

Imagi(ni)ng Bodies as Pleasure: Interrogating Sexual Identity Among University Youth

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Abstract

This paper examines how young men in Kenya are (de)constructing their body for sexual pleasure. The study is based on male students at the University of Nairobi. It seeks to find out the factors contributing to new trends in body and image projection. It analyses the distinguishing characteristics of these new trends in vogue. Finally, the study seeks to find out whose identity (local or foreign) emerges from these sexuality statements. In this inquiry, the guiding framework is hip-hop.

Results show that sexual identity among Kenyan youth is in a state of flux; the youth are under pressure to 'escape' from our rather conservative sexuality into the ever innovative and attractive sexual images of the youth in the western world, popularised by hip-hop. The sexuality of male youth at the university is increasingly influenced by the racy glitz and glitter of hip-hop, sports, the internet and the social scene. The key markers of this emerging identity are the unique dressing and hairstyles, adoption of special speech acts (American accent and *Sheng* dialect), spirited concern for 'sexy' physical appearance (including tattooing), obsession with casual sex, and a heightened lust for ostentatious material possessions.

This new 'sexuality' statement appears to copy western modes of expression. If there is any innovativeness on the part of the Kenyan youth, it is only geared towards gravitating them even closer to their western counterparts. Consequently, local bodies are increasingly glamorising foreign images.

Key words: Sexual Identity, Sexuality, Youth, Kenya

Mila (N.S.), Vol. 9 (2008), pp. 16 – 23, © 2008 Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies

Introduction

Generally speaking, human sexuality refers to how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings biologically, socially, politically, psychologically, and philosophically. Traditionally, sexual(ity) meanings are constructed to maintain racial-ethnic-national boundaries, by denigration of "others" and

regulation of sexual behavior within the group. Both adherence to and deviation from such approved behaviors, define and reinforce racial, ethnic, and nationalist regimes (Wikipedia 2007).

Young men, who are increasingly 'writing their bodies' from the margins to the center, appear to exemplify the concept of the 'body as text'. According to Simon and Gagnon (2003), "the self has become both a scripted actor and its own playwright, with an

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increasing emphasis on erotic pleasures characterising much of contemporary sexual life." In other words, they seem to have borrowed a leaf from the *matatu* sub-culture, which has gate-crashed into the mainstream urban culture, brazenly stating their terms of engagement without waiting to be invited. Much the same view is held by Carole Vance who notes that "sexuality is an actively contested political and symbolic terrain in which groups struggle to implement their own sexual programs and alter sexual arrangements" (Vance 2003).

The ongoing struggle by youth to (de)construct their sexual identity borrows from the same script used by the *matatu* operators and crew. Accordingly, "*Matatu* (sub)culture can be seen as a space from which a subaltern category, dabbling at subversion, talks back at the larger society" (Mungai 2007).

Sexual identity among Kenyan youth is in a state of flux. Their sexuality is increasingly influenced by the racy glitz and glitter of Hip Hop, sports and the social scene. The outward (manifest) markers of this emerging identity are the unique dressing and hairstyles, spirited concern for 'sexy' physical appearance, lust for casual sex, a heightened obsession with ostentatious material possessions and the adoption of special speech acts (American accent and *Sheng* dialect) as tools of seduction.

All these are disruptive affronts against stable categories of taste and privilege 'set' by mainstream society. This is a society largely influenced by religious sentiment as well as traditional values that put premium on modesty on sexual expression. 'From the pristine vantage point of religious, political and evolutionary doctrine, it is sometimes argued that the sole function of human sexuality is reproduction. As a consequence, non-reproductive expressions of sexuality are

Box 1: A Note on Research Methods

This research benefited from a wide variety of information gathering methods. First, I drew on library resources, for background and theoretical information on youth sexuality. Secondly, I used electronic journals and the internet for additional information. Thirdly, I referred to the 'trendy' sections of the local media for anecdotal evidence of the new 'sexuality' statements adored by our youth. The fourth method I used in this research was informal interviews with students in class as well as participating in 'chat' groups within the campus. A total of 138 students (64 women, 74 men) were interviewed. This phase was conducted between August 17th and September 20th 2007 at the College of Education and External Studies (CEES). Students in second and third year were involved. The research entailed an open and informal discussion of various aspects of their sexuality. No notes were taken during the discussions to keep the information gathering as informal as possible. Care was taken to discuss one item at a time, e.g. casual sex, tattooing, nudity and so on. Lastly, I observed the behavior of the 17 students (3 women, 14 men) and took note of what they said and did. Although the procedure for gathering information followed that described above, the sites kept shifting from campus to cybercafes in town. I was a non-intrusive observer in this research. Like the informal interviews, these observations took place between August 17th and September 20th, 2007. 25 students displayed tattoos, only 3 of them were women.

deemed illicit, immoral or illogical' (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002).

Having appropriated hip-hop and its paraphernalia, Kenyan youth feel confident to attempt a deconstruction of their own local narratives of perceived marginality. In this respect, Mungai (2007) notes that one of hip-hop's greatest achievements is to upstage canonical tastes, in art and dress, through radical irreverence. But the outstanding irony is that a local black body glamorizes a foreign.

I start with how hip-hop has influenced sexuality of Kenyan youth. As Kimingichi (2007) notes, "Hip-hop is an emerging culture that cannot be wished away... because it is the current and most prevalent form of expression." Hip-hop is composed of four elements: Rapping and emceeing, Disc jockeying, Break-dancing and Graffiti art.

Celebrities, who are the embodiments of hip-hop, have had a strong appeal on Kenyan youth. The youth appear to revel with messianic zeal, in the lifestyles of successful African American and Caribbean hip-hop artists. Which is why the sexuality of the following stars are held in high esteem: Kanye West, Dr Dre, DJ Khaled, Ice Cube, DJ Precision, Busta Rhymes, Snoop Dogg, and 50 Cent among others.

This may perhaps give credence to the fact that the Kenyan local scene is replete with hip-hop artists trying to emulate (imitate) their icons in the west. Kenyan celebrities who seek to mirror or shadow hip hop icons in the West include: Bamboo, Nonini, CMB Prezzo, Wakimbizi, Abbas Kubaff, Jua Kali, Redsan, Nameless, Pili Pili, Eric Wainaina, and Gidi Gidi Maji Maji. Their music can even be seen as a mime of American/Caribbean hip-hop.

Kimingichi's (2007) recent study of Kenyan hip-hop scene confirms the foregoing relationship. He draws parallels between the western rap and our Kenyan variants. In both, he identifies the rendition of semi-

autobiographical tales in intensely rhythmic lyrical form making abundant use of techniques like assonance, alliteration and rhyme. He points out that Rap is 'slang' for conversation within hip-hop; it is basically chats, often-improvised poetry accompanied by a well-known recording, usually disco or funk.

In the United States, hip-hop has been viewed as creative expression that gives voice to young ethnic urban population. Tricia Rose (quoted in Kimingichi 2007) argues that hip-hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experience of marginalization, truncated opportunities, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity and community. Hip-hop emerged as a new creative and flexible value system in a landscape stripped of value.

In Kenya, it can be seen as a statement of 'emerging youth identity'. The youth have taken aversion to prevailing socio-cultural trends and norms embraced by adults. They are wont to dismiss value systems cherished by adults as lacking in innovation and out of step with the modern times. In their quest for the 'fast lane', they experiment with new trends. In sum, 'hip hop' in Kenya is as much an expression of defiance, as it is a mark of separate identity.

To borrow the words of Mungai (2007), the mainstream society does not need to licence hip-hop's *insurgency*: on the one hand, hip hop appears lighthearted enough not to attract serious public protest, yet serious enough to attract perennial attention from the mainstream. Like a trickster, hip-hop appears to do and get away with virtually all manner of transgressions because at the end of the day, the public does not mind. This then inspires hip-hop to push the limits further.

In De Certeau terms, hip-hop appears to inveigle itself onto public consciousness by

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means of the subterfuge and in so doing, curves space for itself. By its very self-perception as marginalized and stigmatized, the technology of self-representation is constituted around creating maximum visibility (quoted in Mungai 2007).

The choice of hip-hop's rap as a sexuality statement by the youth becomes more subversive when we consider the fact that:

Rap's admissibility as music is still in contention as seen in its dismissal as 'noize genre' that grates against mainstream values. It contests modernity's definition of its values. By deploying rap as a cultural tool, its adherents stake claim to inclusion as legitimate cultural players deserving a recognized space. Rap is the contemporary stage for the theatre of the powerless engaging in ideological insubordination while celebrating the survival of the marginalized (Mungai 2007)

Sex and Nudity

The sexuality dimension of hip-hop becomes more apparent when we peer through the paraphernalia (accompaniments) of hip-hop such as dressing style, physical appearance and body graffiti (tattooing). On dressing, it is evident that youth are growing increasingly bolder with their choice of attire. Young men's trousers are not only larger, but also saggy with baggy tops. In some cases, young men are embracing 'topfree' appearances or shirtlessness as a fashion.

However the quantity of skin exposed is not the determining criterion as is the 'quality'. Similarly, some categories of the young men's attire suggestively follow the contours of sensitive body parts, especially the genitals. Barrenness in wardrobe should not only be seen as one of hip-hop's standard flags but as deconstructive of socially prescribed modesty. But these outer expressions are not an end in

themselves, but a means to an end - satisfaction of sexual fantasies.

Nudity is closely associated with sexuality in most cultures where some level of body modesty is expected. Which may explain why nudity in front of a sexual partner is widely accepted, but there may be restrictions - for example, only at the time and place of sex, or with subdued lighting, or during bathing with the partner or afterward, or when covered by a sheet or blanket, or while sleeping. By Jewish law, no clothes or jewellery at all can be present during sex; at the same time, it must be done completely under covers, and in complete darkness. This ensures maximum acuteness of the sensation experienced during sex and also decreases the risk of self-awareness and shame about one's body.

In Islam, the area of the body that should not be exposed in public is called the *awrah*. For men, the *awrah* is from the navel all the way to the area below the knees. This means that in public, Muslim men have to cover themselves at least from navel down below the knees. For muslim women, the restrictions are tighter (Wikipedia 2007).

Alongside the increasing levels of nudity among the youth is the widespread 'casualisation' of sexual intercourse. If one, for instance, considers sexual attitudes and dating during the 1950s, against present day practices, one will unfailingly notice a distinct contrast. In the 1950s, it may be noted that pre-marital sex was considered quite "wild" and not something "good" for young men and women. But in recent times, sexual intercourse is common after the second or third date. The attitude of the 'Generation Nexters' (dot.com) seems to be "sex first, we will get to know each other later on."

Young men think, "If I don't offer to have sex with her after the second date, she will think there is something wrong with me" (that is, she will think I must be gay or something!).

Somehow, it's considered 'unmasculine' not to try to encourage a date to have sex. No wonder, young men and women are increasingly stumbling into relationships they don't really want, only to find out much later (often after marriage) that they are "psychologically incompatible". Many of the ills grating against our current society—such as illegitimate births, abortions, high divorce rates and spouse abuse—may be linked to these so-called "modern liberal attitudes" to sex(uality). This idea goes hand in hand with the "orgasm centered" attitudes many men have about their sexuality.

In the book, *Men are from Mars: Women are from Venus*, John Gray (quoted in Relke 2007), argues not surprisingly, that men and women are very different with respect to their sexual and non-sexual needs and desires, and thus bring very different ideas about relationships to the table. Clearly, most men probably see intercourse as being far more important to their overall happiness than most women do.

The role of pornography in fuelling this sexual drive cannot be gainsaid. The youth are now accessible to the internet which has many resources on pornography. One of the websites frequented by the youth is www.---.com, which comes complete with x-rated video shows, Digital Video Discs (DVDs) and Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROMs). Explicit Magazines are also available on the streets.

And so is the growing use of the cell phone as a sex medium. It is emerging as a new avenue for 'talking dirty' and a masturbatory aid because of its active interpersonal nature. Online sex is here with us and the youth are embracing it with gusto. "Cyber sexual encounters are free from the physical constraints of space and time ... it occurs in chat rooms or using instant messaging technologies. Such encounters can be drawn

over hours, days or weeks with sexual messages passing back and forth at convenient times" (Abramson and Pinkerton 2002). Overall, Abramson and Pinkerton aver that pornography "powerfully portrays the idea that sex is pleasurable and extols sexual diversity ... but it challenges conventional morality in a provocative way by presenting people enjoying non-procreative sex void of guilt and shame It is not easily suppressed because it is a singular voice of sexual dissent."

An observation of students' use of the internet in cyber cafes near the university indicates a secretive fascination with pornographic sites. Informal chat with them, however, shows their shy reluctance to confirm this proclivity.

It appears that the youth are starved of intimacy, which may explain why they are in a perpetual mad rush for relationships. The youth crave for acceptance, loving relationships and deep intimacy, and yet they believe the lie that sex will satisfy their hunger. In this way, we notice the expansion of sex for pleasure over sex for procreation. The youth are concerned more with the wide range of sexual pleasures available: soothing sensations of the massage, the explosion of feelings that accompany orgasm, a swell as the alternative sexual practices such as masturbation, oral and anal sex and petting.

In this research, I did not delve into the 'hot' issue of the sexual orientation of the students. Homosexuality is largely frowned upon in Kenya and very few individuals are willing to confess such orientation. Which may explain why no student was willing to divulge or even discuss the topic any further. [Editor's note: For an initial reading of this topic in Kenya see Onyango-Ouma *et al.* 2005].

Beauty and Body Image

To maximize the sexual appeal of their bodies,

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young men are in a mad rush to re-configure their natural bodies after the 'perfect' images of celebrity figures. This is in keeping with the same trend in the United States, the hip-hop metropole from which young Kenyans draw their fashion statements.

While analysing the body imaging among the sub-altern, Mungai (2007) argues that much of hip-hop's agenda is tailored towards narcissistic ends. Its signifiers, such as corn rowed hair styles, sagging trousers, ear studs, heavy neck chains and false gold teeth, all bespeak a mode of self understanding that is out to destabilize the modest norms in a conservative society.

Matters are heightened by the local media keen to cash in on this emerging trend. *Pulse* (of Standard Newspaper) and *Buzz* (of Nation Newspaper) Magazines appear to ratchet up the stakes in the celebrity fashion (popular sub-culture). Kenya local stars (celebs), who have taken after their western idols, are widely glamorized in these two weekenders in much the same way local musicians are amplified on FM and TV stations. It appears that bodily appearance has overwhelmed other human attributes. The media is obsessed with those exposed muscles, since it is all about entertainment, entertainment that revolves solely around human flesh. But the irony is that their fashion statements are borrowed (imitated) and they only succeed as crude miniature versions of the main franchise names abroad.

Indeed, a research by Consumer Insight recently showed that although Kenyan productions such as *Vitimbi*, *Vioja Mahakamani*, *Wingu la Moto*, and *Makutano Junction*, hold a wider appeal over foreign soap operas, the foreign programmes such as *Sopranos*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Ugly Betty*, *Rubi*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Love is Timeless*, continue to take a sizeable chunk of airtime space on TV stations. One way of understand-

ing this trend is to examine the sexual images projected by the western soap operas. It is not hard to notice that the tantalizing characterisation of sexually active heroes in such prime time shows resonates with the youth much more than the local productions.

From informal talks with male students, I established that membership in gymnasias and general preoccupations with bodybuilding are a fad in town these days. All these are in quest for a perfect chest, perfect biceps, the right amount of muscles at the right places, and gorgeous stunning face. What an Adonis. The streets and social gatherings are awash with young men flaunting their 'bulging muscles' and hence, the high respect for 'bouncers'.

Tattooing

But the aesthetics of the body are never complete without tattoos. In the words of Terence Lindel (quoted in Kimingichi 2007), tattoos in the US are a political statement by those who feel excluded from the mainstream politics because people who have been oppressed or suppressed need an outlet.

This, perhaps, is the suitable explanation for the growing trend in which hip hop artists, especially in America, look at their bodies as a canvas on which they can express themselves artistically. Denied a chance by poverty to explore their creative endeavors in art galleries, the human body becomes the only personal space that one can undoubtedly utilize.

Bodies are either tattooed with group (gang) insignia, black heroes or anything to express a certain guiding philosophy. During live performances and in recorded videos, they prominently bare their chests because their bodies make a statement. The body tattoos are a daring statement saying, 'you know which gang I belong to, but it is my body, and there is nothing you can do about it'. They exemplify the concept of the body as text

(Kimingichi 2007). According to Kimingichi, the neighborhoods that produced the American artists were poor and neglected, hence, artistic expression through tattooing is widely perceived as embodying a sense of pride, beauty, and self-respect. These elements appear to recuperate their cultural pride, economic self-sufficiency, racial solidarity and collective survival.

Images pricked on human skin are associated with manliness or toughness. Young men want to be seen as human beings who differ from others because they express their individuality explicitly through their bodies. It may be noted that these images prove to be aesthetic constructions that surpass merely copying reality.

Another view on tattoos is provided by Leena Kent, who dismisses the earlier studies that linked people with tattoos to personality disorders and psychosis. Ms Kent observes that such views are now outdated and social exclusion is not the reason why people get tattoos. "People are doing it because they want to be socially accepted rather than because they are rejecting society's norms and expectations ... However, having said that, unfortunately negative stereotypes of tattooed individuals still exists in contemporary society" (quoted at http://www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattoo_facts.htm).

According to a report on the website *Tattoo Facts & Statistics*. http://www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattoo_facts.htm, tattoos and extreme body modification do indeed remain, for many youth, a mark of difference: Either as cultural indicators of social deviance for some, or as a mark of membership in a cultural group or as a rejection of mainstream western consumer culture. From the early 1990's on, there has been a huge increase in the popularity of tattooing among the general public in North America and Europe, a trend that has since spread around the world. Thirty-

six percent of those aged between 18 to 25 years, and 40 percent of those aged between 26 to 40 years, have at least one tattoo, according to a Fall, 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center.

Similarly, a Harris Poll, done in 2003, estimates that 16% of Americans now have one or more tattoos. The report adds that a third of Americans with tattoos say they make them feel more sexy. Make no mistake about it: the tattoo industry is hot property. There are an estimated 20,000 parlours operating in the United States, according to a U.S. News & World Report article, which said that on average, an establishment is being added in the country every day. Tattooing has been ranked as the sixth fastest growing retail venture of the 1990s and 2000s, right behind Internet, paging services, bagels, computer and cellular phone service (*Tattoo Facts & Statistics*. http://www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattoo_facts.htm).

My interviews with students revealed that they are in the tattoo craze. Some displayed their tattoos as fashion statements, largely geared towards fitting into their social groups on campus or in the estates; others have picked up the trend as one of the ways of pleasing their girl friends; but others simply emulate their western hip hop icons. The spider, the scorpion, rose flower, leopard, lion, and python appear to predominate the choice of tattoos among our youth. It appeared that the symbolic meanings associated with these tattoos were not lost on the youth. For instance, the spider and leopard embody the trickster traits, while the lion symbolizes confidence and strength.

What I did not establish was whether the youth have imprinted tattoos on their private parts as is widely done by western hip-hop artists. There was unmistakable coyness in regard to this aspect of the research. Therefore,

this is another area that may deserve additional investigation.

Conclusion

This study reveals that there is foreign influence for the changing definition of sexuality among young men in Kenya. If we take the image of university students as representative of Kenyan educated youth, then the spread and depth of this foreign influence is worrying. Hip-hop is used in this research as the frame of reference in defining youth sexuality.

Among its paraphernalia, hip-hop is resplendent in tattoos, pop music, projection of masculine body images, nudity, obsession with casual sex, insatiable aspiration towards material glitz and glitter, and vulgarity of language (*sheng* and slang).

The syncretism of these paraphernalia appears to be a recipe for rebellion against conservative social norms. The research shows that hip-hop grates rather painfully against the established society in Kenya and with as much ferocity in western societies.

It is interesting to note that the 'sexuality statement' of the youth resonates with foreign content, exotic spices and unfamiliar adornments. We are yet to see our 'generation nexters' attempt a concerted well-thought-out home-grown sexuality statement. Are the youth running away because the local socio-cultural scene is 'conservative, archaic and laid back'?

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