

BOOK REVIEWS

The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Codependency, and the Politics of Nurturance in Postwar Japan. Amy Beth Borovoy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xvii + 234 pp.

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In 1971, a clinical psychiatrist at Tokyo University published an influential monograph titled *Amae no Kôzô*. Translated two years later into English as *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Dr. Takeo Doi argued that *amae*, or the type of dependence developed between child and mother, was the fundamental relationship structure in Japan. In his view, a good wife (and mother) anticipates the needs of her husband and children and provides for them without asking. Doi describes this positively as a “world that need not rely on words”—one in which women telepathically understand the desires of their husbands and children. *The Anatomy of Dependence* spawned a long lineage of texts that sought to explain not only familial relationships in Japan but also how the nurturance and maternalism or paternalism found in the archetypal Japanese family relationship was co-opted and exploited by Japanese corporations and the state in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Amy Borovoy’s book is the latest in this textual bloodline. It explores the psychological and social dynamic between alcoholic husbands and their long-suffering wives. Borovoy was particularly interested in how middle-class housewives in Japan made sense of their lives when their husbands drank to excess. Her fieldwork centered on a weekly family meeting held at the Tokyo Metropolitan Mental Health Cen-

ter for the wives of alcoholics. This was fortuitous for her, as the chief psychiatrist of the center, Dr. Satoru Saito, is widely known in Japan for his many books on addiction, substance abuse, domestic violence, and other family problems. Saito is often credited for introducing the language of codependence from the United States into Japanese family therapy with his 1989 work *Kazoku Izonshô (Family Dependence Syndrome)* in which he explored the darker and more pathological aspects of Japanese family life.

On the basis of her fieldwork at the center and following the general argument that Saito makes in his books, Borovoy argues that alcoholic codependency can be understood as an exaggerated and pathological form of the socially normative dynamic of dependence between a Japanese husband and wife (or child and mother). There is a slippery slope from the wife who packs her husband’s suitcase before he leaves on a trip to the wife who calls in sick for her husband on Monday morning because he is still stone drunk to the one who has to take a second job to pay off her husband’s drinking tab.

Borovoy traces the historical and social development of the middle-class housewife from the 1800s onward, focusing on postwar constructions of the professional middle-class housewife. Her analysis of how the good wife becomes the “*too-good wife*” or alcoholic enabler is quite cogent and enjoyable. She adeptly contextualizes her work into contemporary cultural anthropological and feminist understandings of agency, inequality, and empowerment. She is centrally interested in “a profound cultural dilemma: when does the nurturing behavior that is ordinarily expected of a good wife and mother become part of a

destructive pattern . . . [and] how does society (through historically shaped constructions of family and community) affirm or even demand this kind of behavior" (p. 3)?

On the less positive side, although the book is written in a reflexive voice, the explanation of research methods could have been expanded. Borovoy uses material from group meetings but does not explicitly state that these meetings were open and nonconfidential. She then contrasts statements made in-group with insights from more in-depth personal interviews. Although the author undoubtedly received permission from the center and the individuals involved to conduct research, with heightened scrutiny of fieldwork ethics now the norm one wishes that Borovoy had included a paragraph or two explicitly laying out what agreements regarding privacy and confidentiality were made with her informants.

Carefully organized, concise, and engaging, Borovoy's work is ideal in part or in whole for use in undergraduate cultural anthropology, Japan studies, and women and gender courses. However, as a book that centrally focuses on the social construction of middle-class housewives and family relationships, this book may be less useful for advanced courses in medical and psychological anthropology as there is only a very brief discussion of Japanese medical and cultural views on alcoholism and addiction. For example, although Borovoy notes that alcoholics used to be institutionalized in psychiatric wards, she foregoes the opportunity to analyze Japanese psychiatry in any detail regarding the relationship among the brain, spirit-soul-mind (*seishin*), and body. She also quite disconcertingly elides any significant discussion of the Japanese versions of Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous, despite their significant role in alcohol treatment over the past two decades in Japan. Finally, although a key component of her argument is the discursive shift from Doi's earlier analysis of *amae*, or nurturing maternal dependence, to Saito's much later and darker exploration of *izonshô*, or pathological family dependence, Borovoy uses the same English word "dependence"

in her analysis without indexing which of the original Japanese senses of the word she means, and there is also much less analysis of the actual language and history of "codependency" (*kyôizori*) in Japan than one would expect from the subtitle of the book.

Borovoy's location at the Tokyo Metropolitan Mental Health Center may have made her susceptible to a form of research tunnel vision. Borovoy attended weekly meetings at the Center as well as counseling sessions at other locations but did not engage in any long-term, direct participant-observation of Japanese family life in Tokyo or elsewhere. Much of the analysis in this book is on the macroscopic scale, exploring larger historical, social, and political shifts in discourses on women and families. Compounding this, her selection of Japanese language sources is limited. As a result, we do not know how much of the language of dependence (whether *amae* or *izonshô*) is used in regular daily life. In short, while Borovoy lucidly explains what she experienced at the aptly named Center, we are unfortunately left wanting to know more about both the mainstream and periphery of alcoholism, codependency, and family relationships in Japan.

Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS. Marc Epprecht. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008; xii + 231pp.

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This book, by the historian Marc Epprecht, is informed by the author's acclaimed earlier publication, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (2004, McGill-Queen's University Press), and critiques the commonsense wisdom that a singular form of heterosexual expression exists among Africans south of the Sahara. Alternative sexual expressions, such as homosexuality or bisexuality, are thought to be atypical of African sexuality and are, where observed, explained through

“outside” influences. Epprecht inquires into the origin and the history of this assumption and meticulously explores evidence of alternative sexualities. He argues that ignoring such data has been highly problematic in public health, particularly for efforts addressing sexual health and the AIDS epidemic. As homosexuality and bisexuality were not considered risk factors in the transmission of HIV by most public health services in sub-Saharan Africa, these sexual expressions were rarely addressed in HIV/AIDS campaigns on the continent.

Epprecht draws on a wide variety of historic and contemporary sources from different academic disciplines and carefully outlines the advantages and limitations of each. He argues that few Africans south of the Sahara would identify as homosexual or bisexual or use any other term developed in the West. This, however, does not mean that the same individuals do not engage in sex with people of the same sex. Further, although most African societies value heterosexual marriage and reproduction, many traditionally tolerated and accepted alternative sexual expressions within specific parameters and roles.

Even though early representations of same-sex sexualities were known to anthropologists, these were often downplayed or suppressed. Reasons for this suppression include: an underlying discomfort with the topic stemming from homophobic norms in the West, early anthropologists’ associations with colonial powers, and questionable methodologies that resulted in biased descriptions. As other disciplines heavily relied on anthropology, anthropologists have played a central role in establishing the problematic stereotype of African heterosexuality.

Reading Epprecht’s critique of the historic biases of anthropological research into sexual understandings and expressions is a healthy act of self-reflection for us as anthropologists. Even so, and although most of us would agree with his critique, Epprecht’s evaluation of early anthropological research lacks the complexity and subtlety that otherwise characterizes the book. For

example, the lack of emphasis on alternative sexual expressions in historic research may be because of the fact that past ethnographies aimed to describe the cultural norms of the ethnic groups under study. Thus, anthropologists paid less attention to minority beliefs and practices unless they had a significant impact on the majority. This apparent bias may also have resulted from the dominance of functionalism. Epprecht seems not to reflect on the influence of theoretical assumptions on research and simply states that early 20th-century research imposed Western biases regarding sexuality onto cultural groups instead of pursuing objective ethnographic studies. Such statements in the book obscure, rather than enlighten.

Epprecht repeatedly argues that anthropology’s association with colonial powers is partly to blame for biases in African ethnographies, but he downplays the fact that anthropologists also conflicted with colonial administrators, including, for example, Godfrey Wilson and Max Gluckman at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Rhodesia (now Zambia). He explicitly refers to Gluckman’s commitment to anticolonial politics, but he does not temper his earlier statements regarding the involvement of anthropologists in colonial endeavors. Similarly, his argument that anthropology’s break with its colonial past is one of the main reasons for more explicit references to homosexuality in Africa is not entirely convincing.

Epprecht also analyzes the role of the colonial medical establishment in the creation and maintenance of the heterosexual stereotype. He refers particularly to psychiatry and psychology, arguing that the latter was ineluctably drawn to the study of sexuality. Thus, there was an increased likelihood that psychologists, more so than anthropologists, would discuss same-sex issues. However, this did not happen, and the preexisting stereotype of a singular sexuality was reaffirmed. This stereotype became problematic when HIV/AIDS appeared. By the late 1990s and early 21st century, the belief that homosexuality was virtually

nonexistent in sub-Saharan Africa was so firmly entrenched in mainstream AIDS discourse that it did not require explanation. Epprecht argues that a turning point in understanding the history of African sexuality came when African gays and lesbians became visible and vocal, resulting in a valuable new tradition of ethnography on sexuality in Africa that was attentive to local subtleties. However, these studies were ignored in mainstream AIDS and sexuality scholarship and their findings denied, particularly by African politicians and theologians.

Although this book is a carefully researched and generally balanced study, at times Epprecht makes strong statements without sufficient support. This is in sharp contrast to his otherwise cautious and balanced arguments tied directly to ethnographic and historical evidence. For example, he seems to follow the trend of "religion bashing" that is currently fashionable among some academics. For instance, he speaks of the "the stridently homophobic Catholic Church" (p. 123), ignoring the complexity of the church's understanding of homosexuality. Epprecht also calls evangelical Christianity and Islam "exogenous philosophies" (p. 169). This statement ignores the fact that for many Africans, Christianity and Islam are not something foreign, but part of long historical traditions. Further, by identifying certain world religions as the source of homophobia, Epprecht misses another important issue, namely that conversion to a world religion is at times symptomatic of a group moving from a local frame of reference into one that is global. In other words, homophobia may be because of large-scale economic and political changes, rather than religious doctrine.

There are a few other shortcomings in the text. At times, Epprecht refers to colleagues in a manner that does not stimulate academic discussion. For example, he says that he could name "at least two white Zimbabwean historians" who denied and worked against the growing visibility of African alternative sexualities (p. 165). Why did he not mention their names and invoke some specifics from their scholarship? Further, the book has a few translation mistakes. For instance, he translates the Zulu term *impi* as "warriors," which is not quite correct (p. 91). *Impi* refers to an army or a regiment, whereas warriors are *amabutho* in Zulu.

Despite these minor weaknesses, *Heterosexual Africa?* is a carefully researched and well-written study that convincingly argues that the deletion of references to alternative sexualities in academia and public health has had problematic consequences for efforts to address the AIDS epidemic in Africa. The book's publication is timely, as there is currently increased interest in understanding the association of homosexuality and bisexuality with HIV infections in Africa. Medical anthropologists and public health professionals will greatly benefit from this book. It is also an excellent case study for teaching how anthropological knowledge is constructed and constrained by social and cultural issues. The clear language and structure make the text easily accessible to undergraduate students and graduate students will benefit from Epprecht's solid approach and analysis. I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Heterosexual Africa?* and recommend it for both teaching and to library collections that focus on African studies, gender studies, medical anthropology, and the history of anthropology.