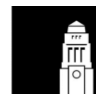

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Kirby, B and van Klinken, A orcid.org/0000-0003-2011-5537 (2021) Religions and masculinities in Africa: Power, politics, performance. In: Starkey, C and Tomalin, E, (eds.) Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society. Routledge Handbooks in Religion . Routledge . ISBN 9781138601901

https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429466953

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This is the final author version of a chapter to be published in Caroline Starkey and Emma Tomalin (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society* (Routledge, forthcoming)

Religions and Masculinities in Africa: Power, Politics, Performance

By Benjamin Kirby and Adriaan van Klinken

Introduction

Understanding the complex intersections of religion and gender in African societies, as anywhere else, requires a multi-layered conceptualisation and analysis of gender; one that not only refers to women, but also to men and to the various ways in which they perform gender and engage in gender relations. This may seem rather self-evident, but in fact the study of men as gendered beings is a relatively recent phenomenon. The following observation with regard to anthropology also applies to other disciplines, such as religious studies and African studies: "Anthropology has always involved men talking to men about men, yet until fairly recently very few within the discipline had truly examined men *as* men" (Gutmann 1997, 385). The study of men and masculinities as a sub-field of gender studies in the social sciences and the humanities emerged in the 1990s, initially with a focus on American, Australian, and European contexts (e.g. Connell 1995; Messner 1997). It was only from the 2000s that this field of inquiry was developed in African contexts (Morrell 2001; Ouzgane and Morrell 2005; Uchendu 2008).

In much of the emergent literature, African masculinities are analysed in terms of crises – for instance in relation to the end of apartheid in South Africa; the impact of the HIV epidemic; the challenges of poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic vulnerability; changing kinship, family and marital relations; situations of violence and conflict, and so on (e.g. Decoteau 2013; Perry 2005; Silberschmidt 2004). These studies explore how men cope with such challenges and adjust to changing circumstances, juggling the demands and expectations of tradition and modernity. They examine how masculinities are embedded in, and reconstructed as part of, wider processes of cultural, social, political, and economic change, reflecting both continuities and discontinuities with established forms of masculinity. The oft-mentioned "crisis of masculinity" does, of course, vary from context to context, as it is informed by specific cultural, economic, historical, social and political conditions. Yet a more fundamental question can be asked about literature that constantly describes masculinity in modern society as in crisis. If, this situation is in fact permanent, then perhaps the somewhat alarmist language of "crisis" is perhaps not particularly helpful as a means of understanding the dynamics of masculinity in society. It is true that masculinity, like society more generally, is constantly in flux as a result of social, cultural, economic and political change. Yet it is also true that men, generally speaking, have shown themselves to be highly capable of navigating those changes, reconfiguring their identities and positions, and continuing to pursue their lives and projects. It is our contention that, for men and masculinities in contemporary Africa, religious practice is one of the key sites through which men navigate and negotiate these changes, often in ways that actually maintain a considerable level of continuity with established cultures of masculinity.

Because in African societies, as in many other parts of the world, religious thought and practice have a considerable influence on people's worldview and provide them "with a

means of becoming social and political actors" (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 2), religion is of vital importance to understanding men and dynamics of masculinity in Africa. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature examining the ways in which religion – religious traditions, institutions, beliefs, and practices – configures men's position in society and shapes ideas about male identity and behaviour. With religion, like masculinity, in Africa being a highly dynamic field, it is important to ask "how understandings and practices of masculinity have been moulded and transformed through religious reform in Africa; and how changing notions, norms, and social practices of masculinity shape and are shaped by religious discourse, innovation, and contestation" (Schulz and Janson 2016, 123). In this chapter, we offer an overview of this literature while also drawing on our respective ethnographic research in two different contexts: Adriaan's with Christian men in Lusaka, Zambia, and Ben's with Muslim men in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Our discussion of religion, men, and masculinities in African societies centres around three different yet overlapping themes: power, politics, and performance. In focusing on power, we examine the power structures in which men and masculinities are embedded and those which they reinforce – both with respect to power relations between men and women and power relations among men – with a focus on how religion shapes these dynamics. Under politics, we discuss the politicisation of masculinity for certain ends and as part of particular agendas, and the role of religious institutions in these processes. The notion of performance allows for a discussion of the part that religious belief, language, ritual, and symbols plays in the everyday navigation of male identity and the negotiation of norms of masculinity.

Power

One of the main concerns that gave rise to debates about religion, men, and masculinities in Africa is gender inequality. These debates emerged in the light of social crises, such as the public health crisis caused by HIV and AIDS, and the crises of gender-based, domestic, and sexual violence. In the light of these challenges, development and social policy scholarship and practice in the 1990s and 2000s became concerned with social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities that would put women and girls at particular risk. Many government bodies as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) launched intervention programmes that sought to empower women. Yet gradually it was realised that gender relations cannot be changed when masculinities are not adequately engaged. This awareness gave rise to a new discourse in which men were "targeted for change" (Bujra 2002). With regard to religion, African feminist scholars associated with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians critically interrogated the role of religious institutions and ideologies that reinforce gender inequality and contribute to women's vulnerability and risk, specifically in the face of the HIV epidemic (Nadar and Phiri 2012). In their analysis, religion (the focus is mostly on Christianity) is one of the constitutive pillars of patriarchy, the gendered system of organising society in which power ultimately is in the hands of men, to the detriment of women. In their work, these scholars develop alternative ways of imagining and organising gender relations with the help of progressive religious thought. These scholars, too, realised that men and masculinities needed to be addressed, and they developed alternative ideas about "liberating" and "redemptive" masculinities (Dube 2016). Through programmes such as EHAIA, the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (a programme of the World Council of Churches), these ideas have been spread among religious leaders and in faith communities (Chitando and Chirongoma 2012).

The above trajectory towards the emerging study of men, masculinities, and religion adopts the concept of patriarchy to develop a critical analysis of the ways in which men and masculinities form part of broader structures of gendered power. The main concern here is with the inequalities between men and women, and with religious ideologies that buttresses

patriarchal masculinities. Indeed, it is important that in the study of men and masculinities, critical attention is paid to questions of power, and related to that, of hierarchy and privilege. “These three form a deadening triad that enforces gender as a binary and static entity and presses religion into the service of legitimatization. Power proclaims and enforces gender disparity, hierarchy maintains it, and privilege denies that such disparity exists” (Krondorfer and Hunt 2012, 198). Yet the concern with patriarchal power, hierarchy, and privilege also runs the risk of limiting the understanding of the complexities of men’s lives and can restrict the analysis of masculinities. First, the constant association of men with power may result in overlooking situations of varying levels of male disempowerment as a result of socio-economic changes, and situations of male vulnerability – socially, emotionally and physically – for example in the face of HIV and AIDS (Silberschmidt 2004). Religious belief and practice can help men to navigate these challenges of everyday life in contemporary Africa, as will be explored later in this chapter.

Second, it can reduce masculinity to one archetype – that of the patriarchal man – overlooking the ways that gender intersects with other social categories, such as age, class, disability and ethnicity, and the multiplicity of masculinities resulting from this. The concept of patriarchy draws attention to the power inequalities between men and women, but the notion of multiple masculinities also asks for an examination of the way in which men and masculinities themselves are structured by a web of power relations (Connell 1995). For instance, how do religious differences structure the dynamics between men who are adherents of different faiths – could it be that Muslim men, in some contexts, are subjugated to a normative ideal of Christian masculinity, and vice versa (e.g. see Wignall 2016)? And how do differences in age, class, and ethnicity among men give rise to multiple, mutually dependent masculinities?

Third, accounts suggesting that masculinity in Africa is massively patriarchal also overlook, as Musa Dube (2009, 216) has pointed out, the diversity of gendered and religious cultures that historically can be found across Africa, including matrilineal traditions (which can still be patriarchal, yet allow for some level of variance of power in gender relations). Charles Ebere (2011) has argued that the feminine imagery for the divine prevailing in some African indigenous religions also allows for gender ambiguity and a relative power for women, although under the influence of Christianity and Islam a much more rigid gender binary and hierarchy has been introduced. As Jacob Olupona (2014) puts it, “the traditional approach of indigenous African religions to gender is one of complementarity in which a confluence of male and female forces must operate in harmony.”

Fourth, even if men and masculinities in general are part of, and benefit from, patriarchy, patriarchy itself is not monolithic and stable but multifaceted and subject to change. As much as religion can be seen as a constitutive pillar of patriarchy, it can also bring about meaningful changes and variations within the same system. To put it simply, one patriarchal form of masculinity is not like the other. For instance, in countries such as Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia, Pentecostal churches have been found to dissociate the biblical and seemingly patriarchal notion of male headship from its connotation of superiority and dominance, and to reinterpret it in terms of male responsibility and “servant leadership” (Burchardt 2018; Chitando 2007; Soothill 2007; van Klinken 2013b). This may seem a merely rhetorical strategy, yet it enables these churches to instil among their male converts a new sense of religious identity and ethical behaviour, helping them to break with previous, more harmful expressions of masculinity associated with aggression, violence, and other behaviours seen as morally irresponsible and as unworthy of “real” men, that is, men as God intended them to be. In that sense, Pentecostal discourses of male headship shape and possibly reshape the ways in which men enact agency, and it produces what the sociologist Bradford Wilcox (2004) in his study of American evangelicalism calls, “soft patriarchs”.

Adriaan's research among Pentecostals in Zambia found that born-again Christian men were likely to narrate their conversion as an experience that transformed not only their religious, but also their gendered selves; moreover, female interlocutors narrated their desire for having born-again husbands, as these were believed to be more committed and responsible (van Klinken 2012; 2013b). Pentecostalism may not break down patriarchy by supporting a radical notion of gender equality, yet it "reponsibilises men" in a way that simultaneously transforms and reproduces hegemonic (that is, established and normative) forms of masculinity (Burchardt 2018). In a similar way, Islamic reform movements have been found to effect changes in male subjectivity and agency by promoting puristic religious ideals (Becker 2016; Wario 2012).

Where the concept of patriarchy draws critical attention to the power relations between men and women, another obvious sub-theme of power relates to sexuality, in particular the ways in which hegemonic forms of masculinity in Africa have become associated not just with heteronormativity but also with homophobia. The seemingly heteronormative character of African masculinities can be linked historically to cultures that emphasise the importance of biological reproduction for economic (survival of the family) and religio-cultural reasons (the belief in ancestors), and which therefore value male heterosexual virility. However, these same cultures often allowed for significant levels of male homo-sociality and indeed, under certain circumstances, male same-sex intimacy (Murray and Roscoe 1998). Colonialism and missionary Christianity introduced more rigid notions of compulsory heterosexual masculinity. In recent decades, postcolonial African states – with the help of Christian and Islamic reform movements – have often continued this mission as part of a particular politics of masculinity in an explicitly homophobic guise (Ndjio 2013; van Klinken and Chitando 2016). Thus, African masculinities are not inherently homophobic; as Thabo Msibi (2011, 55) argues, the relatively recent public manifestation of homophobia is driven by a culture of male anxiety about "an array of social changes questioning patriarchal authority". That is, they are reflective of the earlier discussed "crisis of masculinity" as a result of cultural, social, economic and political change.

Politics

The above discussion has already alluded to various ways in which masculinity has become politicised in contemporary African contexts. Masculinity politics refers to "those mobilisations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and, with it, men's position in gender relations. In such politics masculinity is made a principle theme, not taken for granted as background" (Connell 2005, 205). Obviously, masculinity politics can be driven by both conservative and progressive socio-political agendas, and in many cases its ideological inspiration and objectives might well be rather ambiguous. The present section examines religious forms of masculinity politics, that is, the ways in which religious institutions and movements make masculinity an explicit theme in their discourse and a subject of intervention. One area of study is the work of faith-based organisations involved in development activities, some of which have recently engaged in explicit forms of masculinity politics. Doing so, they sometimes adopt a discourse and strategy sometimes quite similar to secular non-governmental organisations, as Ross Wignall (2016) observes in relation to the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in The Gambia. Another example here could be the work of the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), initiated by the World Council of Churches as a faith-based intervention programme specifically addressing the HIV epidemic, and with a particular focus on men and masculinities (Lusey, Christianson, Sebastian and Edin, 2016). Another area of study, discussed in further detail below, explores how religious reform movements in African settings, both Christian and Islamic, have exhibited an explicit concern with understandings and practices of masculinity as part of their

vision of moral regeneration, not only at an individual level but of society as a whole (Schulz and Janson 2016).

Much of the literature about religion and masculinity politics in Africa (and beyond) has focused on the question of continuity and change; that is, the question how religious masculinity politics continues to maintain hegemonic visions of masculinity while simultaneously allowing for alterations within them in order to accommodate changing circumstances in society (Krondorfer and Hunt 2012). In African contexts, this paradox may be most apparent in Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian movements. As discussed above, these movements are actively involved in masculinity politics, making male gender a principle theme in their discourse. Studies in countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have demonstrated how Pentecostal discourse, on the one hand, problematises the perceived failure of "irresponsible" men in the family, the community, and society at large, with popular or "traditional" forms of masculinity being blamed for the social, economic, moral, and political crises haunting society. On the other hand, they seek to address and overcome these failures and crises by promoting alternative ideals of "born-again" masculinity, defined by responsibility, maturity, and faithfulness (Chitando and Biri 2013; Lindhardt 2015; Soothill 2007; van Klinken 2013b). As much as these ideals are "modern", in the sense that they domesticate men by aligning them to a vision of the nuclear family and encouraging them to be "good" husbands and fathers, they still centre around traditional patriarchal Christian notions such as of male headship and leadership. These patriarchal notions are slightly subverted, for instance by the emphasis on sexual purity and domestic responsibilities that can be seen as "feminising" men. Yet Pentecostalism with its emphasis on the performance of spiritual power also provides men with alternative ways to exercise masculine authority, both in the home, the church, and society at large. Lindhardt captures this paradox with specific reference to Pentecostal pastors mirroring traditional "big men", observing how Pentecostalism "allows for transformations in private while at the same time providing room for the enactment of powerful masculine identities in public" (Lindhardt 2015, 252). This is further confirmed by Adriaan's research in Zambia, a country that in the early 1990s was declared to be a "Christian nation" by President Chiluba, a born-again Christian himself – a declaration now enshrined in the country's constitution. Analysing a sermon series preached by a prominent Zambian Pentecostal pastor, Adriaan has demonstrated that Pentecostal discourse on adult, middle- to upper-class masculinity in this church is also highly concerned with men's roles in socio-political spheres (van Klinken 2016). Hence he argues, building on the work of Ruth Marshall about Pentecostalism as a "political spirituality" (2007), that the construction of a born-again masculinity is a key part of the broader Pentecostal political project of national redemption and the building of a truly Christian nation, in which transformed male subjects embody the ideal citizens.

Similar analyses have been provided of masculinity politics in Islamic reform movements. For instance, Colette Harris in her study of Kaduna city, northern Nigeria, argues that newly emerging Islamic movements are appealing to Muslim men (and women) because they are "legitimising and institutionalising existing notions of masculine superiority albeit with a contemporary twist" while "simultaneously granting some level of recognition to women, producing a seemingly win-win situation" (Harris 2016, 253). Felicitas Becker, in a study on the Zanzibar archipelago in Tanzania, similarly demonstrates how Islamic reformist discourse exhibits concern about men's roles in the family and community as part of a wider sense of social crisis and political discontent, but she also points to a broader agenda, as this discourse further negotiates "the secular gender-equality agendas of the Tanzanian state and aid agencies" and critically examines "long-standing social practices hitherto considered acceptably Muslim, such as the collective negotiation of bride-wealth" (Becker 2016, 160). Islamic reform, in Becker's account, promotes an ideal of masculinity emphasising the role of

men as “heads of, and providers for families”. Indeed, with Becker (2016) and Lindhardt (2015), one could argue that both for Pentecostal and Islamic reform movements, the ostensible concern with “domesticating” men serves as a stepping-stone towards re-establishing male authority in the public and political sphere (also see van Klinken 2016). In other words, as much as these movements are concerned with promoting a particular religious subjectivity among men, they are also concerned with male political subjectivity and citizenship as key to their broader programme of bringing about moral, social and political reform.

Performance

In the previous section, it was seen that religious groups in African settings explicitly promote ideals of masculinity which variously intersect and conflict with dominant models. This section considers how religion can be a site for negotiating masculinity politics in more implicit and mundane ways, drawing attention to “men’s self-understandings and realizations of manhood in everyday life” (Schulz and Janson 2016, 123). Several researchers have sought to counterbalance an emphasis on “official” and programmatic ideals of masculinity among African religious groups by stressing the quotidian improvisation and experience of masculinities by individual actors (Dawley and Thornton 2018; de Blignières 2013; van Klinken 2012; Wario 2012). Masculinity and its attendant politics is, in Felicitas Becker’s (2016) words, “something individuals live and wrestle with, make up and muddle through on a daily basis.”

Several researchers have found the notion of “performance” to be a particularly useful lens for conceptualising masculinities, as in the case of socio-economically marginalised Muslim and Christian men in Northern Nigeria for whom the performance of a certain type of masculinity provides them with social recognition and status (Harris 2012), and in the context of a Catholic men’s organisation in Zambia where the performance of masculinity is modelled after a patron saint who presents an ideal to aspire and embody (van Klinken 2013a). On this reading, the masculine self (as with all gendered selves) is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment”; one that emerges from the self-performances that men repeatedly stage “in the virtual or real presence of others” (Brickell 2005, 40n5). This lens is particularly felicitous for three reasons. First, it brings into view the gendered dynamics that empirical researchers themselves navigate in their field sites, illuminating the gendered identities that researchers and their interlocutors alike assign to one another in ways that shape their findings. Second, performance gestures to both the durability and the malleability of gender constructions, providing a reflexive account of gendered subjectivity that emerges through social interaction. As much as performativity is concerned with social and cultural norms and scripts, it also draws attention to how individuals creatively negotiate, deviate from, and subvert such scripts. Third, by foregrounding how ideals of masculinity tangibly shape social encounters, the question of performance keeps both micro-level and macro-level dynamics in view.

Consider for instance Marloes Janson’s (2016) research in the Gambia with members of the Tablighi Jama’at, an Islamic missionary movement. Janson describes how, during Tablighi missionary tours, husbands are encouraged to take on household chores and childcare so that their wives can undertake missionary work. Because domestic tasks are ordinarily associated with women and even considered “shameful” for men to perform, these vernacular performances of masculinity temporarily deviate from hegemonic Gambian gender norms (Janson 2016, 201). While Janson acknowledges that Tablighi missionaries “eventually reinforce standard norms and roles” once the mission has concluded, this case demonstrates how religious groups may explicitly subscribe to “fixed” notions of religious

masculinity while their masculine performances are far more mutable at a lived level (Janson 2016, 206; 217n24).

Other research has focused on how religion serves as a deposit of symbolic resources for constructing alternative masculinities to culturally authorised ideals which otherwise constrain masculine self-performance in specific contexts (Brickell 2005, 31-32). For example, Ben's research in Dar es Salaam explores how Muslim male subjectivity assists men in navigating a specific form of masculinity politics (Kirby 2017). In this context, everyday political discourse reproduced by government figures and ordinary residents alike regularly subjects an imagined figure of the "idle complainer" to criticism (Kirby 2017: 239). This category denotes a disreputable man (typically young and outside of formal employment) who voices complaints about the failure of the ruling party to resolve their economic precarity, and who offers support to opposition parties or anti-government movements. With its roots in British colonial discourse, this stock character was later adopted by Tanzanian political leaders, serving as a counter-example of the form of national citizenship to which Tanzanains are expected to aspire (Kirby 2017: 188-189). For instance, in 2015, a former Tanzanian president described the opposition coalition and its supporters as "fools and loafers"; a phrase that immediately entered into popular circulation, both in the streets and on social media. As a gender-coded classification, the "idle complainer" label has a tangible influence on the construction of masculinity at the micro-level. This is because it governs which kinds of male political subjectivities meet a favourable reception within social encounters, and therefore which kinds of masculinity can be performed.

In the context of Dar es Salaam, Muslim grassroots activists influenced by Islamic reform movements challenge these authorised frames which structure gendered social interaction. For them, Islam serves as an important point of reference for constructing alternative masculine repertoires whose effects, as in the case of Zanzibar discussed above (Becker 2016), are not confined to religious or domestic domains, but actually entail new forms of male political subjectivity Performances of a distinctively Muslim masculinity have acquired a renewed plausibility in Dar es Salaam because they allow activist men to express political dissent without the risk of being assigned a disreputable masculinity associated with the "idle complainer" label. By using dress practices and gestures, men from diverse economic circumstances foreground the "Muslim-ness" of their masculine performances and their political claims, thereby disposing themselves towards an embedded model of "respectable" masculinity which is rooted in a longstanding form of Indian Ocean citizenship rather than that of the nation (Kirby 2017: 218). This problematises any attempt to dismiss the political critiques of Muslim men using the morally-charged language of "laziness", not only because it would amount to a challenge against the terms of "respectability" which define a "good" Muslim man, but also since it could run the risk of being seen as an attempt to discredit Muslims more broadly (see also Schulz and Diallo 2016). The case of Muslim men in Tanzania illustrates that men are highly capable of switching between different social performances which invoke different (and sometimes distinctively religious) models of masculinity as a means of securing both political expression and individual respectability.

This performative angle complements Becker's (2016) observations about the sermons of reformist Muslim preachers in Zanzibar. In both Tanzanian contexts, religious masculinity emerges as both a site and vehicle of contestation between those who support or tolerate the government, and those that actively oppose it. Indeed, Becker's (2016: 159) work suggests that different rhetorics of (dis)reputable masculinity often engage with notions of "masculinity in crisis" deriving from "donor policy-speak". Attending to everyday performances reinforces Becker's (2016: 181) observations about the multi-dimensional plausibility of Muslim masculinities in contemporary Tanzania: not only do they form part of

a shared programme for political change, they also operate as "individual solutions" to the challenges faced by different men amidst adverse material and political conditions.

Conclusion

Bringing together rather dispersed bodies of literature from fields such as anthropology, religious studies, gender studies, and African theology, this chapter has offered a thematic overview and discussion of the emerging study of men, masculinities, and religion in Africa. The multidisciplinary approach is important to facilitate conversation and exchange between these fields, and to enrich the understanding of masculinity as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. The chapter has mainly focused on masculinities in Christian and Muslim contexts, illustrating the general lack of literature about masculinities in African indigenous religions. There are very few empirical studies that demonstrate how indigenous religious beliefs and practices continue to shape gender relations, men and masculinities in contemporary societies. The three analytical lenses, of power, politics, and performance, allow for a nuanced and multi-layered conceptualisation of masculinities as they are constructed in normative discourses, subjected to interventionist programmes, and negotiated in everyday lives. Religion as a multifaceted phenomenon – religious institutions and communities, religious narratives and beliefs, religious rituals and practices – is part and parcel of the complex processes through which male identity and subjectivity, men's position in gender relations, and ideologies of masculinity are changing over time while simultaneously deriving legitimacy from claims to continuity or retrieval. For instance, Pentecostal discourses of masculinity clearly are a negotiation of modern gender ideals, but are given legitimacy through a language of "biblical manhood".

Given the prominence and vitality of religion as a key factor of social change, as well as the ongoing dynamics of gender in African societies today, the study of religion, men, and masculinities in Africa will continue to be an exciting and productive field of research. One of the key questions to be explored is about the relationship between formal religious discourses about masculinity and grassroots "lived masculinity", that is, how such discourses are being enacted and negotiated in men's daily lives. Another question is about the negotiation of conflicting discourses about masculinity, such as from popular culture, the media, commercial advertising, governmental and non-governmental actors – and how religion is part of this complex field. Finally, with the emerging interest in African queer sexualities, a key area for further research concerns the ambiguity, complexity and fluidity of male sexualities and gender identities, and the instability of their underlying norms.

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