saying goes, "to visualise what you cannot see is the paradoxical pleasure of the mind". To see what you visualise, you need to ask for it or pay for it. This may sound rude and, or rather crudely economic.

Another common strategy is the application of cosmetics and make-ups. These include sweet smelling, expensive perfumes; modern and very stylistic hair patterns; shining jewellery such as earrings, bangles and necklaces which make them look distinct and appealing. As long as men are conscious of their ego, their careers and economic progress, women will always be sensitive to their make-ups, beauty and fashion. That is the source of their power. Here, the author is referring to the unprofessional woman other than those in high places.

Most of the women here would automatically fit the description of a prostitute. They may be called part-time prostitutes, sometimes referred to as the "beer-bar-dance hail girls". They are girls who generally have full-time employment but their jobs may or may not be very well paying (Gachuhi, 1973). This same observation had been recorded before by Emma Goldman (1972), when she said that the women working in the streets as prostitutes are not in it for the fun, but they are there because women's wages are low. "Opportunist submission" to patriarchy may be obligatory, given the different resources people bring to it. Basically, Gachuhi (1973) gives two reasons why these women are found in bars and discotheques:

- 1) They sell their sexual favours to supplement their income;
- 2) They are basically after a good time, either because of loneliness or because they are after adventures.

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It is worth noting that the Kenyan observations cut across ethnic communities, even though the findings cannot be generalised to represent the entire Kenyan society; and the same applies to the Cambridge data.

The author has a lady friend who has been in Britain studying from 1990. She is from Zimbabwe. She confessed to him that her problem at present is finding a husband from Zimbabwe who will accept and appreciate her with all her new habits. These include smoking and allowing her to go out in the company of her other colleagues without raising eyebrows. The man also has to be ready to lend a hand in the domestic chores, thereby breaking the popular public vs private divide.

To these reasons, the author adds those who accompany their partners to such places in order to have fun together, or to have a weekend off, or to entertain friends. It is worth noting that these groups of women are said to be very discriminating in the sense that they do not give their sexual favours to everyone who may approach them. They do not consider themselves prostitutes but rather as "friends in need". Inside this pub, ladies can be seen taking soft drinks if they are alone but change to beers and liquors if they have already made their "kill". However, this is not the rule.<sup>4</sup>

Let us now turn our attention to men and their strategies. Most men prefer dressing in suits, expensive shoes and good shiny silk ties that can easily and readily depict their social class and level of income. They, just like the ladies, use dressing as a seduction model. Men go as far as exposing their expensive watches. Most men put on suits on Fridays (member's day). On the other days such as ladies' nights and campus nights, most ladies prefer those in "big" shoes, a pair of jeans trousers, particularly black and expensive, and at times those in Safari boots. They also prefer men (teenagers) with fancy hairstyles and those who have mastered the appropriate skills in dancing to the tune of reggae music which most of them consider liberating. Cigarette smoking is the order of the day for both sexes.<sup>5</sup>

The other strategy used by men is normally the brand of whatever whisky one is taking. The more expensive the brand, the higher the chances that you will have female company. The brand is regarded as an indicator of the "pocket content". Some men also order their entire capacity at once so as to portray that they have money. This strategy appears to work well, as it endears them to some women who feel comfortable sitting at such tables participating in a conversation. This is not true of Devonshire Arms.

Gachuhi (1973) observed that where you find alcohol, you will also find men and where you find men, you will also find women. Money, men, women and alcohol are the four-some that go along very well in each and every society. In this night club, it is the male who loses the most in monetary terms. It is a man's nature that a smile from a well dressed, clean looking young lady always touches a cord which calls for a reciprocal response which for some of our men is answered by offering the "young woman" a drink or two.

The club strives to ensure an atmosphere in which the popular emphasis is music and

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<sup>4</sup>In Cambridge, women are not as dependent from an economic standpoint. Here, you find that both men and women buy their drinks. At times, women do the buying without any reference to a man. Some age differences were also observed between the Cambridge case and the Nairobi one. In Nairobi, the women are fairly young between the ages of 18 to 30 years. In Cambridge, the women are between the ages of 20 to 50+ years. It can be deduced from this that in Cambridge, we find a combination of both married and unmarried women, divorcees and couples. This is in line with the author's view that not all women who frequent such places are out to market themselves but to have fun. This could also indicate the amount of freedom in the "developed" world that is lacking in our Kenyan society.

<sup>5</sup>There is more smoking particularly among the women in Cambridge than in Nairobi. The concept of fancy hair style more particularly among the black men is common here and it appears very functional. A conversation with one white woman revealed that they fancy such rebellious hair styles.

drinks as the dominant motif. By extension, they talk of the beauty of the ladies present and shower them with lots of praises. The motif operates as a seduction strategy serving to normalise any unconventional signs or situations (Douglas, 1977)<sup>6</sup>. The club helps encourage heterosexual interaction between male patrons and female customers. The announcer plays a prominent role in setting the frame of behaviour. He or she encourages the female customers to approach the men with a tip. Females were frequently seen waiting outside the pub to get a partner, and in an attempt to initiate contact. They also expect these men (strangers) to pay for their entrance fee.<sup>7</sup>

On the basis of their belief in the manifest heterosexuality of the shows, the dancers enlist strong heterosexual imagery in their performance and work consciously to achieve it in their routines. The dancers attempt to exploit the fantasies of women, they employ a number of specific techniques (such as perfumes, make-ups) to enhance their desirability to the female/male customers. This is a stereotypically prescribed gender role usually attributed to females only. The audience normally reward the dancers. There is a tendency in female customers to reward the male dancers more than the female dancers and vice versa. The female customers regard the female dancers as potential "threats" to their chances of winning a man.

The monetary rewards also indicate that one has extra money that can be given out easily. The announcer encourages the audience to give rewards by praising the dancers, and by praising any one person who takes the initiative of giving a bigger reward such as ksh.200 (2 pounds) onwards.

The general approach of most female customers as well as some male ones is to try and establish eye contact with as many of the men and women as possible, and to try to break-down the social distance between themselves (Cavan, 1966:167).

Most of the performances and interactions have to be impersonal because large numbers of people have to be satisfied at the same time. Salutin (1971) observed that as a saleable, exchangeable commodity, it confers some semblance of normalcy and stability in the occasion, because, when participants do not know one another and yet understand each other's needs, the deviant act becomes much easier to perform and more acceptable (p. 14). The limited duration of the encounter gives the participants a feeling of unaccountability and invulnerability which can have the effect of increasing openness, such encounters offer the opportunity to learn about the other sex by trying out behaviours or by making overtures with a minimum risk of rejection, since it is quite easy to turn around and claim that the overtures or proposals were not seriously meant. Safilios-Rothschild (1977) says that brief encounters with strangers are an important way to test oneself in a social situation and to validate one's lifestyle of relating with the other sex (pp. 84-85).<sup>8</sup>

In this pub, some ladies are "aggressive", "crazy", "dangerous", "wild" and "dirty". Verbal and physical abuses are some forms of patron excesses. This frequently included name-calling and insults concerning one's physical attributes. This was mostly a female preserve.

<sup>6</sup>This kind of praises and related verbal outbursts are lacking in Cambridge. It is just music and drinks.

<sup>7</sup>In Devonshire, both men and women pay for their entry fee at £2 and not even a single woman can be seen waiting outside for a man to pay her fee.

<sup>8</sup>This observation is as true for Devonshire as it is for Monte Carlo. This pub offers the opportunity for crossracial encounters where individuals can try out new things including seduction with minimal fear of rejection and the consequences.

Another form of customer excess during show time was lewd behaviour which included getting on stage and making suggestive overtures to the dancers. This was mostly noticed in males. Female dancers could also take advantage of the men sitting in the front row and tantalisingly expose themselves before them.

In the research, the author observed the domination of men in the verbal interaction and the greater verbal abilities in women. This agrees with the findings of Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) which showed that girls have greater verbal abilities than boys. Here, the author found out that women ask questions in order to guarantee a conversational response much more often than men. The male usages of minimal response displayed lack of interest. A woman would make a lengthy remark after which the man responded with "yeah", doing nothing to encourage her, or to elaborate. The women also make minimal responses at times, but their most frequent use of minimal responses was "support work". When men are talking, the women are particularly skilled at inserting "mm's", "yeah s", "oh's" and other such comments throughout streams of talk, rather than at the end. These are signs from the inserter that she is constantly attending to what is said, that she is demonstrating her participation, her interest in the interaction and the speaker (Fishman, 1992).<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

Most of the data presented here call into question three interrelated assumptions about female behaviour:

- 1) that women are more passive than men;
- 2) that men are more sexual than women; and
- 3) that women are less inclined than men to take the initiative in sexual matters.

These popular assumptions notwithstanding, the research findings indicate that given the opportunity, under conditions supportive of and conducive to sexually assertive behaviour (such as the fabricated egalitarian motif and the heterosexual imagery and contact available at Monte Carlo and Devonshire Arms), the potential exists that at least some of the women will engage in sexually assertive behaviour and that some of the women may even behave in exploitative and excessive ways. Hence, under the conditions that violate the usual structural and normative limitations of society (such as traditional proscriptions, prescriptions and the context of female gender roles), a broader repertoire of female behaviour than has been assumed in the past may be observed. This conclusion is based on observations on gender from a sociological standpoint (gender as a social relation), and not on an analysis of the symbolic valuations given to women and men in any society.

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<sup>9</sup>This verbal dominance and abilities was also observed in Cambridge. Here, the women were more assertive and they did much of the talking.



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