

AFRICA/HISTORY/YOUTH

"This is a rich collection of essays about the concepts of generations and youth in East Africa from the nineteenth century until the present. The chronological reach, the originality of the sources, the clarity of presentation and excellent writing all make it an attractive college text."

—Lidwien Kapteijns, Kendall/Hodder Professor of History at Wellesley College

Contemporary Africa is demographically characterized above all else by its youthfulness. In East Africa the median age of the population is now a striking 17.5 years, and more than 65 percent of the population is age 24 or under. This situation has attracted growing scholarly attention, resulting in an important and rapidly expanding literature on the contemporary role of youth in African societies. Nevertheless, the literature thus far has largely neglected the historical dimension. *Generations Past* seeks to address this gap through a wide-ranging selection of essays covering an array of youth-related themes in historical perspective.

Thirteen chapters explore the historical dimensions of youth in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century Ugandan, Tanzanian, and Kenyan societies. The essays address the issues of youth as historical agents of change, inter-generational relations, sex and gender roles, and the analytical utility of youth as a social category. The strong list of contributors includes prominent scholars of the region, encompassing a good geographical spread of all three East African countries.

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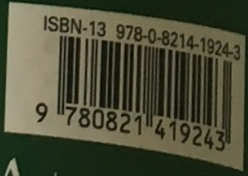
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EDS.

**Generations Past**  
YOUTH IN EAST AFRICAN HISTORY

# Generations Past

YOUTH IN  
EAST AFRICAN  
HISTORY

EDITED BY  
**Andrew Burton and Hélène Charton-Bigot**



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## "Ruined Lives"

*An Analysis of Gender Relations, Youth Sexual Behavior,  
and HIV and AIDS in Early Twenty-First-Century Kenya*

JOYCE NYAIRO AND EUNICE KAMAARA

**HIV AND AIDS** remains one of the major challenges to human life in the world. Over the past twenty-two years HIV has infected more than 35 million people, killing millions and leaving 14 million children orphaned.<sup>1</sup> In spite of all efforts to control the epidemic, the situation has been worsening; the prevalence of HIV continues to increase at an alarming rate. Sub-Saharan Africa suffers the greatest toll, where HIV prevalence has shot up from less than 1 million people in 1985 to 27.9 million in 2003, with 2.3 million people having died of AIDS and 3.2 million newly infected with HIV in 2003.<sup>2</sup> Although the region has only 10 percent of the world's population, it contains over 75 percent of all people living with HIV and has over 10 million children orphaned by the scourge. Since 2005 some decline in HIV prevalence is being witnessed in some countries in the continent, but this is not significant.

Youth, especially female youth, suffer the brunt of the epidemic in the region. Speaking at an international AIDS conference in 2004, Peter Piot, the executive director of the joint United Nations program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), described the "feminization of HIV/AIDS" and observed that the African woman is the "face of HIV/AIDS." Young women are particularly vulnerable. In sub-Saharan Africa "young girls and women 15–24 years of age have 2–8 times higher infection rates than men of the same age." Of the total 25.7 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa in 2001, 14.6 million were women within the fifteen to forty-nine age group.<sup>3</sup> Women in Africa are being infected at an earlier age and by older men. On average there are thirteen HIV positive women for every ten such men in sub-Saharan Africa. Besides the biological factors that make women and girls more vulnerable to HIV infection, sociocultural factors related to the low status of women account for this disparity.

In Kenya, statistics indicate that 1.1 million adults ages fifteen to forty-nine are living with HIV, with the rates of infection in women nearly double the rates in men.<sup>4</sup> Although new infections in young women are said to have significantly

declined in the last five years according to data collected from pregnant women under the age of twenty-five, the Ministry of Health in Kenya notes: "HIV prevalence in girls 15 to 19 years old is 6 times higher than in boys in the same age group, despite lower levels of sexual activity, and the rate in pregnant teens is even higher. Protecting teenage girls and young women remains a great challenge for controlling HIV infection in Kenya."<sup>5</sup>

Although statistics provide a quantitatively measurable, easy, and important way of presenting situations, they are not accurate presentations of human situations, especially with regard to human attitudes and behavior. Hence having set out the above statistical data, in this chapter we go on to analyze qualitative data to propound and advance our argument that controlling HIV and AIDS among youth in Kenya will remain a great challenge if we continue to focus only on statistics rather than interpreting these statistics alongside sociocultural systems and structures. We concentrate on the sociocultural definitions and expectations of femininity and masculinity in contemporary Kenya in relation to youth sexuality and, more specifically, the vulnerability of female youth. Generally, unequal gender relations, characterized by male dominance and female subordination, continue to be manifested in Kenya in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Further we advance the argument that the continued presentation of the HIV and AIDS situation as hopeless and helpless in a context marked by unequal, complex, and inconsistent gender relations serves to worsen the situation rather than to address the challenge.

This chapter uses the idea of urban legends to decode Kenyan youth sexuality and gender relations in the context of HIV and AIDS. Such decoding of present realities necessarily involves a historical analysis of experiences of young people because of the influence of the past on the present. Hence the first section of this paper discusses precolonial gender relations and the impact of colonialism on institutions and processes of socialization that led to erosion of values in human relationships. The second section then seeks to decode contemporary gender relations among Kenyan youth in the context of HIV and AIDS.

Youth may be defined subjectively from different perspectives depending on the context in which it is discussed. Generally, however, youth is a period of physiological, mental, and spiritual transition in the process of human development from childhood to adulthood. Demographers agree that the period of youth ranges from eleven to twenty-four years of age, though puberty, the physical indication of onset of youth, is experienced at different ages in different parts of the world. In this context, we adopt the demographic definition of youth.

### Gender Relations and Youth Sexuality in Kenya: A Historical Perspective

Traditional African societies had a clear process of socialization through which individual members learned of sociocultural expectations with regard to specific issues such as gender relations in sexual encounters.<sup>6</sup> This process, as all other processes, was a religious one in that the societies believed in divine presence,

guidance, and support through its implementation.<sup>7</sup> The socialization process was marked by initiation rites that marked graduation from one stage in life to the next—from birth to childhood to adulthood to elderhood and to ancestorhood. This process of socialization provided lifetime education. As individuals graduated from one stage to another, their knowledge and application of sociocultural values widened and intensified. Although inculcation of expected gender relations in sexual behavior was a lifelong education process, initiation from childhood to adulthood marked the specific moment in which gender awareness was intensified and emphasized especially in relation to sexual life. Indeed, the fact that initiation typically occurs at the critical psychosexual stage of human development dramatizes and makes explicit the difference between male and female social and sexual roles as well as the expected relations between the two sexes. Moreover, in most traditional African societies, initiation involves modification of sexual organs, an act that clearly indicates the sexual significance of this process.

Commenting on the relevance of the initiation process in traditional African societies, John S. Mbiti observes that it is only after initiation that individuals are allowed to share in the full privileges and duties of their people; it is only after initiation that individuals enter into a state of responsibility where they have rights and obligations as men and women.

The initiation rites prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family responsibilities. . . . Initiation rites have a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge, which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated. It is a period of awakening to many things, a period of dawn for the young. They learn to endure hardships, they learn to live with one another, they learn to obey, they learn the secrets and mysteries of man/woman relationships.<sup>8</sup>

Judith Bahemuka Mbula concurs with Mbiti when she affirms that in traditional African societies, it is not birth, but socialization and initiation that make a person a member of his /her community.<sup>9</sup> Karen Erickson Paige and Jeffrey M. Paige note that the initiation rite in Africa provides the critical moment of becoming male or female, the moment when female power is diminished and male power is enhanced and validated.<sup>10</sup> Margarethe Silberschmidt, in reference to the Kisii of Kenya, observes that female initiation involves excising a girl's masculine element to remove female aggression and to control her sexual excitement whereas the male initiation, on the contrary, is believed to be the removal of fear to enable the man to gain control, especially over women.<sup>11</sup>

There are variations in the initiation process from one ethnic group to the other. Nevertheless, the meaning and significance of these varied practices in instilling manhood (and the attendant masculinity) and womanhood (and the attendant femininity) are similar. Initiation from childhood to adulthood, highlighted by circumcision of boys and clitoridectomy for girls in many African societies, served the same purpose of attaining maturity and belonging. It is:

public confirmation of the rights of the individual to become an adult person. Thus initiation moves each gender into a new social world, and childhood comes to an end . . . serves to underpin not only the making of male and female identities—but in particular the difference between these identities. Through the rituals, the moral code for each gender is taught and new restraints are imposed on individuals—to replace an immediate source of authority embodied in the parent with the simultaneously remote and internal one of social obligation.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of social value system, what is expected of males is opposed to what is expected of females. Silberschmidt notes, "What is appropriate behaviour and gives social value to a man is certainly not appropriate for a woman and vice-versa. It is morality in which—when speaking in sexual terms—virtue is at stake. Not men's virtue but that of young girls and in particular a wife's virtue."<sup>13</sup>

The instructions that girls received during initiation on marital relations included how to treat their husbands in bed, how to be attractive, and how to raise children, all feminine roles which calls for subordination to the man. In contrast, boys received instruction on how to command authority and respect from their wives as husbands.

On initiation, girls and boys assumed labels as members of certain age-groups, age-sets, and generation. It was prestigious to acquire such identities, and the initiation rite was largely desired by the youth. This system of socialization of boys and girls into responsible adulthood, though lacking in gender justice, served the community well, especially in terms of marriage and family stability. It would probably be in place in Kenya today had British colonization not caused its disruption. Clitoridectomy was condemned outright by the colonizers, and the entire initiation process eroded as a new system of formal education was introduced. Unfortunately, the new system did not address gender and sexual education, thus leaving young people neglected, ignorant, and vulnerable to rapid uncoordinated social change.

The socialization process in traditional African societies was holistic and extended into all areas of life. Initiation from childhood to adulthood was not just about gender relations and sexuality but also about instilling self-esteem in young people and training them for responsible adulthood. Traditionally, for example, over the period of seclusion after circumcision young men received instructions on the value and ethics of work and the defense of their societies in case of war. Erosion of traditional forms of socialization has therefore left young people neglected, ignorant, and vulnerable not only in the area of gender relations but in many other areas. Through the colonial period traditional societies struggled to retain the socialization process, though this was often internally contested (see, for example, Richard Waller's discussion of Maasai murranshood in chapter 6). However, the demands of modern life, notably formal education and employment, have taken their toll on traditional methods of socialization. In postcolonial Kenya, socioeconomic and cultural change has created the uncoordinated and haphazard adoption of new thinking and values, which have only served to complicate the

situation. For example, the development and popularization of gender empowerment programs which antagonize men and women in the name of gender equality has adversely shaken the foundation on which the African family. The bottom line is that whole societies suffer the consequences of not preparing young people for adult life. The advent of HIV and AIDS has served to worsen the implications of neglecting sexual and gender education for youth. Attempts by individual young men and women not just to cope but to survive in a situation of confusion and ignorance have unfolded in various tragedies, many of them translating into hopelessness. In the following section we present such tragedies as we seek to decode youth sexuality and gender relations among the youth in Kenya today in the context of HIV and AIDS.

### Decoding Youth Sexuality and Gender Relations among Kenyan Youth in the Context of HIV and AIDS

Two narratives, the first a confessional letter that was purportedly posted on a university notice board by "N.P.," a student, and the second the title story by Macharia Mwangi in the collection *Reversed Dreams* (1998), provide the data for this section. N.P. titled "her" confession "Ruined Lives." We retain the title "Ruined Lives" in quotation marks in part because this is not our description or understanding of youth lives. Indeed, the argument consistently propounded in this chapter is that there is hope for justice and life for the human race, for the African people and even more specifically for Kenyan youth in spite of HIV and AIDS.

#### *The Narrative* "RUINED LIVES"

*When I joined Moi University in September 2001, I promised myself "that it's in Moi University I got it and it's here I will leave." I have indeed lived to keep my promise.*

*I was in Form Three when a student on his attachment in our school proposed for a relationship. He had all the qualities a woman would want in a man so I gave in. He told me all a form three girl would want to hear. In my innocence and naivety, I succumbed to his pressure to have sex with him; consequently, I lost my virginity to him.*

*After his placement, he reported to college for his final year and we still had contacts. I visited him on a number of occasions (I've even lost count the number of times I visited him). He was my first and only love and therefore I hung on every word he told me.*

*My boyfriend later graduated and we lost contact until last month (March) when his sister told me about his whereabouts (details of this later). Before registration in the Faculty of Law, in PSSP, I went for medical tests as is the requirement. I then opted for an HIV test, which unfortunately turned out to be +ve. It then dawned on me that I had traded the rest of my life for a university student who had deliberately and intentionally preyed on my innocence.*

*My first impulse was to take away my life, counselling sessions did not mean much to me and I quickly walked out of the session. I however did not confide my status to anyone until today.*

*The following day I went to a different Health facility and the results were still +ve. Therefore there was no doubt that I had been infected by this teacher-student. Since as the sister said, he had passed away after 6 months of being bed-ridden, besides, I had never had any other sexual relationship with anybody, no blood transfusion and the last time I used a syringe was in 1989.*

*Now, since whoever infected me did not mind about my life, I will also infect as many as possible as long as they are university guys oblivious of my status. So guys, anyone of you out there who may have crossed my "path" should count himself unlucky and should quickly place an order for ARTs supply before it's too late!*

*I decided to spread the virus indiscriminately in the Campus, (and have no apologies), because it's here I got and I intend to leave it here.*

*I've a well-documented report of all those guys who "crossed my path" since I joined this college. I will be posting their full names and registration numbers on the Students' Notice Board after the end of Sem. II Exams (August).*

*So far, I've had 124 students, yes one hundred and twenty four. Out of these, only 6, yes six used a condom. I still reiterate the fact that I owe nobody an apology and am still on a spreading spree till August.*

*Otherwise, I wish you success in your end of First Semester exams as you wait for your slow and sure DEATH.*

N.P.

#### *Silence and Denial*

In April 2005 a person identifying "herself" only as "N.P." and claiming to be a student of Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, posted this confessional letter on a notice board at the Eldoret West Campus. Its revelations of a deliberate campaign to infect as many Moi University males as possible with HIV sent ripples of shock far and wide, particularly once the local press and modern information technology widely circulated the legend. The anxiety was further heightened by the anonymity of the author, and calls for investigations into the real identity of the author were heard everywhere. The university administration oscillated between, first, denial and, later, claims that "a suspect ha[d] been arrested and [wa]s helping police with investigations." It is interesting to note that at the time, there was no law in Kenya to deal with people who deliberately infect others with HIV. One might even speculate that it is revelations such as those of N.P. that have drawn the attention of the authorities to the need for this kind of legal provision. As behind-the-scenes investigations to reveal the author of "Ruined Lives" progressed, word on the grapevine had it that in fact N.P. was not a female but a male student. We shall return to the gendered politics triggering this "sex change" later on in this essay.

The discourses informing the pseudo-legal reactions of the university administration are worthy of interrogation. They are reactions clearly driven by two

related concerns. First, the panic over a possible HIV and AIDS epidemic on their campuses and, second, a sense of shame and fear of public indictment of an administration that has lost control and which might therefore be seen to be abetting public ills and chaos. These anxieties about degenerating social order that the legend of "Ruined Lives" generated echo the reasons behind the official sentiments of silence and denial that prevailed in Kenya on the outbreak of HIV and AIDS in the early 1980s. When the first case of the disease was diagnosed in Nairobi in 1984 the government maintained that the patient, who was then admitted at Kenyatta National Hospital, was a Ugandan national. This couched denial played on the stereotyped discourse of the sexual deviance and promiscuity of Ugandans that had circulated in Kenya since the late 1960s when Ugandans, fleeing the political troubles of their home, flooded Kenya and brought with them a lifestyle hitherto unknown by Kenyans.<sup>14</sup> This reaction of national distance and implicit denial that the Kenya government adopted from 1984 was to have far-reaching effects on both the spread of the virus and campaigns, largely by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the churches, to educate the public on the facts surrounding HIV and AIDS. It was not until November 1999 that former President Moi declared HIV and AIDS a national disaster.<sup>15</sup>

In the early years, ignorance about the disease led to many extreme measures like isolating patients in special wards and wrapping up corpses in plastic bags before speedy burial. At the time NGO initiatives to break the silence on HIV and AIDS encountered many challenges, not least that of effective and compassionate communication about the nature and outcome of the disease. Invariably the messages dwelled on heterosexual intercourse as the key factor behind the transmission of the virus, and their attempts at maintaining order worked through frightening messages that dwelled on prolonged suffering and premature death as the result of sexual promiscuity. The reactions of Moi University administration to "Ruined Lives" are precisely rooted in this 1980s mind-set of official denial and the inelegant messages of NGOs and churches.

*The Game of Numbers: Rumor, Shock, and Humor*

Long after official attention to "Ruined Lives" had faded, reactions to its fear-inducing message continued to circulate in those realms that often fall below the radar of institutionalized officialdom. The forums for these public debates ranged from court corridors (N.P. had stated she was a law student on the Privately Sponsored Student Programme) to banking halls and pubs, and ultimately crossed national boundaries through email, blogs, and chat rooms on the Internet. Indeed, it is on the Internet that the moral and health implications of "Ruined Lives" have been interrogated over the longest period. As recently as 19 January 2006 the confessional letter surfaced on the website <http://www.kimanzichana.jubiiblog.co.uk> under the title *Mkenya Aliyewu Watu* (the Kenyan who killed people). The narrative was preceded by a photograph of a dead body at the mortuary.

This photograph—whatever its source may have been—not only spread the impression that N.P. had finally succumbed to the virus, it also lent visual

amplification to the images of corrupted bodies that the resigned title of her confession suggests. The shock tactics employed by the hosts of this website are reminiscent of the methods of preaching the HIV and AIDS message that NGOs and Church initiatives originally adopted. In her study of sexuality in Nairobi, R. Spronk recalls an early 1990s Red Cross and Ministry of Health poster: "[It] depicts a man following a shapely figure clad in a red mini dress and high heels. Against a backdrop of a city at night, we can see the frontal view of the skeletal figure, which is a mask of death. The caption reads: 'WHAT YOU CAN SEE IS NOT WHAT YOU GET—AIDS KILLS.'"<sup>16</sup>

One can see the extent to which N.P.'s story amplifies this position. Inasmuch as she makes mention of her victims needing to "quickly place an order for ARTs [antiretroviral therapy] supply before it's too late!" her title, tone, and parting shot indicate that for her HIV/AIDS is a death sentence and the question of "people LIVING with HIV and with AIDS" is a mission impossible. Again, N.P. is clearly embittered by the fact that she could not detect the presence of HIV in the man she says infected her. Ironically, she exploits the fact of the concealed presence of the virus, which allows her to maliciously spread it to any "university guys oblivious of [her] status."

Although the photograph depicts the fate of the infected persons, the heading *Mkenya Aliyewu Watu* that flags the photograph not only signals the malice aforethought that guided the spread campaign by N.P., but also reverberates with the drama of affected numbers. N.P.'s sinister announcement of the sheer number of men she succeeded in enticing to have sexual relations with her invites a gendered analysis of sexual relations in Kenya, a point we shall come to later on in the chapter. For now we argue that the focus on numbers in a sense stems from and also reinforces the current campaign strategies of governmental and nongovernmental bodies working in the area of HIV and AIDS education. It is thought that the endless repetition of these alarming numbers will serve to prevent people from engaging in "risky behavior," that is, illicit sex or sex outside the socially approved institution of marriage. The numbers themselves have come to live a life of their own, in their sweeping and frightening statements of death. The repeated recitals that indicate thousands and even millions of "HIV cases" or "death cases," or, in the common phrase in town, "Every one out of seven Kenyans has it," create an uncanny atmosphere marked by implicit and sometimes explicit accusations.<sup>17</sup>

N.P. had had sex with 124 males from the Moi University community of whom only 6 wore condoms. Therefore the number that N.P. presumably succeeded in infecting with HIV was 118. Like the posters of decayed bodies and worm-infected fruit that were earlier used by campaigners for behavioral change, the strategy of reverberating statistics is a fear-inducing one. It therefore runs the risk of either being dismissed as alarming exaggeration or, conversely, as painting a picture of a world so grim and doomed that people simply abandon all hope and plunge headlong into "risky behavior." In all probability reactions oscillating between these two positions were behind the "118" label that was variously applied to the "Ruined Lives" episode. *Matatu*<sup>18</sup> touts gleefully called out "stage 118" to

passengers wishing to alight at the Eldoret West Campus where the confessional letter was posted. In other instances the whole legend of the mysterious author, her letter, and arrests by the police was referred to as the "118" scandal. The coining, varied application, and mobility of this label "118" are clear evidence of the appropriation, circulation, and editing of popular culture texts in(to) new contexts.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, here we have the unlikely shift of emotional contexts from moments of deep fear and anxiety to ones of flippant jocularly and gallows humor. In this bleak humor we find new evidence about what HIV and AIDS have meant to Kenyan populations and the various ways in which they live with the pandemic. The coining of new idioms such as "118" in this instance, or "slim" and "slow puncture" in earlier moments, speak not only to the dominant mental images of the disease but also to the terms within which people grapple for hope and squeeze life, humor, and relief, however fleeting, out of seemingly interminably bleak moments. Indeed these "light-hearted" idioms demonstrate that the impulse to fight for life is intrinsic to humanity.

By promising to provide a list of the many men she deliberately tried to infect with the HIV, N.P. projects her ingrained belief that AIDS as a disease is a punishment for immorality—hers and that of the men who cross her path. This moralistic reading of the disease does not deal with either the sociocultural functions of sex among youth or the biological impulses triggering it. It adopts as a priori the Christian view of sex as the just province of monogamous marriage. Thus N.P. implicitly regrets giving in to the pressure to have premarital sex, and once she receives the news of her HIV positive status, she no longer sees a purpose or value for her own life. The sense of chaos that echoes in her mind is played out in her deliberate smear campaign. The certainty with which she sees death—which is to her the climax of individual destruction—is imposed on the world around her in ways that suggest an apocalyptic vision. This gloomy projection subverts every aspect of the "ABC" (Abstain, Be faithful, Condomise) campaign.<sup>20</sup> The fact that only 4.8 percent of her target group paid heed to the idea of condom use as part of the practice of safer sex—which includes preventing the spread of the HIV and AIDS—demonstrates the very marginal success of that particular strategy of education among the youth.

But what if the narrative contained in "Ruined Lives" is not factual but is indeed an urban legend? What if, as the Moi University administration claimed, it was to emerge that "Ruined Lives" was no more than the product of a fertile imagination? Would that make the story any less indicative of the sociocultural basis and impact of HIV and AIDS in Kenya? The idea that "Ruined Lives" may have been the product of a person's (whether male or female) imagination rather than a factual account leads us to consider the importance of literary fiction as illustration as well as product and definition of individual and societal identity. In this particular instance, literary discourse would help to outline perceptions and reactions to the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Kenya. We will not belabor the point that literary fiction mirrors, indeed, is inspired by and in turn echoes social reality.<sup>21</sup> Equally worthy of note is the fact that specific genres of fiction

are framed to serve and communicate particular ideals about the world we live in. Like parables, legends are essentially cautionary tales whose chief characteristic is the mapping of extreme circumstances of destruction and suffering, which are alleviated or overcome by the timely and moral actions of a selfless hero. In postcolonial Africa, urban narratives often take on these qualities of the legend. They are infused with depictions of the urban space as a morally corrupting and ethically vile environment in which ethnic mores compete hopelessly against an alienating and dehumanizing global culture of capitalism, which has in particular long claimed the women who cavort recklessly with modernity and its things of glamour.<sup>22</sup> Urban legends then—written and unwritten—emerge as those condensed moral tales of the city as the place where African social and cultural values have been corrupted and where people search in confusion for moral anchors that will stem their glide into debased modernity.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Signifying Death: "Reversed Dreams"*

As with "Ruined Lives," the title of Macharia Mwangi's short story "Reversed Dreams"<sup>24</sup> graphically captures the sense of finality that dominates perceptions and reactions to HIV and AIDS in our society. "Reversed Dreams" is the story of the emotional turmoil that a young man, Munga, suffers when a doctor pronounces him HIV positive. With a haunting empathy it describes the treacherous ways of romance in this era of HIV and AIDS and gives us compassionate insights into the forces that compel the victim to run the risk of infecting his unknowing girlfriend. In this regard, "Reversed Dreams" might very well have been the flip side of "Ruined Lives," that is, the story of N.P.'s much demonized boyfriend who infected her with the virus. Mwangi's story is told in the first person by Munga. N.P.'s tone moves from vicious revenge to regret and finally to sardonic glee in the statement, "I wish you success in your end of First Semester exams as you wait for your slow and sure DEATH." By contrast, Munga maintains a tempo of a deeply felt despair and dread expressed in intricate flashbacks that lend urgency to the hopeless present.

The language of "Reversed Dreams" dwells on images of destruction and metaphors of fear. As he sits in the reception of the office where his girlfriend, Salome, works, Munga lapses into a nightmarish daydream in which he sees his life choked by "scorching flames" as an unrelenting "seven-horned demon" approaches him (1). He contemplates the certainty of the social stigma and discrimination that his HIV-positive status will invite. He worries about the hurt his condition will cause those closest to him, his mother, "father, his brothers, his sisters, his good friends and oh . . . Salome" (1-2). Munga resolves to inform her about something so important. But Munga's thoughts are constantly on his impending death. At the time he discovered his status the poster in the doctor's office screamed "HELP CRUSH A.I.D.S.," but Munga distrusts its message and focuses instead on the finality that has put paid to his best-laid plans. The narrative's sustained refusal to name either HIV or AIDS, save the brief reference to

the message on the poster at the doctor's office, signifies the extent of the dread that Munga feels. The unmentionable—distant and improbable as he may have thought it—has happened to him and there is no way of confronting it. Munga variously thinks of HIV as a "monster" (1), "the dreaded thing" (3), "this beast" (4).

"Reversed Dreams" gives us a glimpse into the changing face of romance in this era of HIV and AIDS. Rather than being a site of expectant planning and jubilation romance is now a minefield laden with apprehensions and suspicions. At thirty-two Munga has not yet settled down to marriage and now in all likelihood he never will for "he knows now that he will soon be gone. He will soon be extinct, out of this world forever, shamefully" (5). Munga goes in search of his girlfriend, Salome. Oblivious of Munga's troubles (nor indeed of her own impending ones) Salome bubbles on excitedly as soon as they meet. Munga answers her distractedly, speaking at cross-purposes and totally consumed by the need to confess his status to her. He fears the revelation will destroy her and wonders whether she shouldn't just "follow him to the grave" (5). Outside, the impending darkness symbolizes the gloom surrounding this meeting between Munga and Salome. His tongue-tied attempts at confessing end when he succumbs to the pressure of his physical desire, which Salome both incites and echoes. Even through this act, it is difficult to think of Munga as a vicious murderer in the way N.P. of "Ruined Lives" so easily emerges. Rather, Munga comes off as a terrified coward who chooses momentary comfort in the wake of haunted nightmares, guilt, and fear.

#### Gender, Youth Sexuality, and HIV and AIDS

In many ways, postcolonial Kenya is precisely defined by its lack of an agreed-on or coherent value system for sexuality. Although some people, especially in rural Kenya, still uphold traditional ethnic cultural value systems, others uphold Christian value systems, and yet others espouse a "modern" value system largely borrowed from the West.<sup>25</sup> The majority, however, are at a crossroads. They are cultural mulattoes who hold a bricolage value system that bears a mixture of traditional ethnic culture, Christian culture, and a host of other value systems resulting from modernization and secularization. Suffice it to note that this complex value system does not always have consistent or readily recognizable values even within one individual. Depending on the specific situation, every individual chooses what values to adhere to. In the absence of systematic sex education, most young people in Kenya are left to seek answers to questions of their sexuality from their peers and the media. In so doing most end up adhering to inconsistent and complex value systems.

Although there have been a lot of changes with regard to sexual values and the consequent behavior due to modernization and the attendant cultural globalization, gender relations with specific reference to sexuality have not changed much. Writing on the construction of gender, specifically of womanhood in colonial Kenya (within the first half of the twentieth century), Tabitha Kanogo presents a situation that could be compared to that of Kenya today where women

are subordinate to male authority embodied in their fathers, elders, and missionaries.<sup>26</sup> A study by R. L. Munroe and R. H. Munroe on the Maragoli in Western Kenya on cultural reproduction and differentiation of sex within the last ten years of the twentieth century suggests that social change has had little impact on cultural reproduction of gender differentiation.<sup>27</sup>

Gender relations continue to be characterized by male dominance and female subordination. Theoretically, but not practically as we will discuss later, this implies that men make decisions on when, where, with whom, and how sex takes place. This model of sexual relations is based on a negative view of female sexuality that presents women as sexually evil and that therefore their sexuality has to be controlled by men if humanity is to escape doom. Consequently, male sexual morality is rarely under scrutiny. It is female sexual morality that has to be monitored and controlled by the "moral" sector of humanity—men. This view has been inherited from both traditional African and Christian cultures and is perpetuated in modern cultural settings. It is a model of gender relations that unconsciously encourages and pressures young people into premarital sex even in this era of the caution demanded by HIV and AIDS.

The representations of HIV and AIDS that we have read in "Ruined Lives" and "Reversed Dreams" find another point of convergence in their (sub)conscious projection of gendered youth sexuality in Kenya. In both narratives women emerge as "AIDS-givers" and men as "passive victims."<sup>28</sup> The first few paragraphs of "Ruined Lives" appear to indicate that the man who infected N.P. is the guilty person in the story, but this impression fades as one reads on. As the narrative unfolds the man's guilt melts away and his behavior becomes inconsequential as N.P. fits into the stereotypical sexually uncontrolled and evil woman who tempts men into sexual disaster, thereby putting a whole community at threat. And whether "Ruined Lives" is fact or fiction, its interpretation does not change much in so far as gender relations and sexuality are concerned. Critical reading of the text of "Ruined Lives" reveals no knowledge of how the man got infected with HIV and whether he was aware of it when he infected N.P., if indeed he is the one who infected her. It appears the man's behavior is of no consequence and is therefore not under scrutiny; indeed, it is not really the focus of the confessional.

In "Reversed Dreams," although we are told nothing of Munga's previous sexual relationships, Salome's promiscuity is suggested by her portrayal as a single mother whose son, Babito, was the outcome of a "treacherous love" with Munga's shack, the man who "vanished" after he impregnated her. To add to the power of Salome's depiction as a temptress (5), it is she who makes sexual overtures to Munga at a time when his mind is resolved on confessing to her his HIV positive status. The implicit suggestion is that Salome must bear the brunt of the consequences of her seduction since traditional and contemporary views of women's sexuality cast them in the light of sexual aggressors every time sexual activity has an unwanted outcome.

In *Youth, Gender and HIV/AIDS: A Kenyan Experience*, Eunice Kamaara contends that gender relations are positively related to youth sexual activity and the

"Ruined Lives"



consequent possible HIV infection.<sup>29</sup> Her argument is that sociocultural definitions and expectations of masculinity and femininity dictate gender relations that are primarily characterized by male dominance and female subordination. As young people conform to these definitions and expectations, they engage in sexual relations, and many are infected with HIV in the process. Nothing illustrates this argument better than "Ruined Lives." The narrator in the story describes "herself" as a powerless and naive victim of a beast that "deliberately and intentionally preyed on my innocence." The student-teacher took advantage of her inferior position as a form three secondary school student as against his position as an older, more mature, and more educated student at a public university. The female "succumbed" to the sexual advances of the male not because she wanted sex but because he put "pressure" on her to meet his needs. Notice that the male initiated the female into sexual experience.

This experience is typical of theoretical explanations and popular understandings of male-female relations in sexual encounters. Beatrice Paola in an article titled "Turning Down Sex" accurately observes: "[M]ost women are brought up with the mentality that their job is to make men happy. They attach this belief to their roles as wives, girlfriends and even to shallow friendship like flings."<sup>30</sup> Yet, the practical situation (implicit) is that N.P. is no less responsible for what befell her than the man. There is no indication that the man coerced N.P. to have sex, and therefore N.P. should take responsibility for her choices and actions. Moreover, according to the text, N.P. visited the man in his university hostels on so many occasions that in her own words: "I've even lost count the number of times I visited him." N.P. readily fits into the stereotypical representation of women as objects that exist for the pleasure of men, a role they play until tragic results occur.

James N. Henslin, a professor of human sexuality, argues: "Women often try to be unselfish, giving and accommodating men's desires and needs, so that when men express a desire to have sex, it is difficult for some women to reject it thinking that they may lose the relationship if they do."<sup>31</sup> Having studied macho men, David Lewis, a British psychologist, argues that male chauvinism (characterized by dominance especially in sexual encounters) exists in every man in the world but the level to which each displays it differs due to sociocultural factors.<sup>32</sup> Both Henslin and Lewis capture the Kenyan context accurately. Male dominance and female subordination characterize sexual encounters: men largely determine when, how, where, and with whom sex takes place while women are passive participants. The reversal of this scenario is the fodder of tragic urban legends in which men become helpless victims of the treachery of heartless modern women.

Even then, the circumstances of N.P.'s campaign to spread HIV as presented in "Ruined Lives" leave one curious about the pattern of men's sexual relations. N.P. must have noticeably changed partners often; so why did men continually give in to her advances? Were these men completely unaware of her mobility, or did the bug of male dominance extend to a rivalry that saw every man struggle to equal the sexual exploits of his peers? It seems that an uncanny capacity for emulating the behavior of other men and a general tendency to want what every other

man has are part of the psyche and performance of male dominance. In other words, once there is a "popular" girl on campus, every man wants to be seen with her. The social definitions of manhood—indeed the performance of masculinity in our society—seem precisely hinged on dominating and being noticed.

But is it practically the case that men always determine when, where, how, and with whom sex takes place? Did N.P. not determine whether sex took place with her teacher? Did she not, out of her own volition, visit the student teacher on campus? Dominant cultural practices shape her perception of herself as a victim even when she has willfully reversed the norm and become, however maliciously, proactive. In "Reversed Dreams" Salome initiates the sexual act with Munga, and Munga fails ethnic and Christian convention by being unable to contain female sexual desire. Does the story portray the expectation that Salome should have played the role of steadfast Mother Africa and controlled the situation? Hardly, because she is a fallen woman, an unmarried mother tainted in the eyes of both ethnic tradition and Christian morality. Inverted gender roles are seen to result in aborted futures, thereby further complicating the antinomies and contradictions that attend to the sexuality and gender identities of postcolonial youth.

Clearly, contemporary value systems in Kenya especially with regard to gender and sexuality in youth are contradictory or, as earlier expressed, complex and inconsistent. Against such a cultural background, it would seem not just irrational but impractical to expect youth to behave in a responsible way just because we provide information on how HIV is transmitted and how many people are dying every day. Statistics make little sense and therefore do not influence behavior especially when they perennially depict a "hopeless" situation. Statistics on human subjects must be presented alongside shrewd interrogation of social and cultural value systems and structures with emphasis on justice and life rather than on injustice and death if any positive change is to be realized.

The predicament of N.P. is indicative of the fact that there has been little if any behavior change among the youth, not even in a university population that represents our most educated youth, and for whose consumption 75 percent of HIV and AIDS messages are now tailored. For if only 4.8 percent of N.P.'s target group bothered with condom use, it means that the ABC campaign has largely failed. True, we have no way of knowing how many men N.P. propositioned in total, and what percentage of these the 124 "victims" represent. But seemingly, it is a dismal number if we consider that she managed her 124 in under 4 years! That gives us a rate of 2.5 men per month, and if we consider that she was not on campus 365 days a year, the figure may be that much more alarming, say 10 sexual encounters per month!

Our argument remains that continued assumption that knowledge about HIV and AIDS alone will translate to positive behavior change needs to be challenged because sociocultural systems and structures play a major role in determining human behavior. In this case, empowering men and women to critique and transgress the limits set by the sociocultural definitions and expectations of femininity and masculinity is central to winning the fight against HIV and AIDS.

THE BASIC ARGUMENT propounded here is that whereas gender relations in many aspects of life, such as in division of labor in professions, may have radically changed, in the area of sexuality, they have not changed much in Kenya at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This is in spite of many years of gender empowerment programs in Kenya. There is still a general tendency to present and understand women as sexually dangerous for the community, thereby creating a need to control female sexuality. Consequently, gender relations are basically characterized by male dominance and female subordination in sexual encounters, so that men are continually presented as the ones who must make decisions of when, where, how, and with whom sex takes place. Yet, should the result of the sexual act be undesirable, as in instances of unwanted pregnancy or HIV infection, women are presented as being entirely responsible for both the deed and the outcome.

Typical of many real-life situations, this chapter seems to present a contradiction that gender relations in Kenya have changed even as they remain the same. But there is no contradiction.

Although the process of socialization in traditional Kenyan societies, specifically initiation from childhood to adulthood, served to equip young people with necessary knowledge and life skills, the continued hangover of male dominance and female subordination in the context of rapid uncoordinated change creates a situation of extreme negligence, ignorance, and vulnerability for young people. As deeper analysis of contemporary literary texts selected for this chapter indicates, men do not necessarily make decisions on sex. Covertly, women have some level of control, but it is one that society does not want to admit to or endorse as either practical or desirable. Therefore both young men and women fall back on societal expectations of male dominance and female subordination, thereby blaming society for their woes.

In the texts we have used to arrive at these conclusions, one a confessional letter that quickly grew into an urban legend and the other an award-winning work of fiction, we have argued that embedded gender relations are positively related to irresponsible sexual behavior in young people and consequently to the spread of HIV. There is therefore a need to confront this structural aspect of culture and society. Further, we argue that in this context, representations of the nature and outcome of HIV and AIDS seem to have been focused on destruction and death for far too long. It therefore seems that, its prohibitive cost implications aside, it will take time for the antiretroviral therapy gospel of "living positively with HIV and AIDS"—which has only gained volume and visibility in the millennium—to erase these images of doom from public discourse on the pandemic. Indeed, unless advocacy campaigns are pegged to a dismantling of sociocultural gender imbalances as well as promoting resilience and hope, the war against HIV and AIDS will never be meaningfully won. Instead notions of "ruined lives" and "reversed dreams" will continue to dominate perceptions of youth and their futures in the context of HIV and AIDS.

## Notes

1. UNAIDS, *Report on Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic* (Geneva, 2007), [http://data.unaids.org/pub/EPISlides/2007/2007\\_epiupdate\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/EPISlides/2007/2007_epiupdate_en.pdf).
2. S. Weinreich and Ch. Benn, *AIDS: Meeting the Challenge: Data, Facts, Background* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 5.
3. UNAIDS, *Report on Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic*, 8.
4. National AIDS and STI Control Programme (NASCO), Kenya Ministry of Health, *AIDS in Kenya: Trends, Interventions and Impact*, 7th ed. (Nairobi, 2005), 8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Our use past tense here should not be misconstrued to mean that this process of socialization is completely absent in contemporary Africa. The cultural practices mentioned in this section are described as they are (were) in traditional setting with the understanding that some of the practices have remained intact, whereas others have been discarded or modified. Both past and present tense will be used to indicate this reality.
7. As John S. Mbiti observes of African societies: "Religion permeates all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it. A study of the religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the people themselves in all complexities of both traditional and modern life" (J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* [Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969], 1).
8. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 121–22.
9. Judith Bahemuka Mbula, *Our Religious Heritage* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1983), 71.
10. Karen Erickson Paige and Jeffrey M. Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
11. M. Silberschmidt, *Women Forget That Men Are Masters: Gender Antagonism and Socio-economic Change in Kisii District* (Stockholm: Stata Corps, 1999), 62.
12. J. G. Peristiany, *The Social Institutions of the Kipsigis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 73.
13. Silberschmidt, *Women Forget That Men Are Masters*, 72.
14. See, for example, the testimony of Selina Onyango at the Ouko Commission of Inquiry in which she referred to Nicholas Biwott's preference for Ugandan women. The proceedings and report of the Ouko Commission were carried in all the Kenyan public press through 1991/1992.
15. R. Spronk, "Ambiguous Pleasures: Sexuality and New Self-Definitions in Nairobi" (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006).
16. *Ibid.*, 101.
17. *Ibid.*, 90.
18. *Matatu* refers to a ten-seater minibus public transport vehicle common in Kenya.
19. K. Barber and C. Waterman, "Traversing the Global and the Local: Fuji Music and Praise Poetry in the Production of Contemporary Yoruba Popular Culture," in *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*, ed. D. Miller (London: Routledge, 1995); I. Hofmeyr, J. Nyairo, and J. Ogude "Who Can Bwogo Me? Popular Culture in Kenya," *Social Identities* 9, no. 3 (2003): 373–82.
20. The ABC campaign has been propagated as a strategy to control the spread of HIV and AIDS in spite of its limitations and clear indications that it does not work even among young people: All research on the sexual behavior of the young concurs

that the majority of young people are sexually active, most of them with many sexual partners, and yet they rarely use condoms. Lately, the strategy has been queried as ineffective even among married people. See, for example, G. Byamugisha, *What Can I Do?* (St. Albans, UK: TALC, 2004).

21. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London: Heinemann, 1972); David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992); Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* (Oxford: Hutchinson, 1961).

22. See particularly Mwangi Ruheni, *What a Life* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972); Meja Mwangi, *Kill Me Quick* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973), *Going Down River Road* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1976), and *The Cockroach Dance* (Nairobi: Longman, 1979). In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1977) Nairobi is a treacherous den of immorality, and, in Manichean terms, what was once the idyllic rural Illmorog is seen to be hopelessly corrupted once the transnational highway connects it to other urban centers, rapidly urbanizing it, to its detriment. Without exception, these writers depict unmarried women in the city as an amoral lot whose greed for material well-being turns them into ruthless prostitutes.

23. For historical work that examines discourses connecting urbanization and demoralization in neighboring Tanzania, see A. Burton, *African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime and Colonial Order* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005); and, for the manner in which gender is connected to these discourses, see the work of Andrew Ivaska, including the forthcoming monograph "Cultured States: Youth, Gender and Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam" (from Duke University Press), adapted from his PhD dissertation "Negotiating 'Culture' in a Cosmopolitan Capital: Urban Style and the Tanzanian State in Colonial and Post-colonial Dar es Salaam," University of Michigan (2003).

24. Macharia Mwangi, "Reversed Dreams," in *Reversed Dreams and Other Stories*, ed. Nana-Wilson Tagoe and Wanjira Muthoni (Nairobi: Writers Association of Kenya, 1998). Page references in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.

25. See, for example, V. Lema, "The Determinants of Sexuality among Adolescent School Girls in Kenya," *East African Medical Journal* 67, no. 3 (1990): 191-200; Silberschmidt, *Women Forget That Men Are Masters*; Spronk, "Ambiguous Pleasures"; Th. Weisner et al., eds., *African Families and the Crisis of Social Change* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

26. T. Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-1950* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2005).

27. R. L. Munroe and R. H. Munroe, "Logoli Childhood and the Cultural Reproduction of Sex Differentiation," in *African Families and the Crisis of Social Change*, ed. Th. Weisner et al., 299-314; see also Lema, "Determinants of Sexuality among Adolescent School Girls in Kenya," and E. Kamaara, *Youth, Gender and HIV/AIDS: A Kenyan Experience* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2005).

28. C. Nzioka, "AIDS Policies in Kenya: A Critical Perspective on Prevention," in *AIDS: Foundations for the Future*, ed. P. Aggleton, P. Davies, and G. Hart (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 169.

29. Kamaara, *Youth, Gender and HIV/AIDS*.

30. B. Paola, "Turning Down Sex," *East African Standard*, 23 April 2005, 15.

31. Cited *ibid*.

32. Cited by Florence Machio, in "Male Chauvinism," *East African Standard*, 18 June 1997.