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Abstract

Contemporary forms of precarity, migration, connectivity, and sociality have transformed what it means to be a man in many African communities. Responding with agency and creativity to various incentives and constraints, Africans have adapted practices pertaining to labour, marriage, and sexuality to the exigencies of modern life amid the impacts of European colonialism, rapid urban growth, economic hardship, and political conflict. Drawing upon ethnographic and historical research to study settings in East, West, and Southern Africa, the articles in this special issue review the social changes that have taken place regarding men's roles and assess prospects for the emergence of counter-hegemonic masculinities.

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Gender, masculinity, urbanisation

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Whether as a research topic or a subject of public discourse, masculinity appears to have risen dramatically in prominence all over the world in recent years. The field of gender studies, once widely misunderstood as a female scholarly space, increasingly incorporates critical analyses of masculinity, and the study of masculinities has grown into a vibrant subfield (Gutmann, 2023). This subfield has especially burgeoned in Africa, as evidenced by an expanding scholarly literature (discussed below). The contributions to this special issue, most of which originated as papers for a three-part panel organised by Bruce Whitehouse at the November 2021 annual meeting of the African Studies Association, engage with important questions for modern sub-Saharan African societies, both in the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Contemporary forms of precarity, migration, connectivity, and sociality have transformed what it means to be a man in many African communities. Responding with agency and creativity to various incentives and constraints, Africans have adapted practices pertaining to labour, marriage, and sexuality to the exigencies of modern life amid the impacts of European colonialism, rapid urban growth, economic hardship, and political conflict. Drawing upon ethnographic and historical research to study settings in East, West, and Southern Africa, the articles in this special issue review the social changes that have taken place regarding men's roles and assess prospects for the emergence of counter-hegemonic masculinities.

The articles focus on three interrelated themes, all of which underline the importance of *masking* in the construction of male selves. First is the construction of male lifeworlds and selves. Contributors examine how modern responses to mobility, economic opportunity (as well as the lack of it), and conflict have fostered nonlinear trajectories of men's social becoming. Social progress towards manhood is often unstable and reversible amid rapid social transformation and economic distress. As men have navigated these fluctuating conditions, they have appropriated a wide array of cultural patterns, from the local to the transnational to the Afropolitan, hoping to adapt existing notions of morality and social hierarchy to the dynamic circumstances of life in their communities. In this context, we can interpret the public face of the male self as a mask worn to hide men's misgivings and doubts regarding their prospects for attaining manhood and enjoying its benefits.

The second theme concerns public representations and performances of masculinity. These representations often focus on hypermasculinity, but they may also embody novel, emerging, and counter-hegemonic aspects. The contributors to this special issue seek to uncover the contradictions and tensions inherent in men's self-fashioning projects and to peer behind the masks that men wear in their public lives.

The third theme examines male responses to the threats they perceive to their gendered privilege. These articles present patriarchy as something always being constituted rather than as a permanent structure. They consider men's strategies to limit or prevent the erosion of their dominant social positions vis-à-vis women. They ask how men's relationships with women are shaped by their desire to keep their masks in place despite the many social and economic forces buffeting them.

As a whole, this collection offers a multi-disciplinary engagement with emerging scholarship on masculinities in a range of African contexts. As a conceptual contribution

to this field, we emphasise performativity as a register for approaching the negotiations that various expressions of masculinities involve, bringing masculinities research into close conversation with scholarship on identity, youth, religion, popular culture, and political participation. Rather than positioning themselves within masculinities research as such, the contributors to this special issue offer up new avenues for cross-thematic reflection, and for enriching more established research fields relating to contemporary Africa with more acute attention to the complex intersectionalities that shape the lives of men (and women).

Matthew Gutmann (1997: 385) famously observed that anthropology has long involved “men talking to men about men” but not “truly examined men *as* men.” Much the same can be said about African studies, with research on formal politics, economics, and ritual largely implicitly focused on men. The 1970s and 1980s saw an important feminist turn in African studies with studies on women and, by extension, gender relations. However, it would take two decades longer for African studies to explicitly examine men and masculinities through a similar gendered lens. This emergence of African masculinities as a subfield was spurred in part by the rise of masculinity studies more generally. Pivotal here was the ground-breaking work of sociologist Raewyn Connell (1995) who articulated the conceptual framework of hegemonic and other masculinities that remains dominant today.

The turn of the millennium witnessed a veritable global explosion of research explicitly interrogating notions of masculinities, as Gutmann (2023) has recently noted. Early works on African masculinities often had a historical focus, grappling with whether the core concept of hegemonic masculinity was useful for African contexts. Much of this research called into question fixed hierarchies of masculine types, stressing instead that historically competing masculine identities across the continent “promoted sometimes divergent images of proper male behaviour within certain contexts” (Lindsay and Miescher, 2003: 6). This scholarship emphasised that African men cannot be easily pigeonholed into a single category, hegemonic or otherwise, and that there are often multiple, conflicting masculine identities at play in any given setting (Miescher, 2005; Morrell, 2001; Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005).

Over the last two decades, research on African masculinities has built on these insights and indeed flourished. One rich vein has been grappling with intersections between masculinities and HIV/AIDS. As the scope of AIDS’s devastation in sub-Saharan Africa became clear at the turn of the millennium, understanding how gender inequalities fuelled the spread of HIV became a pressing concern. Mark Hunter’s (2010) fieldwork in a South African township was a prominent example and revealed how dominant notions of masculinity shaped intimate relationships in ways that placed men, and women, at risk of infection. Similar research in West and East African contexts probed into the rise of romantic love as a bar for modern marriages (Parikh, 2009; Smith, 2006). This expectation of more egalitarian love-based relationships, this research showed, occurred in a context where men’s status remained tied to multiple sexual partnerships, thus leading to greater, not less, secrecy and subversion in relationships. Some research in this vein also investigated whether AIDS prompted more progressive shifts in

masculinity, yet ethnographic studies in Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda found that hegemonic notions of masculinity remained surprisingly resistant to change (Igonya and Moyer, 2013; Mfecane, 2012; Wyrod, 2016).

This resilience of conventional norms of masculinity is tied to another prominent theme: the complex relationship between African men's responsibilities and privileges. Many studies of contemporary African masculinities, especially in urban areas, have stressed the central status of a man's role as the family's economic provider (Cornwall, 2003; Silberschmidt, 2001; Wyrod, 2016). However, widespread under-employment and economic instability have made this an ideal most men struggle to embody. A period of "waithood" has delayed the onset of social adulthood for many young Africans (Honwana, 2012). This struggle has often coincided with an institutionalisation of women's rights, more women working, and intense economic stratification that benefits elite men. The result is that many men harbour feelings of emasculation as economic providers and frustration for failing to live up to this core ideal of manhood. Yet, in most places this sense of emasculation and its resultant "patriarchal anxieties" (Heywood and Ivey, 2021: 1062) coexist with the persistence of other forms of masculine privilege, especially men's sexual privileges and often their authority within the home (Wyrod, 2016). The complexity of this intertwining of men's responsibilities and privileges is a theme in much recent work, including research focused on modern marriage, men's social relationships with other men, and even how African men are positioned in global hierarchies of race and class (Fokwang, 2023; Fuh, 2012; Matlon, 2022; Musariri and Moyer, 2021; Smith, 2017).

Men's positionings in public spaces also include a more political dimension, as local decision-making as well as state bureaucracies continue to be dominated by men in many settings (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014). In this way, African "big men" defend their state-sanctioned gendered privilege and dominate the inner workings of the state, often profiting from the intersectionalities of generation, class, and gender to bolster their positions (Bayart, 1993; Cruise O'Brien, 2003). At the same time, African men are often perceived as potential threats to the established order, particularly when young men occupy the front lines of armed conflict and political contestation (Diouf, 2003). Male combatants at the end of a military career are not only negotiating social reintegration but also public perceptions of them as archetypes of toxic masculinity (Bjarnesen, 2020). Similarly, in social and political activism, young men reflect societal ambivalences around (hyper)masculinities as both foundational and potentially destructive to the socio-political order (Honwana and de Boeck, 2005; Oinas et al., 2018).

Finally, a vibrant and more recent strain of research focuses on African queer and transgender experiences and politics. Pioneering early works in this area chronicled the diversity of sexual relations across the continent, undermining homophobic assertions that homosexuality is un-African (Moodie, 1994; Murray and Roscoe, 1998). While this work is typically not in direct conversation with masculinity studies per se, it nonetheless provides crucial depth and breadth to understanding the range of expressions of manhood in Africa. As countries such as Nigeria, Malawi, and Uganda have passed odious anti-LGBTQ legislation over the last fifteen years, scholarship in this area has

only grown, providing a crucial counter to such trends (Aterianus-Owanga, 2012; Currier, 2019; Epprecht, 2013; Ndjio, 2020; Spronk and Nyeck, 2021; Tamale, 2011).

The articles in this special issue, then, aim to advance research in a subfield that has fully emerged across a range of scholarly disciplines. Most of the authors contributing to this issue are ethnographers, but all try to historicise men's actions and men's social roles while tacking back and forth between comparativist and particularist approaches.

The article by Uroš Kovač and Dorothea E. Schulz, "Masculinity, Morality, and the State in Northern Kenya: The Case of Baringo County's Il Chamus" (2023), examines the shifting path to manhood in one of Kenya's lesser-known Maa-speaking communities. Northern Kenya is widely known for its insecurity and for the practice of inter-ethnic cattle raiding, against which young men are called upon to protect their community. Superficially, this scenario might appear to conform to existing narratives of young African men frustrated by the economic and political constraints that block their progression to adult male status, young men who resort to violence in order to receive the social status and respect to which they feel entitled. Kovač and Schulz show, however, that among the Il Chamus (as among other Maa-speaking groups), the life stage that lies between boyhood and elderhood is very poorly understood by outsiders who commonly depict this stage as a liminal state marked by violence and associated with warrior status. The Il Chamus in fact associate this stage with prosocial moral qualities including discipline, humility, and respect for elders, and their gendered socialisation emphasises the *suppression* of violence. Il Chamus elders, when recruiting "warriors," seek men known for their self-control rather than their aggression. Careful ethnographic research therefore unmasks and exposes the falsity of essentialising narratives that represent inter-group violence as expressing an innate aspect of male behaviour.

Jack Boulton, in his article "Beyond Toxic Masculinity: Reading and Writing Men in Post-Apartheid Namibia" (Boulton, 2023), critiques the concept of toxic masculinity using insights from his fieldwork in Swakopmund, Namibia. Namibians have increasingly evoked this concept over the past several years amid public controversies around gender-based violence. After reviewing the emergence and use of the term toxic masculinity in Namibian and broader English-speaking public discourse, Boulton finds that it contributes to decontextualising and essentialising men and their behaviour. Human identities are fundamentally based on shared experience and collective action, and are never singular, he points out: "we all wear masks, all of the time" (2023: 235). Using an extended ethnographic vignette, Boulton illustrates how everyday actions by working-class men in a Swakopmund township simultaneously point towards and diverge from recognised social norms of masculinity. The most useful concept for understanding men's behaviour is not toxicity, he writes, but masks.

Jesper Bjarnesen's "Back in Youth: Social Unbecoming in the Study of West African Masculinities" (Bjarnesen, 2023) shows how political violence and warfare in Côte d'Ivoire rendered the progression to adult male status both contingent and easily reversible for male ex-combatants. Bjarnesen foregrounds youth status and gender performativity as key lenses through which to view African masculinities. From interviews conducted in the Burkina Faso town of Bobo Dioulasso with men recruited to join the

Forces Nouvelles rebel movement in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire during the early 2000s, he finds that many of these men initially saw participation in warfare as a potential route to the social manhood denied them by economic dispossession. Yet their experiences of warfare and its aftermath generally culminated in disappointment and re-marginalisation. Unable to secure hoped-for posts in the armed forces, these ex-combatants returned to civilian life with little to show for having survived the traumas of armed conflict. Shunned by society, they found themselves thrust back into their previous roles as dependent juniors. Bjarnesen urges scholars to understand gendered social adulthood as highly ambivalent and vulnerable to political-economic shocks. Moreover, he argues, what is often represented as a crisis of African youth (Honwana, 2012) might better be understood as in the plural, as “contextually specific crises of masculinity” (Bjarnesen, 2023: 260).

In his article “Afropolitan Masculinity: Forgeries of Wife-Owning Husbands in West Africa, 1850s-1950s,” historian Ndubueze Mbah (2023) explores the emergence of a new form of masculinity among Africans who were displaced, marginalised, and subordinated during the century following the British empire’s illusory abolition of slavery. By replacing African slaves with various categories of coerced and bonded African labourers – a substitution that Mbah dubs “abolition forgery” – British imperialists created conditions in which inhabitants of southeastern Nigeria became subject to multiple new forms of colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation. Hundreds of thousands of men and women were compelled to become migrant workers on European-owned plantations in Fernando Po or Gabon. Many men in this diasporic population then sought to achieve adult masculinity by mobilising colonial documents and bureaucracy alongside claims of being “freed, civilised, literate, and rights-bearing British subjects” (2023: 274). Central to these efforts was men’s ability to control the labour and sexuality of women. In many cases, Mbah shows, men established a “transimperial traffic in women” in order to achieve this control. These men, prevented by the conditions of imperial subjugation from earning adequate wages or achieving the living standards to which they aspired, came to see “wife-owning” as a necessary component of their modern masculine identities, a crucial feature of the gender mask they fashioned. Thus did “Afropolitan masculinity” help cement lasting gender hierarchies within West African societies.

Following this historical case study, Bruce Whitehouse (2023) provides an ethnographic examination of gender relations, marriage, and heterosexuality in present-day Bamako, Mali. Whereas men in Mbah’s study were driven during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the empty promises of “abolition forgery” to seek greater control over women, Whitehouse’s study “Patriarchal Anxieties and Masculine Sexual Privilege in Contemporary Urban Mali” finds that the conditions of economic precarity created by neoliberalism in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Mali have driven many men in Bamako to adopt similar strategies of controlling women and their bodies through marital and sexual relationships. During this era, male livelihoods have stagnated and women have taken on significant yet generally unacknowledged responsibilities as earners for their households. In this uncertain context, unable to secure the

economic livelihoods and breadwinner roles normatively expected of them, and sensing the steady erosion of their gendered social prerogatives, many men assert masculine ideals either by pursuing polygynous marriage, or by maintaining multiple female sexual partners prior to or outside of marriage. For these men, donning the mask of heterosexual domination via access to additional wives, girlfriends, and/or mistresses makes up, at least partially, for the loss of social status brought on by their stymied economic ambitions. Masculine sexual privilege, to use Wyrod's (2016) term, compensates Bamako men for their inability to live up to their breadwinner roles in the neoliberal era, at least in part. Whitehouse's research asks readers to consider that masculine sexual privilege, far from an expression of male biology, is itself a mask that men create and wear in response to prevailing political-economic conditions.

As a whole, this issue on masks and masculinities aspires to move the scholarly discussion of men and their behaviour in African societies towards a greater appreciation of the wide range of forces that shape men's lives and constrain their choices.


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Jack Boulton is a DFG Walter Benjamin Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institut für Ethnologie, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. He obtained his doctorate in Social and Cultural Anthropology at KU Leuven, Belgium, and is currently researching masculinities and architecture in the urban centres of Namibia.

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Ndubueze L. Mbah received his PhD in African History from Michigan State University. He is currently an associate professor of History and Global Gender and Sexuality Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and a 2022–2023 Joy Foundation Fellow at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Mbah is the author of the award-winning monograph, *Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age*. He is completing a second book

entitled, *Abolition Forgery: A History of the Afterlives of Slavery*, supported by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

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Von Masken und Maskulinitäten in Afrika

Zusammenfassung

Zeitgenössische Formen von Prekarität, Migration, Konnektivität und Sozialität haben die Bedeutung des Mannseins in vielen afrikanischen Gemeinschaften verändert. Als aktive Reaktion auf die verschiedenen Anreize und Zwänge, haben Afrikaner ihre Praktiken in Bezug auf Arbeit, Ehe und Sexualität an die Erfordernisse des modernen Lebens unter den Auswirkungen des europäischen Kolonialismus, des raschen Städtewachstums, der wirtschaftlichen Not und politischer Konflikte, angepasst. Gestützt auf ethnografische und historische Forschung in Ost-, West- und Südafrika, untersuchen die Artikel in diesem Special Issue die gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen von Männerrollen und bewerten die Aussichten für das Entstehen von gegenhegemonialer Männlichkeiten.

Schlagwörter

Geschlecht, Männlichkeit, Urbanisierung