Renegotiating Masculinity in the South African Lowveld: Narratives of Male-Male Sex in Labour Compounds and in Prisons

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Renegotiating Masculinity in the South African Lowveld: Narratives of Male-Male Sex in Labour Compounds and in Prisons

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Sexual preferences, prejudices and stereotypes bedevil the study of male-male sex and the transmission of HIV in Southern Africa. This is particularly so in the context of the growing tide of homophobia sweeping through our sub-continent. Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe and Sam Nujoma, his Namibian counterpart, regularly describe same sex erotic relations as an un-African "disease" introduced by disreputable European settlers. Both repeatedly threaten to expel gays and lesbians from the body politic. In South Africa, visionaries such as Kenneth Meshoe, charismatic leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, often use the phrase "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve". Such bold pronouncements are often contested. But in discourses about HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa the issue of male-male sex that was so important in the early phases of the AIDS pandemic in the United States and in Europe has been pushed aside. AIDS has come to be seen as a heterosexual pandemic.

By documenting same sex practices in different contexts, anthropologists and historians have played a major role in combating ignorance. (See Van Onselen 1983; Gevisser and Cameron 1994; Amory 1997; Germond and de Gruchy 1997; Murray and Roscoe 1998; Epprecht 1998; and Donham 1998.) Of particular significance is the recognition of male-male sex as the dominant expression of sexuality in South Africa’s mining compounds and urban prisons — the pivotal institutions of the republic’s labour repressive economy (Van Onselen 1984:3).

In 1987 during the closing years of the apartheid era, South Africa’s mining industry employed no fewer than 528,922 labour migrants, and there was a daily average of 113,660 prisoners in jail (SAIRR 1989:419,540). Therefore, an adequate response to the HIV pandemic demands a nuanced understanding of male-male sexuality.

Unfortunately, existing accounts seldom transcend a vision of male-male sex as a kind of "contingent inversion" (Freud 1905), occasioned by the non-availability of women as men’s preferred love object. Junod (1927:493–496) writes that in the early 1900s Shangaan miners in Johannesburg called
“husbands” (nuna) asked young men to become their “wives” (nsati). In return for being treated with great kindness and for being given lots of money, the youngsters satisfied their husbands’ sexual urges. Moodie (1988, 1994) and Harries (1990) portray male-male sex on the mines as a source of resistance to the wage economy. They argue that young men agreed to play the part of wives in sexual activity on the mines so that they could more rapidly become husbands at home. By acting as wives they could double their earnings, rapidly pay bride wealth and quickly establish their own homesteads. However, both authors contend that mine marriages declined with the loss of agricultural land in the 1950s. More fully proletarianised workers started establishing permanent relations with women who came to stay in town, and began to perceive homosexuality as disgusting (Moodie 1988:156). Although Campbell (1997:278–9) reports that male-male sex still occurs on the mines, she see it as a result of celibacy induced by the deprivations of total institutions.

As one of the few authors to investigate the situation in South Africa’s prisons, Hayson (1981:27) argues that the great frequency of “homosexual rape” exemplifies the “frustration-aggression syndrome” and is a violent assertion of masculinity in a context of powerlessness.

Achmat (1993) detects a strong heterosexist bias in much of the literature and correctly warns that through the language of cause and effect, existing accounts of male-male sex may well neutralise the significance of the body, desire and pleasure. He argues that colonialism established new constellations of power, and that in this new context men’s bodies were no longer bound by their reproductive functions to secure wealth and status. Achmat suggests that in this process, compounds and urban prisons emerged as new spaces for desire where non-reproductive sex attained new validity. Yet he posits a complete rupture between the “familiar pattern of male domination and female subordination” in the rural areas, and male — male sex in compounds and prisons (Achmat 1993:101).

Whilst this article welcomes much of Achmat’s critique, it warns against merely celebrating all that is positive and pleasurable in same-sex desire, and against presenting modern gay identities as the normative expression of same-sex intimacy. For this purpose I draw on the experiences and recollections of former miners and prisoners in Impalahoek — a village in the Bushbuckridge area of the South African lowveld. Bushbuckridge adjoins Junod’s original field sites and it was the setting for some interviews used by Moodie (1988, 1994) in his analysis of migrant sexuality. During the era of apartheid Impalahoek formed part of the Northern Sotho Bantustan of Lebowa. But in 1994 the village was incorporated into the newly constituted Northern Province and currently has a population of approximately twenty thousand Northern Sesotho and Xitsonga-speakers.
I argue that in the novel contexts of the workplace and prison, men renegotiated pre-existing masculine identities. In this process men’s fantasies of power were of cardinal significance. Moreover, unlike Achmat who conflates men’s experiences in the labour compounds and prisons, I aim to show that there are vast differences in the meanings of male-male sex in these institutions. In the labour compound male-male sex presents a unique opportunity for realising intimacy and romance; in the prison it expresses masculine dominance that is sustained by violence and fear.

**Sex and Power in the Mining Compounds**

Men from Impalahoek have worked alongside Mozambican migrants in the Pilgrim’s Rest gold mines since the late nineteenth century (Bonner and Shapiro 1993), and began to take contracts for the Witwatersrand gold mines from the 1930s (Wilson 1972:6). With increased population pressure in the reserves, particularly after the implementation of “agricultural betterment” and villagisation schemes in 1960, labour migration became indispensable to people’s survival. By 1992, 51 per cent of all male wage earners in Impalahoek were migrant labourers.

The narratives of former mineworkers foregrounded their masculine identities. For many of my informants migration defined masculinity. Only through migrant labour could men build and support a household. Before identity documents were widely available, officials of the Native Recruiting Corporation would take young men aside, lift their pants, and inspect the size of their penis and their pubic hair to assess whether they were old enough to work on the mines. Hereafter all men underwent a thorough medical examination. They were undressed, weighed, examined for scars and disease and had blood samples taken. Anyone weighing less than fifty-five kilograms was deemed too light to tolerate the strenuous physical demands of mine work and was sent home. At the medical centre the recruits were subjected to further tests. They had to dance and climb steps in a heated room. “If you could not endure, fell down and collapsed you failed the test. Then you had to work on the surface — not underground.”

At the training centres of their respective mines the recruits were issued with the proper attire — with overalls, belts, helmets, and boots — and were allocated rooms in the compounds. For the next two weeks they received instructions.
Daniel Mokoenare recalled being told at the Kinross mine, “Here is the first rule. You are not here for girls.” Then they showed us a picture of a woman with a baby on her back. “You are here to work for this woman and her baby”. All workers were also given safety instructions. They were shown film clips of various accidents and were taught how to prevent them. Many workers recited the mantra, “Examine the workplace! Examine you apparatus and tools! Examine your workmates! Correct everything!” The new workers also started learning funekalo — the lingua franca of mining instructions.

Underground workers worked three alternating eight-hour weekly shifts: from 6a.m. until 2p.m., 2p.m. to 10p.m., and from 10p.m. to 6a.m. Their work teams comprised “chesa boys” (cleaners), “pipe boys”, “spanner boys”, “timber boys”, whinge operators, drilling machine operators, and “bhas boys” (now called team leaders). This hierarchy was reflected in their salaries. During the 1990s the first four categories of workers earned about R1,000 per month, machine operators R1,500 in basic salary plus a R600 bonus; and team leaders up to R3,000. (Mozambicans earned slightly more because they were not entitled to unemployment insurance cards.)

All underground workers faced great dangers. They wore strong leather to protect their elbows and knees and always worked in pairs. One informant told us that whinge cables could snap at any time and that rock falls regularly occurred. He showed us the scars where rocks had hit him on the arm. These fears were understandable. The South African mining industry has a long had an alarming accident rate. Within a twenty-year working life an underground worker had a 3 per cent chance of being killed in a work-related accident and a 42 per cent chance of suffering a reportable injury (Campbell and Williams 1996:7).

An appeal to masculine bravery and persistence served as a coping mechanism in the face of such dangerous work. Indeed, in their oral poetry Basotho migrants likened going to work with going to war (Coplan 1987). But not all workers were fearless enough to work underground. Sputla Ngobeni immediately volunteered to work as a security guard “because securities are more respected by the mine managers”. Ben Monna did not mind working as a “tea boy”. “I would not have liked to have worked underground”, he said. “Falling rocks maimed these people. Many people with whom I stayed died. I could not risk my life.”

Miners celebrated their capacity for physical violence as a key component of masculinity (Breckenridge 1998). Valley Ndlovu said that he had never seen as much fighting as he had seen on the mines, and that it was often caused by misunderstandings due to language problems. Paul Mahumane described how discontent about the price of beer escalated into extremely violent faction fighting at a Randfontein mine in the late 1980s.
The mining magnates had the only bar in the mines where they sold beer. We miners saw how the price of beer increased, but not our salaries. We were unanimous about the exploitation of the bar. We said that whoever drank from the bar would be killed. We fought until 1987 when the bar and all the cafés on the mine were closed. But the whites used divide and rule against us. They realised that the Xhosas wanted beer a lot and spoke to them. They gave them beers free of charge and supplied them with knobkierries, spears and pangas, taught them to faction fight and ferried them from one compound to another. First the Swazis fought the Xhosas. It was so fierce. The Basotho then decided to deal with them. They would wake each other early in the morning and go down to the mine with sharpened steel rods. Many people were killed inside the mine. The Basotho asked you if you thetha [‘speak’ in isiXhosa] or if you bua [‘speak’ in SeSotho]? If you say thetha you are dead. You would be thrown into a dark pit and would die there. Eventually the Xhosas had to go.

Migrants resided in single sex dormitories at the mining compounds. Whilst their work teams were ethnically integrated, specific dormitories were allocated for Shangaan, Tswana, Pedi, South Sotho, Pondo, Xhosa and Zulu workers. A few older migrants recalled that they once slept with blankets on concrete bunks without mattresses and were served meals comprising mainly soup, cabbage and porridge. But by the 1980s miners slept on double-decker steel beds with mattresses. Their dormitories had wardrobes, heaters and fans. All compounds were equipped with change-rooms, wash rooms, kitchens, laundries, television sets and well-stocked beer halls. Workers ate what they liked. Each dormitory accommodated between eight and sixteen men, who were represented by a sibonda [leader] in their dealings with the compound manager.

The administrative control of the compounds was vested in white compound managers, their headman and security guards, whose major task was to produce a satisfactory flow of labour down the shaft every morning (Moodie 1994:76–118). To meet this aim they enforced a host of regulations. No unauthorised visitors, women, children or hawkers were allowed within the compound premises. Workers were not allowed to bring liquor into the compound from outside, or to drink inside their dormitories. They were also prohibited from arriving late or in an intoxicated state for their shifts, from bearing weapons, smoking cannabis (dagga), making an excessive noise, or from roaming about at night. The security guards were empowered to commit any miner to a lockup, and punished workers by making them carry coal and meat. The guards also called the police to arrest those guilty of serious transgressions.

The most obvious contradiction that arose from the foregrounding of masculinity was the absence of women; an absence that threatened to deprive men of sexual contact, intimacy, domesticity and of their very manhood. Until the suspension of apartheid’s draconian influx control laws in 1984, women were prohibited from entering the compounds. Women found it virtually impossible to secure alternative accommodation. A former employee of the Penge asbestos mine recalled that whenever the wives of migrants visited them in the 1960s, they asked local people to accommodate them or built a temporary shelter from
stone, slate and canvas. Mine management often phoned the police to demolish the shanty and to arrest the wife. Fortunately this situation changed. By the 1990s certain sections of the administrative and security personnel were entitled to houses, and wives could temporarily reside with their husbands in the mines’ married quarters. Migrants were also entitled to secure accommodation in the townships. But there were severe housing shortages. For example, Justice Mokoena shared a house with the family of his mother’s brother (*malome*). There were only two small bedrooms and Justice shared a bed with his cousin.

Men did not only view sex as necessary for pleasure. They perceived heterosexual intercourse as ensuring a balanced supply of blood, essential to the maintenance of good health. First a man injected semen (known as white blood) and then absorbed or “sucked in” the woman’s blood and vaginal fluids. Prolonged celibacy caused poorly regulated bodily fluids, short temper, recklessness, depression and an inability to think clearly (Campbell 1997:278). This problem was particularly acute because the healthy food men ate on the mines allegedly heightened their sexual prowess.

Masturbation — known only by the Zulu word *chocotcha* or by the Afrikaans *skommel* — was strictly taboo. Men feared that when masturbating their penises sucked in air and that this caused sickness and AIDS. Some miners even wore condoms when they masturbated in the change-rooms.

Most men sought to satisfy the physical demands of their manhood outside the compounds. Contrary to Goffman’s (1961) ideal type of a “total institution”, the barriers to social intercourse between miners and the outside world were by no means absolute. Migrants could leave the compound premises whenever they were off duty and were free to sleep in the townships overnight.

Men could easily locate sex workers (*kwababane*) whose services were relatively affordable. Women loitered around the gates of every mine. In the 1990s Witbank’s coal miners could purchase the services of housewives in the townships adjoining their compounds, or those of professional sex workers who arrived from Durban each pay day, for between R80 and R200. Other miners placed R50 in the zips of their pants to persuade the women who sold clothes, fruit and beer at the compound gates to have sex with them in the bushes. Outside the Vlakfontein mines, five women shared a shanty, from where they sold liquor and engaged in the commercial sex trade. White businessmen also capitalised on this lucrative market. At Klerksdorp a white man owned a brothel within walking distance from the mine. Here miners could spend the entire night with beautiful young Xhosa women for R250. On a farm strategically located between two Stilfontein mines a wealthy businessman accommodated about one hundred young sex workers from Lesotho. The women paid rent of R90 per month, and the farm workers sold milk, beer and cannabis to the customers.
However, in a cultural ethos that condemned women with multiple partners as unacceptable (*bogega*), relations with sex workers were not conducive to masculine dignity. One informant explained:

> In our culture a man is allowed to have three wives. But a woman… She is supposed to respect a man, to have babies, to clean and to do domestic things … Prostitutes lower a man’s dignity. After you have *chowed* [eaten, had sex] she will have a bath and will *chow* again. Because they have so many different men prostitutes spread venereal diseases.

Another miner added, “These women were so fast. The next day they would not even recognise you”. Unlike the well-known ethnographic case of Nairobi (White 1990), sex workers did not provide men with the comforts of home. At most they enabled men to release sexual tensions. An informant who valued this service argued, “A man is a man. For us one round is enough. We can do it in the veld and we can share the same woman. It does not really matter”.

From the viewpoint of intimacy a more satisfying alternative was to establish *bonyatsi* relations with township women. *Bonyatsi* denoted a regular extramarital relationship in which men provided intermittent amounts of money and gifts to their paramours (*dinyatsi*, sing. *nyatsi*), but did not exchange these directly for sex (Spiegel 1991). Township women generally sought after miners as lovers: miners earned relatively good wages and could easily be identified by their armbands. Betwell Mnisi claimed that he proposed love to any “good-looking woman” he met on the streets of Witbank. If she accepted his proposal, Betwell would make an appointment to meet her in a bar lounge, in the hope that this would lead to a sexual relationship. Older men tended to have more dignified *bonyatsi* relations with domestic assistants who worked in the white suburbs. In some instances these affairs even ended in marriage.

Men’s *bonyatsi* relations with township women were more likely to meet their desires for the comforts of home. But as in the case of men’s fleeting sexual encounters with sex workers, the financial component of *bonyatsi* could be overriding. In the words of Betwell Mnisi,

> You won’t pay for sex, but you’ll spend a lot of money. You’ll have to buy the woman liquor. She’ll drink Crown or Hardies [cider] and that sweet stuff is expensive. Maybe she’ll invite her friends. Then you spend more. When you sleep with her you also have to buy beer for the man who owns the house. It could cost R100 to R150 if you include transport. Then when you get to bed you’ll be drunk and you won’t be able to perform — especially with brandy. You’ll only come 
> [ejaculate] after hours.

The notorious Russian gangsters could also beat any migrant involved with women of their township. At Stilfontein the Russians stripped a migrant and chased him, naked, down the streets back to the compounds. Miner’s wives resented township women. A man’s failure to send regular remittances could result into an unexpected visit from his wife. (Before 1960 compound managers
could deduct half of the husband’s wages and arrange for his wife to collect these at the recruitment offices in Bushbuckridge.)

In the compounds male-male sexual relations more closely approximated heterosexual marriages at home. Unlike commercial sex, these relations enabled migrant men to assume the role of husband at work, to engage in intimate romantic liaisons with a faithful partner, and to enjoy the comforts of home. Junod (1927) writes that at the turn of the previous century Shangaan miners paid up to £25 in bride wealth to the boy’s elder brother, and killed a goat to signal that they had entered into a binding contract for the whole time that spent on the compounds. In addition, the husband gave his wife £1.10 at the end of each month. Older informants recalled having observed similar marriages. Joseph Monna said that at the Stilfontein gold mines, Mozambican, Xhosa and Zulu men took boys as wives during a public ceremony. In front of hundreds of witnesses, they presented their boys with gifts of trousers, dresses and colourful blankets to signify the start of their marriage. At the end of their contract the husband gave his ‘mine wife’ £30 to take home. Joseph personally abhorred this practice, but described it as part of the lifestyle of the ethnic other. Another informant said that at Vlakfontein boys had the prerogative of choosing husbands.

Every Saturday there was a wedding. The Xhosa and Pondo sang and danced in front of our rooms. They would dance, jump up and down, and would pull their blankets so that their buttocks and genitals stuck out. They only covered it with the shell of the maraka fruit. Everyone went there to listen to the nice songs and to see what happens. The young ones would choose any man they think would take care of him. They would be married from that time until the contract expired.

Evidence from the lowveld does not support Moodie (1988, 1994) and Harries’ (1990) contention that mine marriages were no longer a common feature of life in the compounds after 1970. Though these marriages were certainly less formal, informants insisted that they were still extremely pervasive. Senior migrants still yearned for power, romance and domesticity, whilst junior miners’ desire for money had not abated. Sputla Chiloane recalled that when he had newly arrived on the Witbank mines as a twenty-one year old novice in 1987, up to ten men proposed love to him each day. Sputla said that he declined these proposals, but that his friends who accepted were immediately given R600. He specifically recalled how one man offered a youngster R200 for a single round of sex. A young man who accepted such a proposal lived as “wife” (msisa or nsati) of his senior partner behind an enclosure of curtains (madia dia), shared his bed, regularly offered himself for thigh or anal sex, undertook various domestic tasks. “She” cooked, washed her husbands’ clothes, polished his shoes, fetched rations in the kitchen, added sugar to strengthen his home brewed beer, and accompanied him to town. In return the wife received an additional amount of about R300 per month.
Many senior migrants preferred mine wives to sex workers and to township women. Informants said that it was easier to propose love to one’s younger co-workers, and cheaper to have sex with men. Men allegedly ate less expensive food than women did, and never demanded clothes. Moreover, informants saw sex with male partners as less dangerous:

I have personally asked the elderly men why they prefer boys. They tell me that women bite. With a woman you can become ill and can get STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] and you can even die if she has committed an abortion. With women there is also AIDS. They say that it is safe with a young boy. He won’t transfer any diseases to you.

Mine marriages were also shaped by seniority and dominance. Nearly all the men who kept mine wives were team leaders (bhas boys), senior underground workers, or sibonda in the compounds. Mozambicans, who had a reputation as tough underground workers, were deemed to be particularly fond of male-male sex. Informants speculated that sexual contact with women could weaken the potions Mozambicans used to attain influential positions.

The Mozambicans were not well educated, but after three months they would be made a headman. Most of them are leaders in the shafts. They always had nice rooms. If a Mozambican looks for a job today he’ll get it. A herd boy from Mozambique can get his father’s position on the mines. If a Mozambican tells his boss, ‘I’ll phone Maputo to call my relatives’, the white man will employ them. I think this is because they eat matanyola [have thigh sex]. Women will weaken them … We rarely saw a Mosotho in a senior position. If there was a Mosotho in such a position we suspected that he had a male wife.

Seniority predicted sex roles. Being a husband exaggerated a man’s masculinity and enabled him to be a “real man” (monnana na) on the mines. The mine husband suffered no stigma. He achieved honour by subordinating other men sexually, being polygynous, being a provider and enjoying the comforts of home. One husband never ate in the kitchen. “He said that his food must be cooked by a wife — not by a machine”. Moreover, erotic attraction towards men predominated in a cultural milieu that foregrounded masculine beauty. A man’s love for his mine wife could be extremely intense. On the Witbank coal mines one husband hung himself after he discovered that another man had had sex with his mine wife. The distraught husband took his wife’s clothes, shredded them and put the remnants in a bag. He then hung the bag from the rafters and placed the noose around his own neck.

Mine marriages, in turn, feminised the male wife. Male wives were rarely older than thirty, were always clean-shaven, and mimicked women in their hairstyles, clothing and mannerisms. On weekends they accompanied their husbands to town to have their hair straightened, permed, or braided like those of a woman by hairdressers. Mine wives always wore attractive feminine clothing — headscarves, floral dresses or tight trousers. One perplexed informant asked me, “What kind of madness is that? These men wore very expensive dresses. I would
have liked to have bought dresses like that for my wife [at home], but I could not afford it”. Mine wives also wore rings as a sign of their attachment and painted their fingernails. They did not participate in sport, never fought, spoke to their husbands in high-pitched voices, and drank cider or wine rather than beer. Team leaders ensured that their wives were not given strenuous manual labour, and often sent their wives on sick leave. At Kinross, a team leader reportedly hid his wife in a secluded place whilst all the other men worked.7

Men had diverse motives for becoming mine wives. But we cannot exclude purely financial considerations and physical coercion. Jonas Mohlala recalled that at Stilfontein:

Things such as matanyola [thigh sex] were there … The bhas boys would make us work and toil like hell and will then tell us to come to their rooms at night. In that way [by having thigh sex] we will get some relief and won’t have to work like hell anymore.

Team leaders and isibonda occasionally raped newcomers on the mines. The young men had no recourse to justice. “It was very humiliating to be raped. We served our families and could not go back home. We were also afraid of the bhas boys.”

Many young men who accepted the role of wives lacked heterosexual experience. At home they roamed about as herd boys and had few opportunities to meet girls. To prevent teenage pregnancies parents prohibited their daughters from forming attachments with boys. These young men only engaged in thigh sex with young girls, or occasionally also with their male compatriots. They perceived their sojourn to the mines as an educational experience, and sexual relations with elders as part of their socialisation into becoming powerful men.

**Sex in Jail**

As policing has become more effective in Impalahoek increasing numbers of men have been imprisoned. More police were deployed to suppress the political uprisings in the latter years of apartheid, and to deal with the escalation of crimes such as robbery in the 1990s. Until 1958 there was only a single police station in the Bushbuckridge district. Now there are six.

We interviewed eleven prisoners. Scotch and Big Vincent served the longest sentences: Scotch was imprisoned from 1962 to 1983, and Big Vincent from 1980 to 1988. The other interviewees served sentences of between one month and six years. They were incarcerated in the holding cells at the Acornhoek, Hazyview, Tulumahashes and Standerton police stations; in the medium-term prisons of Nelspruit and Bethal; and in the Baberton maximum-security prison.

Our informants were generally secretive about the nature of their crimes. Big Vincent said that he was wrongly convicted of rape, and Andries, who served
only six years of his twelve-year sentence, described himself as a political prisoner. Jack Malapo was found guilty of assault, Freddy Usinga of stealing a firearm and of robbery, and Jabu Mnisi of attempted murder. (Jabu shot someone who broke his window.) Elleck Malatsie was detained for participating in a march to protest against the presence of the Mankweng riot squad in Bushbuckridge.

The dominant theme in the narratives of former prisoners was how their degrading treatment deprived them of an active masculine identity. I commonly heard men say, “in prison they make you a wife”.

Upon admission, wardens inspected inmates’ bodies for any marks, tattoos indicating prior membership of prison gangs, and for signs of disease. The wardens then issued them with prisoners’ clothing and escorted them to their cells. Inside the cells older prisoners put the newcomers through a series of humiliating trails. Ellek Malatsi said that at the Acornhoek police station the older inmates asked him to sit on a wall and to pretend to cycle, and hit him with shoes they tied to a belt. They also commanded Ellek to act as a drilling machine. He had to put his finger in a small hole and circle around the hole until he was so tired that he collapsed.

Over time conditions in the prisons had not improved a great deal. In the 1960s up to one hundred inmates shared a single cell. They slept in pairs on sisal mats and on cement bunks. In the 1980s political activists were detained under the most adverse circumstances. When Elleck Malatsi and thirteen other Comrades were held in custody in a storeroom at the Tsakane police station, they slept on a cement floor, were issued with only eight blankets, could not wash, and were fed only oranges and bananas. The police constantly interrogated and beat them, and forced them to frog jump from the police station to a nearby dam. In times of drought the holding cells of the Acornhoek police station were without water and their toilets did not flush. In 1998 the prisoners protested against this intolerable situation by smearing faeces on the prison walls.

Prison cells were still extremely overcrowded in the 1990s. The holding cells of the Acornhoek police station each held ten double-decker beds; the cells of medium-term prisons such as Nelspruit about fifteen double-decker beds; and those at the Baberton maximum security prison up to twenty beds. Unlike the dormitories of the mining compounds, inmates of the prisons were not segregated by ethnicity or by the category of crime they had committed. Basotho, Shangaan and Zulu robbers, rapists and murderers shared the same cells.

The predictable and boring routine of prison life undermined men’s autonomy. At 7 a.m. all cells were unlocked, all prisoners were counted, and asked to register any complaints. Wardens then marched the prisoners to the kitchen in two straight lines. Each morning they ate a breakfast comprising two slices of bread, soft porridge and a cup of tea. The prisoners usually ate fast, to make
way for others. From the kitchen they were led to the quad to relax and then occupied themselves with their own tasks. At midday the prisoners were served large slices of bread called ‘bare-head’ (kaalkop in Afrikaans) and a cup of fruit juice or cold tea. Supper was served at 3 p.m., comprising of starch (maize porridge or maize rice); vegetables (potatoes, cabbage or carrot); and meat (pork, beef, chicken) or soup. The inmates then cleaned the passages, were again counted and locked in the cells.

We only ate and slept. That’s all. We did nothing to pass the time. We did no work and no sport. The quad was small — only one meter wide and three meters long. We only walked and after you were tired of walking we played casino [a card game] or marabaraba [a board game].

Some prisoners were given study rights, and others could work for a small wage. Gardeners, carpenters and builders earned about R7 per month, and boilermakers and chefs R18. Only in maximum-security prisons such as Baberton did inmates work outside to clean dog cages, tend pigs, herd cattle, cultivate fields or build dams. They were called the Ferreiras (a common Afrikaans surname). Until 1990 each prisoner received a packet of tobacco in addition to his wage. The workers saved their earnings or purchased tea, bread, sweets and cold drinks at a tuck shop inside the prison. Though prisoners could receive visitors until 17h00, many were incarcerated too far away from home to retain contact with their kin.

The wardens, who controlled the prison regime, completely dominated prisoners’ lives. Some were oppressive and made life hard. The Shangaan wardens at Tulumahashe were said to discriminate against Basotho, and the wardens at Baberton punished prisoners for the smallest misdemeanours, such as not standing properly in the queue. Wardens also conducted unexpected searches for cannabis and weapons. They deprived the troublemakers of food, locked them in icy refrigerators, or confined them to single cells. Men complained that the wardens were frequently drunk, made a lot of noise in the passages, or were grossly incompetent. For instance, wardens mistakenly informed Jomo Manzini’s relatives that he had died. However, there were a few wardens who sided with the prisoners and smuggled cannabis, liquor and weapons into the cells for a nominal fee.

In a cultural context where masculine power was associated with the capacity to consume (Schatzeberg 1993:446), constant hunger expressed the powerlessness of inmates. All informants complained about the quantity and quality of food in jail.

Nobody was satisfied with the food. You won’t hold out from 3 o’clock in the afternoon until 8 o’clock in the morning without anything. That is seventeen hours! We would gulp the little food they gave us in a few minutes and after finishing we always desired to eat more.

With food you will never eat and be satisfied. Throughout my stay there [in prison]
we ate *samp* [maize rice]. The porridge was too soft and too little. This was very difficult for me.

Prisoners who were deprived of food were sometimes so hungry that they ate a mixture of toilet paper, toothpaste and salt. Indeed, those who always begged for food could even become the targets of witchcraft. The Ferreiras could manufacture poison from the head of a snake or a lizard, or from a flower called *nvuthuza*, and use it to cripple their enemies.

Prisoners sought to gain some control over their lives through their membership of prison gangs such as the Big Five, 26, 28 and Air Force. (See Hayson 1981; Van Onselen 1983; and Lötter 1988 on the structure, ranking and multi-ethnic and nationwide organisation of South African prison gangs.) All of our eleven interviewees were well acquainted with the workings of these gangs. (Three belonged to the Big Five and one to 26.)

Members of the Big Five wore tattoos of a cross or swastika and were known as “Hitler’s soldiers”. I was told, “We admire Hitler because he wanted to conquer the whole world”. The Big Five mainly spoke Afrikaans and *tsotsitaal* (the a language of township thugs) and collaborated with the prison authorities to secure privileges such as extra food and an early release. Despite the references to Hitler, member of the Big Five referred to themselves as peace-makers. Their slogan was, “We don’t meet with blood”. The Big Five opposed all other gangs, reported anyone who smuggled knives or cannabis to the prison authorities, and disciplined any of their own members who robbed, stabbed or raped other inmates.

The tattoo of the 26 was a dollar and a hand clasping a moneybag and they were known as the Krugers (after the Kruger Rand). Their members were primarily those arrested for crimes such as robbery, theft or car heists. They devoted themselves to making money in jail by stealing from fellow inmates, gambling, and by trading in cigarettes and cannabis. Jabu Usinga who was a member of the 26, bought cigarettes and tobacco from the prison wardens and sold these to fellow inmates at inflated prices. He asked fifty cents for a single cigarette or for a matchbox of pipe tobacco and made between R17 and R50 each week. Other members of the 26 gang bought cannabis from wardens, hid it underneath their mattresses, and smuggled it past checkpoints by wrapping it in cellophane and by pushing it up their anuses. This trade was extremely lucrative. Outside jail an “arm” of cannabis cost between R30 and R50: inside it cost R150.

The 28 — South Africa’s oldest prison gang — was an outgrowth of Nongoloza Mathebula’s Ninevites (Van Onselen 1983). Their tattoo was a heart with a vagina inside, or a circle with four arrows extending from it. The former showed their desire for sex; the latter that for them all directions end up in prison. Members of the 28 were mainly long-term prisoners — sentenced for rape and murder. They spoke mainly Zulu and Afrikaans and operated mostly in the dark. The 28 were known for extreme violence.
The Air Force — also known as the flying Springboks — had the tattoo of an eagle with the letters RAF (for Royal Air Force) on the left and the numbers 2, 3 and 4 on the right. In contrast to the other prison gangs, the Air Force saw everything of value as located outside the prison. Their sole aim was to escape.

They [Air Force] hate to be arrested and can only talk of going out. They never carry a lot of bags. Their hands are always free. This is so that they can escape any time … They don’t deal with picaninis [young male lovers] and don’t like eating too much. When they eat food they get late. They always fly. They don’t like to own anything. Not even a rug. They only like you if you have a plan to escape.

The Air Force 2 attempted to escape from police stations, the Air Force 3 from medium-term prisons, and the Air Force 4 from maximum security prisons. They spoke a coded language that nobody else could understand and were known for their fierce loyalty. There were stories of legendary escapes in the folklore of every prison. For example, in Nelspruit, Ditiro Moeng and Flick Mohlala cut the bars of their cell with the blade of a steel-saw and escaped with a rope that they made from cutting blankets.

All prison gangs were hierarchically organised and maintained their own internal discipline. The Big Five had no fewer than twenty-five ranks. These included pillars, foot soldiers, witnesses (who gave advice), and peacemakers; as well as the shine (a type of overseer who investigated cases), judgement judge, advocate (who defended gang members accused of misdeeds), battle machine, marshal, spade jack (who planned attacks on other gangs), head, vice-president, queen and the president. The queen was the president’s wife, and was also known as ‘mother of the children’. It was the queen’s duty to plead for mercy on behalf of all soldiers.

Anyone accused of breaking the gang’s rules or of disobedience was given a formal hearing. Evidence was presented against him, lawyers defended him, and the president gave a judgement. Gang members immediately executed the punishment. They could beat the offender, throw him to the ground and walk on top of him, or could kill him. In Bethal gang members rolled a blanket around the neck of an offender, pulled in both direction to suffocate him, and kicked him on the stomach. In 1996 the 28 killed a prisoner in Baberton, dissected his body with knives and actually ate the liver.

Violence was also extremely pervasive between the different gangs. In January 1996, five inmates were killed when the 26 and the 28 fought the Big Five in the Baberton prison. The fight occurred after a member of the 28 raped a member of Big Five, and “someone swore at someone else in the kitchen”. The inmates fought each other with knives, sharpened spoons, broomsticks, table legs, and even with the frames of portrait holders. (Prisoners displayed endless creativity in manufacturing weapons.)
The violence by prison gangs enabled a few men to assert their dominance, but created intense insecurity and fear among most prisoners. To cite some of my informants:

From the day you arrive till the day you get out you thank God for each day you survive. They might hit someone with a mug in the kitchen and then the fighting would start. Then you have to flee. You always doubt if you will be alive tomorrow. You become unsure of your faith.

In Baberton life is not safe. Maximum is very dangerous. It is rotten. You are always on the watch out for those who can harm you. With a mere nail they can take your eyes out. You sit like a rabbit with your feet underneath your body. You sit very quietly.

Those who stood outside the gang structure were always the most vulnerable. They were called insulting names such as “free flower”, “moron”, “know nothing”, or “someone from the bush”.

Male-male sex expressed the hierarchical order of prison gangs and was sustained by violence, hunger and fear. Unlike in the case of labour compounds, the barriers to social intercourse between prisons and the outside world was absolute. In prison folklore the only episodes of heterosexual intercourse occurred when corrupt wardens arranged women for the Ferreiras at an exorbitant fee. Men also told a story of a hermaphrodite warden who regularly paid prisoners to have sex with him.

Prisoners distinguished between consensual and coercive sex. Consensual sex was preceded by a proposal and normally took place within the framework of a formal relationship between a dominant lebosa (“the he one”) and a subordinate picanini (“boy”) or mfana wa misa (“boy wife”). Our interviewees’ estimates about the frequency of these relations vary from three men in a cell of twenty who kept juvenile wives, to two husbands and six wives in a cell of sixteen. Sexual partners were nearly always members of the same gang. They had sex within an enclosure in the cell, made from blankets and sheets (madiadia). But in the case of short-term liaisons the husband proposed to the boy in the quad, offered him a gift, and they then had sex at the end of the passage where nobody could see them.

The husband provided his lover with extra food, cigarettes, cannabis and small amounts of money, and was expected to protect him at all times. He might give his partner his entire plate of food and then help the kitchen staff wash dishes in exchange for some of the leftovers. He alone penetrated the “boy wife” during thigh or anal sex. However, provision appears to have been the most important criterion of masculinity. Indeed, informants described the hermaphrodite warden in Barberton as a lebosa because he proposed and paid for sex. Provision was also more important than age. “Money talks in prison. Sometimes a small boy would even fuck an old man. This is because the old man suffers and wants to eat and smoke”.

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The most desirable “boy wives” were fat, young, and had a light complexion. Like the mine wives, they acted in an effeminate manner. They were clean-shaven, spoke in feminine tones of voice, wore towels around their waists when going to shower, and used names like Sarah, Sebongile, and Mmabatho. The “boy wife” washed the husband’s clothes, swept his cell, made him tea, and relayed messages for him. Many young men took the initiative and offered themselves as wives for others in order to obtain extra food, money, cannabis and protection. Big Vincent said that he acted as a wife for Danger and Lucky — two senior prisoners.

Danger was my husband in Standerton. He was one of the prisoners whom they brought from Pietermaritzburg because they killed a convict. Danger was a Big Five. I loved him because he was a boxer and he protected me. When a fight starts you run to him. I had to kiss, romance and caress him … Prison life is rotten. This man killed his children on my thighs. He made me a graveyard … Lucky worked in the prison gardens. He supplied me with vegetables he stole outside.

The instrumentality of these relations was apparent when Jabu Usinga committed suicide after another man had taken his “boy wife”. Jabu cut his penis with razor blades and then swallowed the blades. Yet Jabu’s former lover was unperturbed. “In prison there is no love. You don’t sympathise with anyone else. You only sympathise with yourself — that there is nobody to help, supply you and support you.”

Coercive sex or rape (go kata, “to push down”) was extremely pervasive. Bekker Malinga, a warden at the Baberton prison, sexually assaulted boys in the showers and gave them cigarettes or R10 not to report him to the authorities. Gang members frequently raped newcomers as a form of initiation. At the holding cells in the Acornhoek police station the entire 28 gang had thigh sex with newcomers inside a shelter made from blankets. Rape victims were usually too intimidated to report their attackers. Junior prisoners feared that if they refused to have sex with senior gang members, the latter could place cannabis or weapons on their beds, and notify the wardens. Andries Mapayile relayed how he was raped during his stay in the Baberton jail:

I was from the sports ground and I wore short pants so my thighs were exposed. I was not aware that this could happen. I noticed nothing and I walked down a passage. Suddenly someone switched off the light and it was totally dark. Then they attacked me from behind and they raped me. There were many of them, maybe four. They were the 28 and the 26. These are very troublesome gangs. Fortunately they only did it in the thighs … To save my life I kept quiet. Had I complained they would have taken me to the single cell. One thinks that the police are protecting you. But when you are released and go back to the cell the gangs can kill you.

In 1989 Sigoto — a member of Big Five — captured a boy who was on trial in Nelspruit, gagged his mouth, and raped him. A warden saw Sigoto, beat him with a baton and confided him to the single cell. Sigoto was then re-sentenced and forced to serve an additional two years. However, in many cases the wardens
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turned a deaf ear to rape. Jomo Mohlala told me that he once awoke at night and heard someone crying. The wardens switched on the light and caught a member of the 28 raping a newcomer. When the wardens asked him, “What are you doing?” the intruder replied that he had merely come to ask the newcomer for a cigarette. Despite protestations by the other prisoners, the wardens accepted this explanation.

Gangs such as the 28 and the Big Five raped the “free flowers” who were not gang-members. Should anyone rape a member of a rival gang a contest for power would ensue.

Unlike miners, prisoners expressed grave concern about the dangers of male-male sex. Jomo Mohlala recalled that one boy had to be treated in hospital after the other prisoners had anal sex with him. Other comments included:

Because the prisoners take male wives there will be a lot of disease. When men have sex between the thighs and ejaculate, their penises will suck air and they will grow lean. It is like masturbation.

Those who think their lives will end in jail do that [have male-male sex]. But if you are a thinking man you won’t. It’s not good. When you have sex with a boy your penis will suck air into your body and there will be dirt in your lungs. After three years of doing that, you’ll be infertile.

The strength of the sperm causes debilitation. The sperms are alive. Maybe they do something inside your body. You become powerless.

Since the late 1990s some prison authorities have begun to place condoms in the passages of jails. Educators have also begun to visit the Nelspruit and Baberton prisons to inform inmates about AIDS. These messages received a mixed reception. Whilst some men blew up the condoms like balloons, others used them for protection during anal sex. “The men say they put condoms in the boiler — this is what they call the picanini’s anus. They say the boiler is too hot.”

Conclusions

Contrary to pronouncements by politicians such as Robert Mugabe, Sam Nujoma and Kenneth Meshoe, male-male sex is extremely pervasive in South Africa’s migrant compounds and prisons. Many black South African men have directly experienced male-male sex as instigators, willing receptors or rape victims, or have witnessed these encounters. Narratives of male-male sex are also an integral part of South African male working class folklore.

Why then does the denial of male-male sex in Southern Africa persist? Epprech (1998) is certainly correct in his assertion that male-male sex is hidden behind a veil of discretion. But as the evidence I have presented here shows, this veil is less than opaque. The assertions of homophobic politicians ring true at one
level, at the level of sexual identity. Even to miners and prisoners modern gay identities, where both partners are classified as the same male gender, appear new and foreign. Donham (1998) contends that among black men the emergence of modern gay identities is connected with the international struggle against apartheid and with the birth of a “free” South Africa. The founding of multiracial gay rights organisations such as GLOW (Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand), the formulation of a sexual non-discrimination policy by the ANC, and the Johannesburg gay pride march summarise these changes. In the course of these events black men became aware of a global gay community. But this way of looking at the sexual world was not taken up consistently or completely (Donham 1998:11–12).

The works or revisionist scholars such as Achmat (1993) convey the mistaken impression that male-male sex invariably assumes modern gay personhood. Rather, same sex couples in the South African mines and jail designates a dominant masculine partner who sexually penetrates other men, and a playful effeminate partner who adopts only the receptive role in sexual intercourse. These roles were negotiated differently on the mines and in jail. On the mines same sex intimacy cannot be explained by the absence of women. It was a deliberate strategy by senior migrants to realise masculine personhood, intimacy, romance and the comforts of home. Moodie (1994) describes the effects of this strategy:

If the dominant mores of white society decreed that all black men, even senior mine supervisors were ‘boys’, black workers themselves graduated from being ‘boys’ for their fellow workers to being ‘men’ with their own ‘boys’ as they gained mine experience. In fact, the entire system of mine marriages was thoroughly interwoven with the power structure of the mines (Moodie 1994:128)

In prisons male-male sex had a greater component of contingency. Yet informants told me of convicts who had developed “a taste for men” whilst in jail, and pleaded with their “boy wives” to stay with them after they were released. In the prisons, male-male sex created a hierarchy of domination and subordination within and between prison gangs, a hierarchy that was sustained by violence and by fear. In either case, there was no sharp rupture with the familiar pattern of masculine domination and feminine subordination in South Africa’s rural areas.

An adequate understanding of the HIV pandemic demands that we recognise that male-male sex is a high risk activity for the transmission of HIV. Contrary to popular assumptions, male-male sex is extremely pervasive in both institutions and frequently takes the form of anal intercourse. Moreover, the differences in power between partners make negotiations over the use of condoms difficult, and knowledge about AIDS is very uneven. This is indicated by the beliefs that masturbation causes AIDS and that HIV cannot be transmitted by male-male sex. The denial of male-male sex can therefore have severe consequences. When in
1987 two inmates of South Africa’s jails were diagnosed as AIDS sufferers, and nine as HIV positive, they were placed in isolation. Colonel Immelman of the South African Prison Services, said that “homosexual” activities would not be tolerated and that disciplinary steps would be taken against transgressors. As scholars and AIDS activists we should oppose such denials of male-male sex. But we should also be careful to distinguish between male-male sex and modern gay identities. In the labour compounds and in prison, male-male sex is not a practice of peripheral others. It is part of the daily encounters of ordinary masculine men.

Notes
1. Although I have conducted research in Bushbuckridge for intermittent periods since 1990, most of my interviews about sex in the mines and jails were conducted during July 2000 and January 2001. I thank Jen Badstuebner, Gerd Bauman, Jean Comaroff, Eliazaar Mohlala, Graeme Reid, John Sharp, Kally Shokane and Charles Van Onselen for their help. I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants. Unless otherwise specified, all indigenous terms are in Northern Sesotho.
2. This figure excludes the prison population of Bophuthatswana, the Ciskei, Transkei and Venda. During 1987 there was a daily average of 55,000 prisoners in the entire United Kingdom.
3. Heterosexism does not denote active bigotry, but rather “the passive acceptance or a conceit, that is, that exclusive reproduction-orientated sex is the ideal, the norm, the nature and the proper function of human sexuality” (Epprecht 1998:648).
5. Thigh sex is called *matanyola* in Northern Sesotho, *metsha* in IsiXhosa and *hlobongo* in IsiZulu. In this form of erotic activity the “husband” inserts his penis between the “boy’s” thighs (see Moodie 1988:231).
6. Mosse (1996) suggests that same-sex eroticism is an unintended consequence in the modernist era that valorises the aesthetic beauty of the male body.
7. To some extent the transvestite performances of male wives encourage audiences to suspend their usual prejudices (Lancaster 1997). Male wives provoke critical reflections about gender. They denaturalise the desire to dominate others, to give rather than receive, and to protect rather than to be protected. In addition, they question the appropriateness of violence, drudgery, dangerous underground work, and of dreary dressing.
8. See Lancaster (1992) and Gutmann (2000) for a comparable distinction between the dominant *machista* and the subordinate *cochon* in Latin America.

References


