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Isak Niehaus



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Isak Niehaus

Biographical Lessons

Life Stories, Sex, and Culture in Bushbuckridge,
South Africa*

This article asks, with reference to the life story of one man, called Ace Ubisi, whether biographies contain any valuable lessons for understanding men's sexuality, particularly of masculine promiscuity, at a more general theoretical level. In particular, I ask whether they shed light on the relative importance of "sexual culture" (Caldwell *et al.* 1987, 1988, 1989; Heald 1995; Niehaus 2002a; Thornton 2003) as opposed to political and economic factors, in explaining men's sexual conduct and proclivity to have multiple sexual partners. The latter include the high demand for family labour in small-scale agriculture, women's subordination, the separation of households by migrant labour, as well as the provision of quasi-marital services to men by women in towns with inadequate housing (Packard & Epstein 1991; White 1990; Gausset 2001)¹.

Ace Ubisi is one of the thirty-six men from Impalahoek, a village in the Bushbuckridge magisterial district of the South African lowveld, whose life stories I recorded over the past two years². During apartheid the village formed part of the former Northern Sotho Bantustan (or "homeland") of Lebowa. Bushbuckridge was incorporated into the newly constituted Limpopo Province after South Africa's first democratic elections of 1994, but

* I thank my research assistants Eliazaar Mohlala, Kally Shokane and Eric Thobela for their help during fieldwork, and also Niko Besnier, Harri Englund, Gunvor Jonnson, Catherine Mathers, Graeme Rodgers, Jonathan Stadler, and Charles van Onselen for helpful suggestions during the writing up process.

1. Gausset warns against over-estimating the importance of culture in the spread of HIV in Africa. He suggests that "exotic" practices such as polygamy, wife exchange, circumcision, dry sex, levirate, sexual taboos and sexual cleansing are not intrinsically incompatible with safer behaviour. By targeting such practices, health workers are likely to alienate people whose cooperation is necessary to prevent the spread of AIDS.
2. Much of the information that I present is of an extremely sensitive nature. However, I believe that in a country afflicted by horrendous sexual violence and by one of the most severe HIV/AIDS epidemics on earth, silence is a far more serious abuse of academic freedom than the revelation of sexual secrets. I have, however, used pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants.

still exhibits many characteristic features of a “native reserve”³. In recent years the HIV/AIDS epidemic has claimed several lives in the village.

My informants spoke Northern Sotho, Tsonga and English, and all were between the ages of twenty and forty years. Their life stories show frequent changes in sexual partners. With the exception of the very poor, men entered into a succession of relations with girlfriends (*mothlabo*), wives (*mosadi*) and extramarital lovers (*nyatši*), and also engaged in numerous one-night stands (called *feta ka mo*, lit. passing here). Though nearly all men had fathered children, very few were married for any length of time, and hardly any had established effective paternity over their progeny.

Whilst Ace’s account is not representative of all the recorded life stories, it does illuminate the various possible experiences of men in Bushbuckridge. His biography captures the diverse themes of sexual socialisation, the love affairs of an attractive young man, the sexual life of migrant labourers, the fragility of marriage, the impact of unemployment and sexual violence.

Ace is a thirty-eight-year old man, whom I have known since the start of my fieldwork in 1990. I first met Ace when I attended church services at his mother’s home and studied her practice as a Christian healer. Then Ace worked as a migrant labourer in Witbank. After Ace was retrenched in 1993, I spent more time with him. Together, we watched most games of the 1998 and 2002 Soccer World Cups, and I have on occasions employed Ace as a research assistant. Despite his reputation as a heavy drinker, Ace is generally well liked. As the wife of one of my colleagues once remarked, “I really like Ace. He can make you laugh. That man has personality”. Ace is extroverted, very articulate in English, and an excellent storyteller.

My account of Ace’s sexual biography is based on six unstructured interviews⁴ and it falls somewhere between a life story and life history⁵. I did

3. There are definite similarities in the social structure of the former South African ethnic Bantustans and the so-called “Native Reserves” in the United States, Australia and Canada. These include the status of reserve dwellers as rural proletarians; the existence of high levels of unemployment; the determinative effects of kinship, ethnic politics and administrative structures; and social encapsulation (CARSTENS 1991: 271-290).

4. The six interviews with Ace Ubisi were conducted in the village of Impalahoek on 31 May 2002, 20 December 2002, 21 December 2002, 10 January 2003, 17 April 2003 and on 18 April 2003. During the interviews I did not use a cassette recorder, but relied almost exclusively upon note taking. I have been rather liberal in editing Ace’s words to enhance the readability of his accounts, but I sometimes indicate the original South African terms that Ace used in brackets.

5. BERTAUX (1981: 7-8) distinguishes between a “life story” that is essentially an account of a person’s life delivered orally by the person himself and the more authoritative “life history”. The latter is such as account that is supplemented with biographical information drawn from other sources. These may include conversations with other people, police and court records, official reports by medical practitioners and social workers, and other kinds of documentary sources such as letters.

not supplement Ace's accounts about his own sexual relationships with an in-depth analysis of documentary sources, but I did interview Ace's younger brother and maternal uncle (*malome*) to crosscheck their truthfulness. With minor exceptions, Ace's accounts proved extremely reliable.

Whilst biography has all the drawbacks of a one-person survey, it also offers several theoretical advantages. The biographical narrative is widely credited with its syncretism and with its capacity to foreground personal subjective experience and historicity (Ferrarotti 1981: 19). Moreover, life stories work better than survey data to get to the core of sociological objects, i.e., social relationships (Bertaux 1981: 6). Hence, C. Wright Mills (2000) characterises the sociological imagination as the ability to grasp the interplay of society, history and biography. Ace Usisi's biography points to several limitations in the capacity of existing models of sexual culture to explain men's actual conduct. These include their failure to capture the interplay of diverse discourses about sexuality, recognise the importance of social institutions such as labour compounds in shaping sexual behaviour, and distinguish between cultural models and social action.

Learning about Sex from Peers and Teachers, 1965-1979

Ace Ubisi was born to a Shangaan bus driver and a Northern Sotho housewife in 1965. As the oldest of five siblings, he has two brothers and two sisters. In 1970, when Ace was merely five years old, his father died tragically in a motor vehicle accident. This left the Ubisi household severely impoverished. In these traumatic times Ace's mother, Nana Segodi, turned to religion. Her father was a preacher of the Zion Christian Church, and Nana became a prophet of the Ethiopian Apostolic Church. She derived some income from her services as a healer and her five brothers also assisted her.

Between 1972 and 1979 Ace attended three different primary schools, all located within close proximity to his home. He was never a particularly good student and repeated the seventh grade. As a boy Ace encountered contradictory attitudes towards sex. His peers and the master of the circumcision lodge that he attended actively encouraged sexual experimentation, but Ace's mother, uncles and teachers vehemently repressed any expression of adolescent sexuality.

Ace recalled that in his youth boys and girls occupied very different social worlds. Boys took the cows to the fields in the morning before school; spent the afternoon in the bush catching locusts, digging mice, shooting birds with catapults and fishing; and again drove the cattle back to the kraal in the early evening. Girls never hunted, but helped their mothers work in the vegetable gardens and wash clothes. Only occasionally did boys and girls swim together in the rivers.

Ace learnt about sex from his peers⁶. He recalled that youngsters between the ages of seven and thirteen played a game (*koko*), in which girls hid in the maize fields and boys searched for them. Whenever a boy found a girl, he mounted her and mimicked having sex. This act never involved actual penetration. “The first time I found a girl I was only seven. I searched for her and screwed her. But I kept my trouser on all the time.”

Ace soon learnt that adults disapproved of adolescent sexual play. One afternoon in 1975, Ace and his cross cousin were alone at home and played *koko* in his uncle’s bedroom. His uncle unexpectedly arrived, chased them from his bed, and thrashed them both with a stick. “But he never told us that it was wrong.”

At the age of twelve, Ace was circumcised at an initiation lodge in the bush. Here he encountered an entirely different attitude from adults, and saw men speaking lewdly about sex in public. “When the initiation master circumcised us he taught us recitations and used very rude and vulgar language. He said things like, *Mosona mmago* (your mother’s arse), *nyo mago* (your mother’s vagina), *polo ya rago* (your penis) *lesete lago* (your balls). There you are allowed to be rude.” Even Ace’s own relatives used such language when they came to visit him at the lodge. “They’ll tell you that the purpose of taking off the foreskin is so that you can enjoy the vagina. They’ll also tell you to ejaculate. They’ll never say these things at home.” Ace recollected the following lyrics of songs that were sung at the lodge:

<i>Heva hevo-he - heva hevo</i>	Talk talk - hey talk talk
<i>Oratile mahero - uratile mahero</i>	You like talking - You like talking
<i>Mosadi wa pelo ke mang?</i>	Where is a woman who has a good heart?
<i>A ka mang nyo ka nyoba - heva</i>	Who can give me a vagina to fuck - talk
<i>Hevo - he - he va hevo</i>	Talk - hey talk talk
<i>Vana vaka le lahle lešutlho</i>	My children please abstain from fucking
<i>Letlo šutlha ledi kgaitsemi</i>	You may end up fucking your sisters
<i>Yo nna are ditsebe - yo nna are</i>	I am sorry we don’t know anything - I am sorry
<i>Ditsebe tsa maloba tsa maloba</i>	We don’t know things of yesterdays
<i>Le ma labanyana</i>	Even those of long time ago

These instructions and the hardships that initiates had to endure taught them to become men⁷. However, Ace remarked that the elders did not actually teach them how to have sex. The boys were expected to learn this from their peers. At primary school teachers displayed an entirely

6. See Philip & Iona MAYER’S (1970) discussion of the concept “socialisation by peers” and of Xhosa youth associations in the Eastern Cape. Though peer groups were not nearly as formally structured in Bushbuckridge, similar processes were apparent.

7. See HAMMOND-TOOKE (1981) for a detailed discussion of Northern Sotho circumcision lodges in the South African lowveld. Despite the valuable insights that his analysis provides, Hammond-Tooke somewhat downplays the importance of sexual instruction.

different attitude, and Ace regularly fell victim to their over-zealous attempts to exorcise sex from the schools (Niehaus 2000). Pupils at the Impalahoek Primary School were prohibited from engaging in love affairs, kissing, and from holding hands. Boys and girls sat on separate sides of the class and were never allowed to mingle. Ace even recalled that in 1976, he was part of a group of boys watching the girls do high jump. The next day a teacher called them to the staff room, reprimanded them for staring at the girls' panties, and beat each boy five strokes with a stick. In 1977, when Ace was thirteen years old, he and a friend went about all day collecting empty bottles to sell in the shops, and when it became late he slept at his friend's home. Ace's mother believed that he had eloped with a girl, and she reported him to the school principal. On another occasion Ace delivered a love letter from his older cousin, Jabo Segodi, to one of the girls in his class. But a teacher intercepted the letter. The next day Jabo was forced to read the letter in front of the school assembly. Hereafter, Jabo, Ace and the girl were each whipped five strokes in the staff room, and another five strokes in each and every class of the school. "The teachers beat us in front of the small kids. We all cried. They wanted to show us that we were not allowed to write love letters."

Throughout the period of Ace's socialisation, no clear model of sexuality predominated. Ace received mixed messages about sex.

High School, Soccer and Five Girlfriends, 1980-1985

After attending two high schools in Bushbuckridge, Ace left to stay with his maternal uncle (*malome*) in the copper-mining town, Phalaborwa. His uncle worked as a traffic official and sent Ace to attend a fairly exclusive English-medium school. In 1983 Ace was seriously injured in a motor vehicle accident, spent almost four months in hospital, and could not attend school for the rest of the year. Though Ace never failed at high school, he never attained a matriculation (school leaving) certificate.

Contrary to their teachers, high school students perceived sexual experience as a mark of honour. Ace explained that at school only boys from wealthy families, and boys who had attained good marks were popular among girls. "I was from a poor family. I was not intelligent and I was also not good looking. But I was good at soccer." As captain of the soccer team, Ace had his first girlfriend (*cheri*) in 1983, and he had at least five girlfriends in 1984.

The first time Ace had penetrative intercourse was on new years' eve, 1981. Ace's classificatory brothers invited him to attend a party at their home. Here Ace danced, drank liquor and smoked cigarettes for the first time. A girl who was two years older than him, and worked as a servant for his brothers, called Ace into her room. "This time I did it with my pants off and I put the thing (penis) inside." On another occasion in 1983,

Ace's school organised a trip to Giyane, where they played soccer and participated in a *muchongolo* dance contest. Ace scored two goals and won R5 for dancing. On their way back to Phalaborwa some students had sex on the rear seats. "Some of us did not even have girlfriends. Two or three boys would screw the same girl on the back seat."

By 1984 Ace had three girlfriends in Phalaborwa (Mona, Doreen and Gladness) and two girlfriends in Impalahoek (Helen and Iris). Ace told me that Mona "hijacked" him after a soccer game and took him to her home. "Mona's parents were at Moria [the ZCC headquarters] and we spent the whole night there. The next day she washed me. Mona looked for men. She was beautiful, but she was a whore (*sefebe*)." Ace met Doreen at school. "We always talked in the streets when going home. Sometimes we agreed to meet on weekends. Then we had sex in the bush." Ace also met Gladness at school. "I visited her place every month. Then I lied to my uncles and told them I'm going to visit school friends." Before having sex, Ace used to give Gladness little gifts such as potato chips, yoghurt, sweets, avocados and fruit juice. In 1984, Ace's final year in school, Gladness told him that she was pregnant. Ace was shaken, could not accept responsibility and fled to Impalahoek. "We used to write love letters, but when I heard that she was pregnant I never wrote to her again. I was afraid of my uncles. If they knew they would have punished me like hell. I told one of my friends to tell Gladness that I was gone. She could not trace me. She only knew that my surname was Ubisi and that I had stayed with someone called Segodi."

Ace met Helen and Iris in Impalahoek during school vacations. On 16 December 1982, Ace met Helen before a soccer match. He scored three goals and afterwards she sent a child to call him. Helen was from one of the wealthiest households in Impalahoek: her father owned a coal yard and café in the village; and a shop, a butchery and bottle store in Nelspruit. "At her home Helen gave me food and a carton of cigarettes. She had seen me smoking. There was also wine in the fridge and water to wash. In her room she hugged and kissed me and told me that I played wonderful. Everything went well. I knew how (to have sex) from Gladness and Mona. Helen only chased me at five o'clock in the morning." Hereafter, Helen regularly collected Ace after soccer.

Ace met Iris on Good Friday, 1983. Helen was in Nelspruit at the time, but soon learnt of the affair. "In December Helen confronted Iris. It could have been a hell of a fight. Iris even collected her friends to beat Helen. When I arrived I chased away their friends, and called the two of them. I said, 'I love you both! You decide if you still love me.' They accepted. From then I kept Iris in Impalahoek and Helen in Nelspruit."

Marriage and Divorce, 1985-1998

In 1985 Ace sold ice cream for a local businessman and played soccer for Impalahoek United. That year Iris' father and aunt came to Ace's home

to announce that she was pregnant. This time Ace accepted paternity, but said that he could only pay bride wealth once he secured a regular job. "I asked R60 from a friend who worked in Phalaborwa and borrowed R200 from Helen. Then I sent elders to give the money to Iris' father as *ku ti komba* (to promise marriage). He said that I was welcome at his home at any time and that Iris could visit me whenever she wanted."

Ace rationalised his decision as follows, "I liked Iris. She was also from a poor family and she could be a daughter-in-law (*makoti*) at my home. She could come here and cook. Helen was from a wealthy family. You can't take someone from a family who smeared butter and jam to a family like mine".

At first Ace stole ice cream money to pay for Iris' medical check ups and maternity dresses. However, in 1985 Ace secured employment at the AMCO Bank Colliery, just outside the town, Witbank. Ace only worked underground for three weeks, and was then transferred to the Emergency Prevention Unit Police (EPUP). The mundane aspects of Ace's work involved guarding the mine gates, walking patrol and enforcing company rules. But during the turbulent anti-apartheid struggle EPUP was also called upon to repress political protests. "There were so many strikes. The workers threw bricks at us. To defend ourselves we had to use teargas, pump guns and we sent dogs to bite them. We sometimes shot live bullets, but we first had to warn the strikers. This was unfair. The strikers never warned us, and they could burn us with petrol⁸. Some policemen were stabbed, gunned down, and burnt alive."

Being a migrant enabled Ace to support his wife and child. "After I was employed I went to Iris's family and asked her to come and stay with my mom. Now she fully belonged to my place. I bought her food and clothes and sent her R50 or R70 so that she could buy cold drinks. Iris delivered on 16 April 1986. On 22 April I came home with money [. . .]. I bought clothes for her and for the child, and even a baby walker. I told her that she must phone me whenever she needed money [. . .]. When I was at Witbank Iris had everything." Ace called his son Tembisa.

But the prolonged separation of migrant labourers from their spouses undermined conjugal stability⁹. Ace soon separated from Iris. In January 1988 Ace attended a six-month training course in the town of Vryheid. "Whenever something is wrong at home bad things will happen at work.

8. During the South African liberation struggle the "necklace", a tyre dosed in petrol, was used to execute political enemies—such as the police and their informers—in public by burning them alive.

9. MURRAY (1981: 64) points to a central contradiction of the migrant labour system. "On the one hand, the economic viability of a conjugal relationship in practice requires the separation of spouses. On the other hand, the prolonged separation of spouses is most conducive to the destruction of the conjugal relationship."

They soon chased me from the course because I did not know the instructions.” Being dismissed from the course, Ace phoned Iris and told her that he was coming home. “My mom had dreams [messages from God] that I should not sleep with her daughter-in-law (*makoti*). But on the day that I arrived my mom was at a church ceremony in White River. I first went to a bar lounge, and then slept with my wife. My mom came back and did not foresee any problem.”

“When I was back in Witbank, it felt as if my head started cracking. It felt as if someone had poured hot water on my uniform. I felt cold and hot and I thought that I was dying. I was taken to the hospital at work. There, I suddenly remembered what my mother said. I realised that only a traditional doctor (*ngaka*) could cure me. I left the hospital and looked for a moneylender (*machonisa*) to give me R100. With the money I (hitch) hiked to Middelburg. From there I got a Sunripe truck to take me home. I was sweating and I was seriously ill. I told him that I am dying and I gave him my address.”

“At home my mom told me that I had slept with a woman who had had an abortion. She took me to a doctor, called Sekumba. But Sekumba was drunk and I was dying. His wife threw the bones and she also said that I had screwed a woman whom had had an abortion. Sekumba’s wife put a hot spear on my head to attract the impure blood. She also gave me herbs (*dihlare*) and an enema (*sput*). I was powerless. I went back to Sekumba the next day. He also gave me herbs to drink.”

“When I recovered I asked my wife, ‘Why do you want to kill me?’ And I beat her with a baton. Iris was bleeding and then she confessed.” Ace learnt that whenever his mother attended women’s meetings, Iris had sexual intercourse with a minister of her church. In February 1988 the minister impregnated Iris. In fear that Ace would divorce her, Iris procured a back-street abortion. After Ace beat Iris, she fled to her mother and never returned. Yet Ace never legally divorced her. “In all that time I never paid bride wealth. I only gave her parents R270. I never had any certificate. No! I won’t put my signature on any certificate. If you do your wife can kill you to get the benefits.” (Iris died in March 2003.)

Ace now tried to reconcile with Helen, and spent the Easter vacation of 1988 with her. However, Helen told him that she had already married a Nigerian doctor. Helen nonetheless gave Ace her phone numbers and agreed to be his paramour (*nyatsi*). “In December I again visited Helen in Nelspruit. Her husband was not there and she gave me that nice thing. But Helen would never leave a doctor for Ace who was only a miner.”

Sex and the Under-Life of Migrant Labour Compounds, 1985-1993

From 1988, Ace became absorbed by the under-life of the migrant labour compounds. Ace remained a desirable lover. He was still securely

employed, and he became a regular member of Witbank Black Aces, a first division team of the National Soccer League.

Whilst senior miners could live with their wives and children in a township, younger men were obliged to reside in the compounds. Ace described the compounds as “a good place to sleep and to get food”. He shared a dormitory with nearly thirty other men. They slept on double-decker beds and each man had a fan, wall robe and locker. There was also a hall with a television set. Life was strictly regulated. No men under the age of twenty-one and no women were allowed inside the hostel. “There were gates like the Berlin wall that kept women out [. . .]. They took us as stupid. Whenever we went to town two or three buses would take us and the securities would guard us.”

But the compounds were not total institutions, and their barriers to social and sexual intercourse with the outside world were incomplete. Inmates were free to leave and enter the compounds whenever they pleased. Some miners propositioned the women selling fruit and vegetables outside the mine gates for sex, or purchased the services of sex workers, who came all the way from Durban in buses each month end. Others engaged in regular love affairs with the women of Witbank’s townships¹⁰.

Initially, Ace purchased the services of these sex workers, and it is from them that he first learnt of condoms and AIDS. Later, Ace established a regular relationship with a township woman, called Lindiwe. She was a divorcee, who had been married to a former business tycoon, Ben Mokoena. When Ace met Lindiwe, she owned a house and a tavern, had two children and she was pregnant. Ace was very honest about the aims. “I only pretended to love Lindiwe. Actually I just wanted money from her. She gave me her car and money to go and visit my friends [. . .]. I could also go to her place to grab beers at any time.” But Lindiwe also reaped rewards from her relationship with the security workers. “We took all the beers that we confiscated from the unlicensed sellers in the hostels straight to her. When we found cannabis (*dagga*) we also took it to her place. She paid us and we could drink at her tavern for free.”

Ace’s relationship with Lindiwe soon brought him into trouble. Ben Mokoena learnt that Ace was in love with his former wife, and sent four men to wait for Ace outside her home. “They stopped me and said, ‘Ace! Wait for us! Where do you come from?’ I replied said, ‘It’s none of their business’. They then said, ‘We know! You’re screwing our cousin’s wife!’ Then one of them grabbed me. I tried to fight, but it was useless. I cried as they beat (*bliksemed*) me. They used bottles and beat me on my body and on my head. Fortunately, I managed to run away. Lindiwe took me to the nearby hospital. I was bleeding and slept there for one night.”

10. See NIEHAUS (2002b) for a more detailed discussion of the moral economy of sexual relations in the mining compounds, as experienced by men from Bushbuckridge.

At work Ace lied to the superintendent, saying that “Comrades” had beaten him, and he applied to bear a firearm for his own protection. But the EPUP superintendent soon confiscated Ace’s weapon. (Ace apparently fired warning shots at suspicious men).

In 1993 Ben Mokoena was murdered, and Lindiwe was a prime suspect. “Since that day I was no longer free at Witbank. I had too many enemies. I heard that Ben’s brothers had chased Lindiwe from town and that they were looking for me. I was only safe when I drank with my colleagues. I also had to borrow a gun from my friends. I applied for early retirement, but the superintendent told me to wait. My mother prayed for me and she gave me herbs.” Ace did not fully understand why Ben was so concerned about Lindiwe’s love affairs. “Maybe Ben thought that I made his wife divorce him [. . .]. Lindiwe loves money. Now she has a husband who owns seven mortuaries.”

Experiencing Unemployment, 1993-2003

In 1993 Ace was one of nearly five thousand men who were retrenched from Witbank’s coal mines, and since then he had not managed to secure another permanent job. This has not been for a lack of trying. In April 1993 Ace joined his younger brother to look for work in Cape Town. Thereafter, he attended a technical college in the hope that he could qualify as a refrigeration technician. Ace subsequently held temporary jobs at a Nelspruit law firm, and at the Phalaborwa municipality. He also spent months desperately searching for work in Johannesburg.

Ace met Stella Shubane, whom he sometimes calls his second wife, at a local bar lounge. Ace twice proposed love to her. “Before she could reply I told her my name, where I was from, and where I had been schooling. I told her to trust me. But Stella refused. Maybe she thought that I was a thug (*tsotsi*) from Johannesburg.”

“On Friday my friends and I took two bottles of Whiskey to the bar lounge. I met with my cousin, Joe, who knew Stella, and I asked him to call her. Joe said, ‘Don’t worry. Stella loves you. She’ll come!’ Stella arrived at 8.30 and Joe bought her four cans of cider. Stella told me about her likes and dislikes. She started to trust me. We drank. I took her hand and we danced till to 12 pm [. . .]. I asked Stella to come with me to Impalahoek, but she said ‘No’. I then accompanied her to her own place. On the way I took her into the bush and she gave me two rounds. On Tuesday she organised her friend’s place and I sponsored her with liquor. We stayed there the whole night. When it came to screwing Stella was the best. She is a whore (*sefebe*) and she knew all the styles.”

Three months later Stella told Ace that she was pregnant. “I thought maybe she prevents, but I learnt that she did not. When I asked Stella (about contraception) she replied, ‘No! You told me that you were not

married!” Ace soon left for Johannesburg. “I never wrote a letter, but she wrote several. When I was gone they (Stella’s relatives) brought her to my mother’s house. My brother, Siphon told me that I now had a wife at home. I decided not to come home. I did not want to marry Stella. How could I marry someone whom I met at a drinking house (*shebeen*)?”

“In 1997, when, I worked at the Phalaborwa municipality, Stella again became pregnant. This time it was twins. They were two daughters. But Stella complained that my mom did not treat her children as well as she treated my niece, and she went back to her own place. Stella once came to my work crying for money, and dropped the two three-month-old kids with me. Then she left. Only when I pleaded with her did she take the two kids back. Before she left we fought. I beat her [. . .]. Since then I visited Stella at her parents when I came home, but I always slept at my own place in Impalahoek.” (Whilst Ace told me that he was always uncertain of the paternity of Stella’s children, Ace’s brother was adamant that Ace was definitely not their father. He said that Ace would have lost face if he admitted to being cuckolded so thoroughly).

Ace regularly found Stella with other men. “I once saw her drinking with another man at Banda. They were together for more than three hours. She told me he was only a friend’s boyfriend. We quarrelled and I beat her on the way home. Stella’s relatives reprimanded me and said that I had no proof. They said that if I saw a mistake I should come to them. In 1999 Stella got a job at the Sunnyside Restaurant. I always found her seated there with men. I knew that Stella had a paramours (*dinyatši*). I decided that I would get them.”

“One evening I visited Stella at her home. But she complained, saying, ‘I’m sick. I’m tired. I have a head ache.’ At 10.30 I said, ‘Bye’. But I had my suspicions and I waited outside. Later I saw a car light. The car waited at the gate and hooted. The driver sent a boy to call Stella. The boy told her, ‘Dan calls you! He asks are you alone, or are you with that fool (*moegoe*) Ace?’ The man then went into Stella’s home and she came out carrying a bag. Now I had full proof that she was in love with Dan. I pushed her, and shouted, ‘You bloody fucking stupid’. Dan fled and as he drove away I threw stones at his government car. I later learnt that he worked for Home Affairs (department).”

“Later Stella found a job at Wineberg in Johannesburg. She told me that she lived with her sister. But when I phoned, the sister told me that Stella had moved to Alex (Alexandra township). I eventually traced her supervisor, but he told me that Stella was living in Vosloorust. My cousin found out where she stayed and I went there by taxi. The first time I saw men drinking beers outside the home, and Stella was inside with another man. The second time that I came there she was next door, drinking beer with another man. I chased the man and beat Stella like hell. I used my fists, bottles and bricks. She took a week from work and reported me to

the police. She said that I did not support our kids and that I wanted to kill her. Fortunately my uncle (a policeman) fixed the docket.”

Since that day Ace has avoided Stella. “Stella can’t report me. She knows that I know the social worker, the prosecutor and the Impalahoek police. I never married her. There was no bridewealth. Not even a single cent. She was only my paramour (*nyatši*).”

The Commotions at Chicken Run, 2000-2003

Ace acknowledged that his failure as a provider contributed to the breakdown of his relationships. In the years that followed, he could not even secure temporary jobs. At one stage Ace coached the Impalahoek United soccer team, but was dismissed after he took R30 from the club. Ace also worked for me as a research assistant. Ace recently obtained an old 16 mm film projector from a local businessman and planned to show films at local schools. But he still needed a bulb, an extension cord, a screen, films, and transport. At home Ace’s mother suffered a stroke. She could no longer practice as a faith healer and now received a small disability pension. Ace’s sisters soon quarrelled with him over his mother’s pension, and refused to cook for him. At the same time, Ace gained a reputation for drinking heavily. He drank Black Label, a beer advertised as the ideal thirst quencher after a day’s hard work. Perhaps, his preference indicates a nostalgic longing for better days of the past.

Since 1999, Ace’s only significant lover has been Nomsa. This relationship was a desperate attempt to gain some financial support and to find another place to stay. Ace met Nomsa when he drank with his classificatory brothers at Chicken Run—a complex that previously housed a poultry farm, but now hired rooms for rent. “I saw Nomsa and wanted to propose. She was good looking, but she was older than me. I learnt that she worked as the floor manager at Clothing Sales, and my friends told me that she was not married [. . .]. After a few weeks Nomsa came to Four Roads (the nearest drinking house) to buy take-away beers. I followed her and proposed, but she told me that I was still young.”

“One evening there was a party at Chicken Run. Nomsa was also there. I proposed again, but again she refused. We spoke until midnight. Then she said, ‘Take two beers and go home’. Two weeks later I again found her at Four Roads buying take-away beers. I asked her to stay and to drink at Four Roads, but she refused. Nomsa did not want to mix with the men at Four Roads, and told me that I should rather come and drink at her place. We went there and talked. Finally she said that she could understand what I said. She asked, ‘Are you married? How many kids do you have? Are you working?’ She also told me that she is a widow. Nomsa pretended as if she did not want to have sex, but she took off her clothes. I also took off mine and I joined her in bed. After finishing the

job she chased me. She said she is in love with a soldier and told me to go home. The next day I came back to her place. Since then she was my girl friend.”

Nomsa was seven years older than Ace. Previously, she was married to a security guard in Burghersfort and they had two children. Nomsa resided with her parents-in-law, but her husband no longer came home, and she had another child with a policeman. In 1996 Nomsa’s husband died in a road accident, and two years later her parents-in-law both passed away. Nomsa now faced a conundrum. When her sister passed away, Nomsa’s parents insisted that she should marry her sister’s widower (The sororate). He worked in Klerksdorp, but expected to see Nomsa whenever he visited Burghersfort.

Nomsa acted as a “sugar-mommy”. She bought Ace several items of clothing, a torch, radio, and shoes; and also bought Ace’s niece a dress, a cap and a T-shirt. In turn, Ace’s sister accused him of taking food from their place to Nomsa’s home.

However, trouble started when Nomsa’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Neo, visited Impalahoek from Burghersfort. “Neo told her mother that she likes men. When her mother is on duty, she brings boys home. Different boys propose to her and she agrees with all of them. Some of them are even my friends. She will do this in my presence. Neo is lazy and does not cook. She also takes her mother’s clothes. I complained, but Nomsa agrees with her daughter. This is because all her sons-in-law buy beer for her.”

“In November 2002 I drank beers with my brothers at Chicken Run. When I knocked at Nomsa’s door nobody opened. I heard Neo tell her mother, ‘Here is that bloody fucking Ace. He always takes your money. Tell him to go home. He is a dog’. I pushed the door and called out to Nomsa, ‘This bitch of yours does not want to open.’ But Nomsa shouted, ‘Go Home. Bugger off (*Voetsek!*)’. I then went home to fetch an axe and a screwdriver, and I broke down the door. Nomsa threw a bottle at me, but it hit the wall. She also tried to pour boiling water on me. Fortunately the kettle delayed. Nomsa then screamed and the neighbours came. Then I went home. The next day the police told me that Nomsa’s landlady had complained to them that I had broken the door. But if I fixed the door she won’t press charges.”

Eventually Nomsa did confront Neo about her numerous boyfriends. “They argued and Neo swore at her mom. The next day Neo returned to Burghersfort [. . .]. When I am with Nomsa there is no problem. But not when that trouble-maker—Neo—is here.” One month later Neo was back in Impalahoek. She again refused to open the door for Ace, and there was another commotion outside Nomsa’s room. “Even the landlady was there. She told me; ‘Don’t beat your wife with your fist. Beat her with your penis.’”

In 2003 Ace learnt that Nomsa had another boyfriend, Valley Mohlala. Valley worked for the Electricity Supply Commission and had two wives. Nomsa also began to suspect Ace of keeping girlfriends. “Nomsa once found Yvonne’s phone number in my trousers. She phoned Yvonne and told her to keep away from me [. . .]. Then Nomsa gave me rules: (i) I must not come to her place past 7.30 pm; (ii) I must not drink beers without her being present; (iii) I must stop hating her daughters; (iv) I must visit her place in Burghersfort; (v) I must stop investigating her; and (vi) I must stop going to Clothing Sales to speak to her at any time.”

“Once I broke her rules and came home past 9 pm. I knocked and she did not open the door. That is when I beat (*bliksemed*) her. She is strong, but I was clever. I did everything to prevent her from grabbing me and I boxed her. She hit me several times, but I won the fight. Afterwards I apologised to her. I said I thought there was another man inside her room [. . .]. The next day Nomsa reported me to the police. A police officer told me that she had laid a charge against me, and asked me to pop out R100 for bribery. He said that he could convince Nomsa to withdraw the case. The officer told Nomsa that she should rather talk to me. Nomsa came to me and we solved everything.”

Ace clearly understated Nomsa’s anger. A week later she applied for a protection order against him, and on 13 March they appeared in front of the nearest magistrate. “Nomsa told the magistrate that I am her boyfriend, but that she no longer feels safe with me. She said that I had broken her door and that I could kill her at any time. She also told him that I am a close friend of the police and that they would never help her against me. The magistrate then asked me to make statements. I said that I was just trying to save her daughters from too many boyfriends. Finally, the magistrate told me that he had no option, but to grant the order. He said that I am no longer allowed to go to Chicken Run or to Clothing Sales. Neither am I allowed to be near Nomsa. He also advised me that if I had sex with Nomsa at her place I could be found guilty of rape.”

Ace believed that his only hope of a new relationship was with Yvonne Shai. Yvonne was from Nelspruit and worked at a game lodge ten kilometres north of Impalahoek. Ace met her at a taxi rank and they spoke for the entire afternoon. “Yvonne is only twenty-two years old and to me she is beautiful. I like women with buttocks. I highlighted that I was in love. Before she got into the car I patted her on the buttocks and gave her a baby kiss. She kissed back. Yvonne told me, ‘Be with me in your dreams’. She also gave me her telephone numbers, but she told me that she was not allowed to receive any phone calls whilst she was on duty. Once I phoned and she said, ‘Have you been with me in your dreams?’. But I have not screwed her yet [. . .].”

Love and Lovers in Retrospect

In reflecting on his life, Ace underlined the difference between the actuality of his biography and his ideals. Ace remarked that of all his lovers, he loved his first wife, Iris, the most. “She only made the mistake of being impregnated by the minister. Iris was very good. Even at home they liked her. She respected my parents and me. She also gave me a son. I have no doubt that he is mine. She was not after men. I could go to her at any time and I would never come across another man. She knew that I was also in love with Helen, but she did not give me problems.”

Ace told me that after their separation, Iris married Vusi Shubane, the brother of a local businessman. Iris’s second marriage ended tragically. Vusi contracted HIV from an extra-marital lover, and infected Iris. Vusi died in 2000. In accordance with local custom, Iris’s parents refused to allow her to mourn for him. “In our tradition you must not mourn for your second husband whilst your first husband is still alive. Iris had to mourn for me.”

Ace took great care to ensure that his son, Tembisa, did not repeat the same mistakes that he had made. In 2003 Tembisa impregnated one of his girlfriends and Ace spoke seriously with him. “I said, Tembisa. Do you know of AIDS? Do you wear condoms? Do you know that your mother died of AIDS? Before her death she complained that she wanted to see me. I went there and I brought her cold drinks. She was sleeping under a tree. Before she spoke to me she cried. She said, ‘Ace. I loved you. I made a mistake when I separated from you. You tried to reconcile, but my parents refused. They looked for money. Now money is killing me. He infected me with AIDS. I’m dying’. Then she said, ‘Ace. Your son is troublesome. He comes late. He drinks and he has girlfriends. He refuses to fetch water for me. Take care of him! Advise him! Whip (*sjambok*) him! You can’t only talk. He does not listen. He thinks he is old enough. Beat him up! If you do not beat him, he’ll be in trouble’. Three days later, Iris died.”

Beyond “African Sexuality”?

Ace Ubisi’s biography provides a useful contrast to various models of sexual culture. In the most well known of these, Caldwell *et al.* (1987, 1988, 1989) argue for distinctive patterns of sexual behaviour, population and fertility in sub-Saharan Africa. They suggest that in Europe and in Asia, where resources are fixed, marriage is strictly regulated, and female sexual purity is of central moral concern. But in Africa where the economy is small in scale and property remains within the lineage, sex and marriage revolve around the reproduction of descent groups. The ancestral religion emphasises fertility rather than chastity, and little guilt surrounds sexual

activity. Given men's desire for descendents, polygamy is common. And because of men and women's strong attachments to their natal lineages, conjugal bonds are emotionally weak. Caldwell *et al.* (*ibid.*) find little evidence of female sexual pleasure, and argue that women often conceive of sex as a service rendered to men, in return for cash and support. Divorce is frequent, but seldom bears disastrous consequences. Long postpartum sexual abstinence, the separation of genders, and initiation ceremonies also encourage pre- and extra-marital sexual activity.

Heald (1995) acknowledges great diversity in these matters¹¹, but nonetheless ventures to construct an alternative general model of sexuality, drawing largely upon East African ethnography. Contra the Caldwells, she argues that because women's reproductive role is so crucial for the perpetuation of lineages, there is a preoccupation with sexual morality. Throughout East Africa enormous power is accorded to sex. Sex is perceived as highly ambiguous: as both life-giving and as profoundly dangerous. In local knowledge a child is formed through the mingling of men's white blood (semen) and women's red blood (identified with menstruation) in sexual intercourse. Hence, the sharing of bodily fluids is an ultimate act of trust. In addition, ritual sexual intercourse and proper mingling can cleanse the impurities of death. However, the wrong mingling of blood is life threatening. Therefore coitus is circumscribed by numerous taboos, unknown in Europe. Spouses may not refer directly to sex, have intercourse in the dark, nor touch each other's genitals. Parents should avoid sex when their sons are healing from circumcision wounds, and adultery and sex with widows both carry the threat of death. For these reasons, reproduction has to be brought under proper social control. Circumcision instils self-control, and avoidance between the members of proximate generations balances the liberties between members of the same generation.

Based upon earlier fieldwork I constructed a model of sexuality specifically for Bushbuckridge (Niehaus 2002a). The starting point for my analysis is the local perception of the human body as permeable and particle. According to villagers, bodies readily transmit and incorporate substances such as blood, fluids, breath (*moya*) and aura (*seriti*)—to and from other bodies. From this perspective, the conjunction of substances from different bodies gives rise to condition of intense power or heat (*fiša*). As in East Africa, sex is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, the flow and exchange of blood is essential for procreation, and for the maintenance of good health. Prolonged celibacy causes poorly regulated bodily fluids, stupidity, short temperedness, recklessness, and depression. On the other hand, sex is extremely dangerous in the case of incest where no exchange of blood occurs, and in inauspicious sex where there is an excessive mixture

11. AHLBERG (1994) points to enormous diversity in these matters on the African continent and argues that it would be a futile exercise to construct a single model of "African sexuality".

of substances. If a woman made love to several men, her lovers absorbed substances from each other's bodies, through her. Their blood polluted each other and their auras clung to each other's bodies. Sexual intercourse with widows (who bore the aura of their deceased husbands) and with abortees (who were still polluted by the foetus) was potentially fatal. Therefore, sex was safest between regular partners who were immune to each other's sweat, blood, fluids, odours and aura. I suggest that these taboos expressed fears of contaminative exposure in overcrowded village settlements, vouched for the validity of marriage, and naturalised masculine domination¹².

None of these models are appropriate to account for the central thrust not for the intricacies of Ace's sexual biography. One would be hard pressed to explain Ace's numerous sexual encounters, his liaisons with about a dozen lovers, two broken marriages, and uncertain paternity of five children, in terms of an excessive concern with reproduction of the lineage, as proposed by Caldwell *et al.* (1987, 1988, 1989). Ideally, Ace saw a child as a seal of the sexual relationship and he always expressed great affection and concern for his son, Tembisa. But Ace's other children were unplanned. He fled from Phalaborwa after he had impregnated his girlfriend, Gladness, and refused to acknowledge paternity of Stella's three children. Such attitudes are very pervasive and men often saw children as belonging solely to their mothers. In this respect, the Caldwell's model of African sexuality may well capture women's perspectives better than those of men.

The alternative models devised by Heald (1995) and by myself (Niehaus 2002a) inform only small details of Ace's sexual biography. They illuminate Ace's fear of death after he had had sexual intercourse with an abortee, and also specific details about funeral customs. But a preoccupation with health did not feature prominently in Ace's narratives about his sexual encounters.

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There are important discrepancies between these models of sexual culture and Ace's life story, and Ace's experiences contain at least three important lessons for the study of sex, culture and society in southern Africa. First, his biography suggests that it is less fruitful to search for a single hegemonic model of sexual culture, than to assume, along with Foucault (1980), that any social setting is characterised by multiple discourses about sex. These discourses seldom crystallize into a single set of meanings, but are often discordant, and may even be contradictory. This was most apparent during adolescence, when Ace's mother, guardians and teachers severely repressed

12. Based on fieldwork in the Baberton district of Mpumalanga, THORNTON (2003) has constructed a roughly similar model, emphasising local conceptions of flows of sexual substance.

any expression of sexuality, but his peers and initiation master incited sexual experimentation. Later in life, Ace's conduct conformed to a traditional model of the *ramotse*—who is the household head, provides for his wife and children and is entitled to keep paramours. But even here, diverse meanings of sex were at play: as procreation, a pursuit of pleasure, and as an expression of masculine domination. Some contexts called for the presence of monogamy. In others it was quite legitimate to be polygamous and to keep paramours. Discourses of hygiene, pollution and taboos also informed Ace's conduct at crucial points in his life.

Second, unlike in these models of sexual culture, social institutions are of central importance in Ace's life story. Whilst Caldwell *et al's* (*ibid.*) model of sexual culture refers only to the family, lineages and kinship; Ace's life story highlights the impact of schools, initiation lodges, migrant labour compounds, and drinking houses. These institutions provide the significant context for sexual discourses, meanings and encounters. We should not seek to associate each of these social institutions with a single discourse. As Goffman (1961) recognised several decades ago, there is often a tremendous difference between the official "house-rules" of institutional representatives, and the unofficial rules of conduct of their inmates. Ace's sexual behaviour was shaped less by the formal discourses of teachers, hostel managers, and drinking-house operators; than by the "counter-culture" of high schools (Willis 1983), by the "under-life" of migrant hostels (Gordon 1977), and by the implicit understandings of drinkers.

Third, Ace's biography points to the importance of distinguishing between what men aspire to, what men say, what men honestly believe, and what they actually do. The failure to make these distinctions undermines the utility of these models. In a now classic study, Holy and Stuchlik (1983: 15-20) argue convincingly that there is no necessary and unproblematic congruence between representational models, normative notions which ascribe meanings to actions, and the specific acts performed by individuals. They assert that representations, norms and actions each have a separate existence as a different domain of social reality. These domains are not homologous, and should not be conflated, nor substituted for each other. These observations are especially pertinent to sexual conduct. As Tuzin (1991) reminds us, the locus of sex lies in the interaction of cultural ideas with psycho-biological impulses. Sexual experience is also personal and private, and is therefore subject to considerable intra-societal variation.

Earlier studies, such as Liebow's (1967) account of street-corner men in Washington DC, may well bear important lessons for understanding the intricacies of men's sexual conduct in a rapidly de-industrialising South Africa. In this classical ethnography, Liebow does not see the behaviour of these men as mere a response to internalised cultural patterns. He argues that they are also constrained by the facts of their situation—by being unemployed or by holding low paid, unskilled, dead-end jobs—to act the way

they do. Street-corner men share mainstream ideals such as the conventional family, and strive to play the roles of father and breadwinner. However, their income is insufficient to support a wife and a family. Faced with a daily situation of failure, Liebow (*ibid.*: 147) argues, these men often desert their families. He writes: “To stay married is to live with your failure, to be controlled by it day in and day out. It is to live in a world whose standards of manliness is forever beyond one’s reach.” To cushion their failure, street-corner men themselves, attribute the failure of marriage to “manly flaws”: such as the need for sexual variety and adventure, gambling, drinking and fighting.

Like many other men of Impalahoek, Ace did not aspire to a situation of middle-class monogamy. Ace’s ideal was to be a successful husband and father, who also kept a few extra-marital lovers for pleasure¹³. This is evident in the special tenor with which he recounted certain events in his life stories (Van Onselen 1993: 510). Ace boasted about his girlfriends at school, took exceptional pride in his ability to support his wife, Iris, and his son, Tembisa, and adamantly defended his extra-marital love affairs by invoking a tradition of polygamy (Spiegel 1991). At the same time, Ace despised the sexual promiscuity of youngsters, such as Neo and Tembisa. But the actuality of Ace’s biography did not match his ideals. At school, Ace fathered an unplanned child. As a migrant, he was shamed when his first wife, Iris, conceived from another man. And after Ace was retrenched from the mines, he failed to re-marry or even to support his lovers. The desperation of his unemployment compelled Ace to rely upon the financial support of his women. Ace also suffered the indignity of having his lovers desert him for wealthier, more masculine, men. It is precisely this “crisis of self-representation”, and the ensuing fear of emasculation, that precipitated his violence towards women¹⁴.

There may well be value to cultural models, and there is certainly merit to the structuralist argument that items carry meanings as part of wider symbolic sets rather than by themselves. For example, Kaspin (1996) warns against the simple reduction of meaning to function. She argues that the claim of ideational systems upon the collective imagination often rests upon their logical coherence. Yet cultural models are not accurate predictors of sexual encounters in the South African lowveld. Diverse meanings inform men’s sexual conduct, these are negotiated in the context of specific social

13. See COLLINS & STADLER (2000) for an informative account of the very diverse meanings of sexual intercourse among young men and women in Bushbuckridge.

14. MOORE (1994) argues that through investment individuals take up specific subject positions in gendered discourses, and construct a self-identity relative to others. However, a crisis of self-representation ensues when the ability to take up or to sustain a particular gendered subject position is thwarted. In this context, violence may be deployed to enforce subject-object relations, to maintain certain fantasies of identity and of power, and to reconfirm the nature of masculinity otherwise denied. Moore’s emphasis on fantasy explains why violence is often the result of a perceived rather than a real threat.

institutions, and situations on the ground constrain men's sexual conduct. Biographies often transcend these limitations and may therefore be of strategic importance for understanding and preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

University of Pretoria, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology.

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ABSTRACT

This article shows that life stories contain valuable lessons for understanding masculine sexuality at a more general theoretical level. I discuss the life story of a thirty-eight year old male resident of Bushbuckridge, South Africa, focusing specifically on his experiences of sexual socialisation, schooling, initiation, labour migration, marriage, divorce, unemployment and sexual violence. I suggest that this life story offers several analytical advances over theoretical models of African sexual culture. It is more likely to reveal the interplay of different discourses on sexuality; to highlight the impact of institutions such as schools, migrant compounds and drinking houses on sexual behaviour; and distinguish between what people say and what they honestly believe, and between what they aspire to and what they are constrained to do. For these reasons cultural models are not accurate predictors of actual sexual behaviour. Therefore, biographies may accord insights of strategic importance in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

RÉSUMÉ

Leçons bibliographiques. Vies, sexes et culture chez les Bushbuckridge, Afrique du Sud. — Cet article montre que les histoires vécues nous permettent de comprendre la sexualité masculine à un niveau théorique plus général. Je présente ici la vie d'un homme de 38 ans habitant à Bushbuckridge en Afrique du Sud, en m'intéressant plus particulièrement à certaines de ses expériences : socialisation sexuelle, scolarité, initiation, migration professionnelle, mariage, divorce, chômage et violence sexuelle. Je suggère que cette histoire de vie permette plusieurs avancées analytiques sur les modèles théoriques relatifs à la culture sexuelle africaine. Elle révèle l'interaction entre les différents discours sur la sexualité et met en lumière l'impact d'institutions telles que l'école, les enclos (*compounds*) de migrants et les bars (*drinking houses*) sur le comportement sexuel, et établit une distinction entre ce que disent et pensent les gens, et entre leurs aspirations et leurs contraintes. Pour ces raisons, les modèles culturels ne constituent pas des instruments fiables de prédiction du comportement sexuel. En revanche, les biographies peuvent ouvrir des perspectives d'une importance stratégique pour empêcher la propagation du sida.

Keywords/Mots-clés: South Africa, biography, culture, sex, AIDS/Afrique du Sud, biographie, culture, sexe, sida.