Rethinking gender and sexuality in an African context during the end of HIV/AIDS paradox


Cynthia Simekha is a PhD student in the Sociocultural Anthropology program, with a concentration in Medical Anthropology and Global Health at UW. She was raised in Kenya, where she completed here primary and secondary education, before migrating to the USA seven years ago. Cynthia holds an AA degree in Nursing, BS in Public health and Geography from UW. She later went on the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor she worked on her MSW with a focus on Global Social Work with a concentration on Community Organizing and practice area of Health. While working on her MSW, she had opportunities travel to various parts of the work working with marginalized communities; i.e She worked with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on Maternal and child health and Early Childhood education.

This year Cynthia was awarded the Summer Pilot research funding through the department of Anthropology, where she will be travelling to Kenya to conduct a pilot study on "Rethinking gender and sexuality in an African context during the end of HIV/AIDS paradox". Her main project is to examine new forms of 'gender-fluid' households that are challenging and transforming the social structures of communities and redefining gender identities, roles and relationships in this period of intensifying AIDS epidemic. This work is unique internationally, as there is a deep tradition of denial around the historical significance of 'gender fluidity' in African traditional communities, especially in rural communities. Cynthia's work seeks to answer core questions about the nature of demographic and social transformation under forces of deep environmental pressure. At the centre of this research is the rare subject of intimate lives of African women in Africa and in the Diaspora, bodies that overwhelmingly carry the greatest burden of disease in the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

This summer, Cynthia anticipates conducting a crucial pilot ethnographic research for eleven weeks in rural and urban western, central and coastal Kenya mainly to understand the ways the community is rethinking family relationships and households, which may or may not adhere to the long-standing family structures that are historically "acceptable". Cynthia will also be analyzing how these new formations of family relationships and households balance between internal protection versus external risk vulnerability for its members it terms of health, access to social amenities, security, the right 'to be' and lead a well-fulfilling life. Cynthia is humbled and honored to receive this scholarship as the funds will be extremely helpful in financing her trip and upkeep will doing her project.

Status of Research or Work: In progress


Links