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## Pleasure for Sale: Prostitution in Colonial Africa, 1880s–1960s

One who makes friends is better than one who quarrels  
A friend in need is a friend indeed  
Make friends with many but trust only a few  
Money is my lord  
Welcome my friend  
To love without action is not love  
Every day I wait of you darling  
The day you give money to a prostitute she is your friend

### Introduction

The epigraph above is the text on the walls of the rooms of two prostitutes working in Kampala (Uganda) in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Although these statements are discrete, they collectively highlight the main features of prostitution in colonial Africa: money, sex, and companionship. Prostitution derived its strength from the ability to maintain a consistent pool of men, who found the room of a prostitute welcoming. Money was important in the affair between the prostitute and her male lover – women sold sex partly because it guaranteed financial mobility and freedom. However, companionship and friendship could expand the gains of a transient romantic relationship. Hence what began as a transactional affair could metamorphose into marriage and long term relationship. Like other aspects of human existence, prostitution has a history rooted in the socio-cultural, political, and economic experience of diverse African societies. Before the imposition of colonialism over much of Africa from the 1880s, diverse forms of sexual behavior existed across time and space.<sup>2</sup> However, these forms of multiple sexual behaviors which included concubinage and ritual sex rarely involve direct payment for sexual service. The entrenchment of prostitution

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- 1 Southall, A.W.; Gutkind, P.C.W.: *Townsmen in the Making: Kampala and Its Suburbs*, Uganda 1957, 80–81.
  - 2 Barkow, Jerome: The Institution of Courtesanship in the Northern States of Nigeria, in: *Geneva Afrique* 10:1 (1971), 59–73; Akyeampong, Emmanuel: Sexuality and Prostitution among the Akan of the Gold Coast c.1650–1950, in: *Past & Present* 156 (1997), 144–173; Uchendu, Victor: Concubinage, Among Ngwa Igbo of Southern Nigeria, in: *Africa* 35:2 (1965), 187–197; Nast, Heidi J.: *Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace*, Minneapolis, 2005; Lovejoy, Paul. E.: Concubinage and the Status of Women Slaves in Early Colonial Northern Nigeria, in: *Journal of African History* 26:2 (1988), 245–266.

as a “capitalist social relationship” and a “direct relationship to wage labor” can be conveniently traced to the colonial period in Africa.<sup>3</sup> As Luise White has noted, “Prostitution is a capitalist social relationship not because capitalism causes prostitution by commoditizing sexual relations but because wage labor is a unique feature of capitalism: capitalism commoditized labor.”<sup>4</sup> This chapter examines the nature and dynamics of prostitution in Africa from the period of conquest in the 1880s to the 1960s when most African countries began to receive independence from their colonial masters. It explores the identity of women who sold sexual favor and men who bought it within the context of the drastic socio-economic and political changes ushered in by colonialism. It demonstrates that prostitution seemed “inevitable” in colonial Africa that featured an enduring reconfiguration of gender roles, the transformation of precolonial sexuality and the emergence of new ones. In addition, this chapter highlights the reason prostitution came under the surveillance of both African and European moralists and the myriads of policies put in place to either regulate or prohibit it.

## African Prostitution in Time and Space

Oral traditions and written sources by European explorers who visited Africa before the nineteenth century are replete with reference to complex socio-sexual behavior that seemed to be highly entrenched in the life of several communities. Among the Akan of modern southern Ghana in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, communities kept select women (mostly slaves) called *abrakree* (public women) who rendered sexual services to men, especially bachelors. These women were not expected to charge money for their services; but could receive gift. Married men who slept with them could be fined. The public women phenomenon was a significant aspect of prevailing religio-cultural identities that manifested in the distribution of political power along gender and social class. It involved an initiation which reinforced the power of sex in everyday life of the people. Aside from the public women, certain class of women called *etiguafou* (prostitutes) “dispensed sexual favours for a negotiated price.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, among the Hausa of modern northern Nigeria, an institution called *karuwanci*, featured independent living by divorcees (*karuwai*).<sup>6</sup> The *karuwai* lived in a separate housing managed by a senior elderly woman who served as the mouthpiece of the group in public affairs. *Karuwanci*, provided the gateway for divorcees to be reintegrated into marriage and family household. Hence, a single unmarried woman could not practice *karuwanci*. In precolonial Kano, also in northern Nigeria, royal concubines, as Heidi Nast has shown in her book titled, *Concubines and Power*, were recruited among slaves. Royal concubines did not just

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3 Luise, White: *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, Chicago 1990, 11.

4 Ibid.

5 Akyeampong, *Sexuality and Prostitution*, 149.

6 Barkow, *The Institution of Courtesanship*, 59–73.

help the government in such capacity as tax collectors, they served as a bridge between empires, states, and communities through marriage and family formation.<sup>7</sup>

The full entrenchment of prostitution in Africa can rightly be traced to the consolidation of colonial capitalism. Charles van Onselen has pointed out that prostitution is “a functional consequence of the rise of the urban society created by early industrial capitalism.”<sup>8</sup> With particular focus on Johannesburg, he opines that it was a consequence of South Africa’s “most explosive capitalist development that took place between 1886 and 1914.”<sup>9</sup> Prostitution was concentrated in three main domains, namely, urban centers, military bases, and mining settlements. This classification is not a neat one – several cities started as mining camps, while military bases were also located in cities. Yet, it provides an easy gateway to approaching sex work in Africa through the lens of space and geography. Mining settlements, military bases, and cities were all male-centered sites of imperial economic and political power. They reordered African demography as the colonialists made cash economy the central focus of the new economic structure they created for metropolitan gain. An in-depth discussion of the character of these three locales would help enrich our knowledge of the relationship between sex work, space, and colonial capitalism, and further shed-light on the significant position that prostitution occupied in African colonial encounter.

City centers of varying sizes and sophistication existed in several parts of Africa before the imposition of alien rule.<sup>10</sup> However, the new colonial cities were designed to satisfy the colonialists’ quest to modernize or “civilize” their colonies by importing Euro-American ideals of work and obligation to the state and its infrastructure of domination. The colonialists did not create the new cities for women; rather they maintained it as a site for competitively cheap male labor. However, women would find their way into the city, not mainly to provide sex, but to engage in other productive activities in the expanding commercial sector.<sup>11</sup> The availability of modern infrastructure and facilities like electricity, tarred roads and educational institutions were important factors in rural-urban migration. One of the immediate consequences of colonial urbanization was cultural heterogeneity, which reflected in new expressive cultures and socialization that brought people together for the purpose of enjoying music, drinks, and love, among the endless benefits of urban life. The facelessness of the city facilitated by its large population enhanced anonymity

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7 Nast, *Concubines and Power*.

8 Evans, Richard J.: Prostitution, State and Society in Imperial Germany, in: *Past and Present* 70 (1976), 106.

9 Onselen, Charles van: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, vol. 1: *New Babylon*, London 1982, 103.

10 Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine [translated by Mary Baker]: *The History of African Cities South of the Sahara: From the Origins to Colonization*, Princeton 2005.

11 Little, Kenneth: *African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa’s Social Revolution*, Cambridge 1973, 29–75.

and the freedom to express sexual desire. The city was amenable to such activities as public flirting and solicitation, which facilitated sex work.<sup>12</sup>

But prostitution was just one of the numerous sexual liaisons that took place outside marriage. Hence, precolonial sexual liaison did not disappear after the imposition of colonialism. Rather, they transformed and were adapted into new forms to suit the realities of urban life.<sup>13</sup> In their survey of Kisenyi in Kampala (Uganda) in the 1950s, A. W. Southall and P. C.W. Gutkind, noted that “Every variety of sexual relationship is found in Kisenyi, from relatively durable concubinage to blatant prostitution for cash payment.” Kisenyi according to them, “is always full of good-time girls who hang around the beer bars waiting to be bought drinks. They will go home to sleep with a man who treats them, on the understanding that further presents will be forthcoming. Undoubtedly many girls hope, against the weight of experience, that out of such amours longer term marriage partners may be found. On the other hand, there are surprising numbers of the sophisticated type of girl who think that it is definitely preferable to remain free.”<sup>14</sup> Southall and Gutkind provide useful information about the ethnicity of men who patronized prostitutes and the financial remuneration of sex work. Aside from sex, men who patronized prostitutes also received accommodation. They could stay with a prostitute as long as they wanted, provided they paid for the time better spent with other men.<sup>15</sup> The following statement by a 22 year old tomato seller resident in Kampala revealed the world of a typical young urbanite: “I am not married, and I have no permanent lover, but I engage women for their night at five shillings each time. I do this twice a month, and sometimes I pay two shillings for a short time at their houses down the hill there.”<sup>16</sup>

Aside from urban centers, mining camps or settlements were another significant prostitution-centered space. Like the cities, mining settlements were established purposely for men. According to Van Onselen, the history of prostitution in Johannesburg should be traced to its emergence, first as a mining camp, and later a town and city. As mining settlements became highly masculinized, women found their way there to provide the much needed services, such as sex, food, and other services traditionally derived from home. In a July 1896 census of African miners in Johannesburg housed in the compounds within a three-mile radius, the black males outnumbered black females by 40, 855 to 1,678. This represents a ratio of 24.34 men to every woman.<sup>17</sup> Military settlements or barracks is the last of the three most important domains where sex work flourished in colonial Africa. Indeed, it is the most masculinized of the three spaces. The European superpower were not in

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12 Akyeampong, *Sexuality and Prostitution*, 156.

13 Little, *African Women in Towns*, 89–90.

14 Southall; Gutkind, *Townsmen in the Making*, 79.

15 Aderinto, Saheed: *When Sex Threatened the State: Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism, and Politics in Colonial Nigeria, 1900–1958*, Urbana 2015, 60.

16 *Ibid.*, 80.

17 Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History*, 104.

Africa mainly to establish military basis – rather they came purely for the purpose of exploiting the human and material resources of the continent. However, it did not take long for them to realize that the establishment of a strong army was central to the success of their capitalist mission in Africa.<sup>18</sup> The military, like the mines and big cities became a significant edifice of imperial presence in Africa. It would have been impossible to violently subdue Africans and maintain imperial rule without a well-financed military outfit. Colonial authorities during the first half the twentieth century informally recognized “military prostitution” as an indispensable aspect of military culture, and sought to regulate rather than abolish or prohibit it.<sup>19</sup>

The local names of prostitutes reflected the geographical and cultural diversity of prostitution in various African locales. It also reflected the type of prostitution practiced, method of solicitation, the nature of accumulation and generational difference. In Lagos (Nigeria), prostitutes were variously called, *Ashewo*, *Akunakuna*, and Marina Girls. *Ashewo* in Yoruba literally translates as “someone who breaks money” (i.e., into smaller dominations). Prostitutes probably assumed this name because they usually had cash to help people make change. *Akunakuna* is the name of a town in southern Nigeria where most of the prostitutes are believed to have come from, while Marina was a popular red-light district of the colonial city.<sup>20</sup> In Abidjan (Côte d’Ivoire) and the Accra (Ghana), *Tutu* prostitutes (derived probably from the expression two shillings, two shillings which they charged for short-time service) worked in diverse locations. While Abidjan *Tutu* served men in her rented room, her Accra counterpart could visit men in his private lodging. In Sekondi Takoradi, also in Ghana, the older and younger generation of prostitutes were called UAC (United African Company) and A.G. Leventis respectively. These two expatriate companies dominated West African commercial enterprise throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

In East Africa, prostitutes’ name came from the type of solicitation they engaged in. The *Watembezi* prostitutes in Nairobi (Kenya) did a lot of street walking and solicited in public spaces such as pubs and dance halls, while the *Malaya* waited in her room for men to come in. Another type of prostitutes, *Wazi Wazi* waited in front of their room. Because the *Malaya* prostitutes had a room to herself, she could perform several home-related services, aside sex. She could prepare meals, do laundry and spend time with her lover.<sup>22</sup> A similar trend manifested in Kampala. *Haya* prostitutes waited in their rooms for men, while their *Ganda* and *Toro*

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18 Killingray, David: The Maintenance of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa, in: *African Affairs* 85:340 (1986), 112–142.

19 Aderinto, *When Sex Threatened the State*, chapter 4; Parsons, Timothy: All Askaris are Family Men: Military Families in the King’s African Rifles, 1918–1963, in: Killingray, David; Omissi, David (eds.): *Guardians of Empire*, Manchester 1999, 157–178.

20 Aderinto, *When Sex Threatened the State*, 54.

21 Akyeampong, *Sexuality and Prostitution*, 162.

22 White, *The Comforts of Home*, 13–21.

counterparts solicited in beer parlors and on the streets respectively.<sup>23</sup> Yet several prostitutes combined these three types of prostitution. In Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), ethnicity and race played a significant role in the social standing and clientele of prostitutes. The Haya prostitute ranked lowest, followed by the Ganda, Indians and the Arabs. The clientele of the Arabs cut across races, “but only the higher income groups, and such women are usually well dressed and live in rooms of considerable affluence (...) As a rule these professional prostitutes (as opposed to ‘call-girls’) band together and rent all the main rooms in a house. Each taking one and being herself responsible for its rent.”<sup>24</sup>

### Prostitution, Accumulation, and Socio-economic Mobility

Like most forms of capitalist enterprise that emerged under colonial rule, prostitution involved migration. Women traditionally worked outside their native communities because working away from home guaranteed anonymity, which enhanced transactional sex. A survey of prostitutes in Sekondi-Takoradi (Ghana) in the late 1940s showed that of the 127 prostitutes interviewed, only 9 were local women.<sup>25</sup> Most of the prostitutes in Lagos during the 1930s and 1940s were not locals – they were predominantly from other parts of Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> Prostitution did not take place only within national boundaries – women did cross the artificial colonial boundaries to sell sex in neighboring countries.<sup>27</sup> Several Ghanaian and Nigerian prostitutes worked in Abidjan in the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> In 1941, an estimate of 1200 women from the southern Nigerian provinces of Ogoja, Owerri, and Calabar were working as prostitutes in southern Ghana.<sup>29</sup> Migrants prostitutes did not hope to remain in the cities or mines forever. Rather, they wanted to practice prostitution for about three years (as seen in the case of Nigerian women in Ghana) and return home to either marry or reunite with their husbands.<sup>30</sup>

The interviews conducted by Southall and Gutkind among prostitutes in Kampala in the early 1950s revealed the relationship between age and marital status, and financial needs. A 25 year old Haya lady practiced prostitution to invest in education of her daughter: “My husband was a poor man. He would not send our daughter to school, nor had I any money to pay her fees, so I came here and rented this room and started to be a prostitute (...) When I have got enough money I shall

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23 Southall; Gutkind, *Townsmen in the Making*, 79–84.

24 Little, *African Women in Towns*, 91.

25 Aderinto, Saheed: Journey to Work: Transnational Prostitution in Colonial British West Africa, in: *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24:1 (2015), 99–124, here 99.

26 Aderinto, Saheed: Of Gender, Race, and Class: The Politics of Prostitution in Lagos, Nigeria, 1923–1958, in: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 33:3 (2012), 71–92.

27 Aderinto, *Journey to Work*.

28 Little, *African Women in Towns*, 88.

29 Aderinto, *Journey to Work*.

30 *Ibid.*

go back and send my daughter to school at home.”<sup>31</sup> Another prostitute, a Haya and widow came to the city in search of job to pay for her son’s education, but decided to practice prostitution due to unemployment.<sup>32</sup> A single Haya lady (22) practiced prostitution to, “get good dresses and money.”<sup>33</sup> But not all women practiced prostitution primarily for money. Some came hoping to find husbands as gleaned from the following statement by a single 28 year prostitute: “I come here because I thought that I should get a man of my tribe to marry me. There were men at home who might have married me, but I waited for them to do so and all the boys only used me as their mistress, so I came here.”<sup>34</sup> The testimony of a 22 year old Toro prostitute revealed the intersections of emotional love, remuneration, and marriage: “I have many lovers here who give me money. Each lover had his own time for visiting me. Some give me five shillings, or ten shillings, others beer and others cloth (...) I do not love them all, but they sleep with me for the money that they give me. Among them all I only really love Mikairi, a Tori boy who also loves me very much. I cannot marry him now because I am trying to get a lot of money in Buganda. I shall marry after a long time, I cannot tell you when.”<sup>35</sup> Findings from other parts of Africa did not contradict those from East Africa – most women sold sex because of money. However, Kotokoli women of Togo, who practiced prostitution in Accra, in addition to making money, hoped to return home with children by one of their clients.<sup>36</sup>

Prostitution was a profitable job in colonial Africa. One of the main criticism against it was that women made “easy” or “tons” of money selling their bodies. The petitions African men wrote against women’s activities should therefore be read beyond the usual rhetoric that they dented the image of their ethnic group or community by engaging in the disgraceful profession. Prostitutes’ income varied in accordance with their age, method of solicitation, clientele, location, among other variables. In the West and East African cities during the 1940s and 1950s, prostitutes charged between two and three shillings for a sexual intercourse, and about 10 for longer service or a whole night. They had an annual estimated income of about 100 pounds – far more than the minimum wage of 36 pounds offered in government establishments in Nigeria. A Tutu prostitute in Abidjan made between 250,000 and 400,000 francs working for two years.<sup>37</sup> Ethnicity also influenced what prostitutes charged for sex. A Ganda prostitute interviewed in the 1950s stated that she charged according to her customer’s ethnic origin. It would appear that Bantu-speaking men were willing to pay more for sex than the Acholi and Lango.<sup>38</sup>

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31 Southall; Gutkind, *Townsmen in the Making*, 80.

32 *Ibid.*, 80.

33 *Ibid.*, 81.

34 *Ibid.*, 81.

35 *Ibid.* 85.

36 Little, *African Women in Towns*, 89.

37 *Ibid.*, 89.

38 *Ibid.*, 92.

Nigerian prostitutes working in the Gold Coast in the 1940s collectively remitted up to £2,000 to Ogoja, Owerri, and Calabar Provinces, per month. This estimate could be on the low side, since a 1941 report from the district officer of Afikpo Division stated that about five hundred Buhumunu women alone remitted about £8,000 per year.<sup>39</sup> These monetary values of sex work were derived from postal (money) orders, which represent only one method by which money was transferred across the colonial artificial border. The cash that prostitutes sent through friends and families could not be officially accounted for.<sup>40</sup> So important was the proceeds from prostitution to the economy of some southern Nigerian provinces that native authorities proposed and did impose special taxes on returnees prostitutes. Prostitutes also combined sex work with other professions such as commerce, beer brewing, and craft making. The extra income made from these “legitimate” business helped to augment the proceeds from prostitution, which fluctuated from time to time. Basotho women in the South African Rand were infamous for brewing beer illegally. One Madam Comfort Abes, in addition to prostitution, also ran the “Holly Wood Bar” in Lagos in the 1940s.<sup>41</sup> A petition against one Madam Afiong Bassey, also of Lagos, who was accused of girl trafficking, stated that she claimed to be seamstress “just to deceive the general public and the authority whereas she is a notorious harlot.”<sup>42</sup> Yet prostitutes made more from their trade when they danced with men and followed them to social gatherings. Some men gave regular weekly or monthly allowances to prostitutes. Women from some ethnic groups made more money because they were believed to be more beautiful or skillful in bed than prostitutes of other ethnic background. Demand for Efik women was high in British West African cities because of the widespread notion that they were better in bed than prostitutes of other ethnicities.<sup>43</sup> Men sought after Haya women, “not for their features, but for their pale skin colour.”<sup>44</sup> What prostitutes did with their money were mostly visible in their native communities and where they worked. Returnee prostitutes invested in landed property such as homes. Some of the brothels in Nairobi were owned and operated by retired prostitutes.

The illegal status of prostitution in most parts of Africa and the fact that it belonged to the off-the-book sector of the colonial economy prevented prostitutes from organizing themselves into trade union or pressure group to demand better working condition from the government. However, prostitutes, especially those who operated from popular brothels organized themselves into self-help associations based on place of origin and ethnicity. They raised money to help financially

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39 R. K. Floyer to the Resident of Ogoja Province, 10 December 1943, OBUBDIST 4.1.71, National Archives Enugu (cited hereafter as NAE).

40 Aderinto, *Journey to Work*, 113–115.

41 NAI, COMCOL 1, “Police Report,” November 26, 1946.

42 NAI, COMCOL 1, “The Reporter to the Commissioner of the Colony,” October 1, 1943.

43 Aderinto, *Journey to Work*, 99–107.

44 Southall; Gutkind, *Townsmen in the Making*, 82.

distressed members. The members of the Area Harlot Society of Accra were mostly from Ogoja province of Nigeria. They organized parties in honor of retiring prostitutes and helped new members integrate into the prostitution subculture. They also assist members navigate the complex criminal justice system by paying for legal fees and working with corrupt police to avoid arrest or incarceration.

## Colonial Power and Prostitution Regulation

If prostitutes provided the sexual services and comforts of home in the diverse African cities, mining camps, and military bases, why then should authorities prohibit against it? From all indications, the “problem” with prostitution was not the sexual act itself that took place mostly behind closed doors, but several activities associated with it. The subculture of prostitution, especially in the cities, comprised of several other elements, whose activities helped promote the trade in flesh. Prostitutes, especially street hawkers, shared the same ambiance with delinquent children and youth, who were directly and indirectly involved in such activities as crime and public disorder – all of which colonial and African reformists frowned at. In Lagos, Accra, and Johannesburg, this group of delinquent boys were called *boma* boys, pilot boys, and Bowery boys respectively. Prostitution supposedly polluted the moral serenity of the city. The appearance of women soliciting in the red-light districts was considered by many as an impediment to civilization, which colonialism professed. Policing prostitution, reformist believed, would not only help reduce the activities of delinquent youths, but would also stop such activities as illegal beer brewing, which led to drunkenness that prevented men from working hard for the colonial state. Thus, the language of sexual vice fed into broader issue of maintenance of law and order – the prerequisite for maximum colonial exploitation.

Prostitutes were also accused of being the purveyors of venereal disease (VD). The relationship between VD and prostitution in Africa went beyond wellness. Rather it had a strong political-economy undertone. Syphilis and gonorrhea were constructed as diseases capable of depleting the African population and undermining the availability of labor needed for the maximum exploitation of the colonies. But the panic of the era reflected in the unequal attention given to different classes of people, based on their importance in upholding colonial hegemony. The high incidence of VD among the military intensified campaigns against sex work because the military was central to the maintenance of law and order needed to sustain imperialism. In 1868, about 13 percent of British troops in the Cape Colony were hospitalized as a result of VD related illness.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the agitation against prostitutes reached the peak in most parts of Africa during the WWII, when VD related illness inhibited the productivity of the colonial army. In addition, the trafficking

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45 Heyningen, Elizabeth: *The Social Evil in the Cape Colony, 1868–1902: Prostitution and the Contagious Disease Acts*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 10:2 (1984), 170–197.

in underage girls for prostitution came under serious criticism by moralists who believed that children needed state protection. Child prostitution flourished because of the assumption that sex with virgins was capable of curing VD, and because minors were easier to exploit, sexually and financially than their adult counterparts. To reformists, a girl-child was not supposed to be on the street soliciting for sex, but in the classroom receiving instructions to become a responsible mother and wife. They were convinced that child prostitutes would grow up to become adult and procurers.

The approach to dealing with the above mentioned prostitution related vices varied from one part of Africa to another. It was also influenced by location and the socio-economic structure. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the colonialist's policy on prostitution oscillated between prohibition and regulation. While prohibition involved outright criminalization of prostitution and related activities such as solicitation and pimping, in regulation, the government allowed sex work within regimented areas of the city or the country. Regulation also involved official toleration of sex work provided it did not seriously affect the colonial state. In Nigeria for instance, the government officially tolerated prostitution until the outbreak of the WWII, when it began to prohibit it. Similarly, up to the mid-nineteenth century, authorities in the Cape Colony, "did little to interfere with the practice of prostitution. They probably accepted that it was inevitable in a seaport town and provided a form of controlled release for the antisocial energies of unruly sailors."<sup>46</sup> Yet, prohibitory policy was not uniformly applied to all colonial subjects. While prostitution was prohibited among the civilians, it was regulated among the military, because of the assumption that military prostitution cannot be totally eradicated. Military authorities feared the impact of outright prohibition on the discipline of African soldiers who were regularly stereotyped as individuals incapable of controlling sexual desire. Thus they advocated for or informally introduced policies that made "clean" and "disease free" prostitutes available to both African and European soldiers.

Be that as it may, policing prostitution usually involved the introduction of a gamut of laws aimed at punishing prostitutes for streetwalking and delinquent youths for pimping and such vague offences as "disorderly" conduct. These arrays of laws can generally be grouped under VD and public order legislations.<sup>47</sup> Anti-VD laws branded all women, regardless of occupation and location as purveyors of VD. In 1885, the Cape parliament passed the Contagious Disease Acts (CDAs) just a year before its British version was repealed due to the protest by feminist and other women's right groups. Influenced by the temperance and social purity ideas,

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46 *Ibid.*, 171.

47 McCurdy, Sheryl A.: Manyema Women, Low Fertility, and Venereal Diseases in Tanganyika, 1926–1936, in: Hodgson, Dorothy L.; McCurdy, Sheryl A. (eds.): "Wicked" Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa, Portsmouth 2001, 212–33; Phillips, Richard: Heterogeneous Imperialism and the Regulation of Sexuality in British West Africa, in: *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14:3 (2005), 291–315.

the South African version of the CDAs criminalized VD and empowered sanitary or medical officers to detain women suspected of harboring VD in Lock Hospitals. Like its metropolitan version, the African CDAs only punished women, while letting men off the hook of the law. Single women moving into the mining settlement of Shamva, Globe, Phoenix and Falcon (all in modern Zimbabwe), in the 1920s were subjected to compulsory medical screening for VD – popularly called “inspection” by the authorities, and remembered by local women as *chibeura* (to open something, often by force).<sup>48</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s in South Africa, new laws were passed to prevent women from moving into towns and cities in the name of upholding the moral sanity of those places.<sup>49</sup> The laws targeted at some “undesirables” would in time become a burden on the entire female population.<sup>50</sup>

The introduction of VD laws tended to be popular among African elites who subscribed to the colonialists’ vision of a clean colonial society free from the moral scourge perpetrated by the so-called undesirable women. However, most anti-prostitution laws were not successful at ameliorating the real and imagined danger of sexual vice because of many factors. In the first instance, the colonialists did not have the human and financial resources to effectively police prostitution. Anti-prostitution laws tended to overstretch the police, especially during WWI and WWII, characterized by breakdown of law and order. In addition, the criminal justice system was corrupt. Prostitutes, brothel and pub operators, and delinquent youth devised new means of circumventing the law by bribing the police. In Lagos, prostitutes paid “police money” to avoid arrest. The inadequate policing of prostitution prompted elite African women in Nigeria to advocate for the enrollment of women into the police force. They thought that prostitution as a “female-specific” offense could best be policed by women.<sup>51</sup> In Cape Town during WWI, white women formed themselves into volunteer police to monitor sexual vice in their community when the government refused to yield to their demand for the establishment of women police. The volunteer patrols did not have any legal power to arrest, but to “save foolish women and silly girls from moral danger, to lessen the social evils of [the] streets and other public places and to raise the moral tone of the community, particularly the female portion of it.”<sup>52</sup>

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48 Jackson, Lynette A.: “When in the White Man’s Town”: Zimbabwean Women Remember *Chibeura*, in: Allman, Jean; Geiger, Susan; Musisi, Nakanyinke (eds.): *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Bloomington 2002, 191–215.

49 Eales, Kathy: *Rehabilitating the Body Politic: Black Women, Sexuality and the Social Order in Johannesburg, 1924–1937*, Working Paper, South Africa 1990, 7–13; Barnes, Teresa A.: *The Fight for Control of Women’s Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939*, in: *Signs* 17:3 (1992), 586–608.

50 Summers, Carol: *Intimate Colonialism: The Imperial Production of Reproduction in Uganda, 1907–1925*, in: *Signs* 16: 4 (1991), 787–807.

51 Aderinto, *When Sex Threatened the State*, chapter 7.

52 Quoted in Shear, Keith: “Not Welfare or Uplift Work”: White Women, Masculinity and Policing in South Africa, in: *Gender & History* 8:3 (1996), 393–415, here 398.

In addition, the punishment for prostitution was not too severe to serve as deterrent. The option of fine in lieu of imprisonment given to convicted prostitutes and pimps meant that few defaulters would serve prison sentence. Moreover, prostitutes repatriated to their home town returned to different parts of the city where they assumed new identity, while continuing to sell sex. Hence, policing of prostitution tended to expand the geography of sex work as prostitutes relocated to new areas in the city to avoid arrest. During the clamp down of Nigerian prostitutes in Accra in the late 1940s, several women moved to Lagos, Ibadan, and other southern Nigerian cities to continue their trade.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the phenomenon of prostitution in colonial Africa. It emphasized that before the establishment of alien rule, diverse forms of sexual behavior existed under complex socio-cultural and political situation. Most of these sexual identities and behavior did not involve the payment of sex. However, the emergence of prostitution as a form of labor that involved direct payment for sex came through colonialism. The establishment of colonial urban centers, mining camps and military bases wrought serious changes in gender roles, as well as the economic and political structures of various parts of Africa. Women, like men migrated into the cities to partake in the new cash economy that came with imperialism. With time, prostitution would help the colonialists to maintain the city as a site of competitively cheap labor. It directly and indirectly complemented the efforts of the colonial government in the areas of accommodation for migrant men and the provision of amenities like food, traditionally derived from home. From all indication, prostitution was a profitable trade for women who practiced it. Women accumulated resources which they invested in their families and landed property. By working away from home, women were able to break the socio-economic barriers imposed on them by native laws and custom. This chapter has also identified the reasons prostitution came under serious criticism by European and African reformers. It supposedly promoted public disorder by facilitating the activities of delinquent urban criminals. Moreover, prostitutes were accused of being the purveyors of VD. Anti-prostitution campaign mostly took the forms of legislation to prevent women from moving into the city or imposition of compulsory screening for VD. Other legislations policed brothels and the red-light districts in search of prostitutes and criminals.