

African Same-Sex Sexualities and Gender Diversity: A Framing Note

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity which refers to variation pertinent to gender expressions and identities, sexual expression and sexual orientation. The article describes the emerging and evolving African scholarly production evident in the last two decades and describes key underlying themes that bring together this special issue.

Keywords

African sexualities, gender diversity, homophobia, heteronormativity, identity, media

African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity is a topic that reveals much about ontology (our being), human rights, epistemology (knowledge) and affect (emotion and feeling) in social and cultural contexts. There is no singular, uniform story that can fully capture the multiple strands of sexuality as a complex human attribute and quality. Beyond a narrative that sexuality should encapsulate rights to citizenship and pleasure, the resistance to alternative, nonbinary, variant, and nonheteronormative gender identities increasingly tell another story about exclusion and homophobia (see Ireland, 2013 for an expanded argument about homophobia in Africa). This note introduces our special issue on “African Same-sexualities and Gender Diversity” and adds texture to the scholarly debates about the politics of sexuality identities.

Beyond African geopolitics, the concept “same-sex sexualities and gender diversity” directs attention to variation with regard to gender expressions and identities, sex characteristics, sexual orientation, and is usually received with abjection and derision by religious and state institutions. In spite of the received norms inherent in our societies, not all of us are attracted to the opposite sex; neither are we all comfortable with the sex assigned at birth nor are we all comfortable with what is presumed to be expected gender role behaviour for women and men. Indeed, such is the richness of human sexuality that biology also bequeaths some distinctive characteristics as not everyone is born with bodily sex attributes that are exclusively male or female based on the rules and standards in society.

The inherent diversity of and variations in human sexuality present in all societies and cultures, are shaped by a myriad of factors (such as biology, culture, gender, class, power etc.) that provide colour, shape and texture to the human experience (see for example, Herdt, 1997). Ironically, despite the full spectrum of rich diversity that sexuality offers (see

for example, Bosia, McEvoy & Rahman, 2020; Davies, 2010; Matebeni, Monro & Reddy, 2018; Monro, 2005; Reyes & Clarence-Smith, 2012; Nyeck & Epprecht, 2013; Ryle, 2015; Sandfort, Simenel, Mwachiro & Reddy, 2015), lived and material realities simultaneously show deep-seated prejudice, policing and violent disciplining of gender non-conforming sexualities (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Fischer, 2019; Janoff, 2005; Patterson & Gossett, 2016; Salamon, 2018; Schulman, 2009; Serrano-Amaya, 2018; Sloan & Gustavson, 1998; Weiss & Bosia, 2013).

We have commented before that our understanding of African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity outside of Northern contexts has steadily increased as a result of the HIV epidemic (see for example, Reddy, Sandfort & Rispel, 2009; Sandfort & Reddy, 2013). While the literature on HIV contributed to an improved understanding of the complexity of HIV in relation to same-sex sexualities, it has often elided deeper engagement with the diverse narratives that shape same-sex sexualities and gender diversity in African contexts. Beyond some pioneering studies (see for example, Arnfred, 2004; Ekine & Abbas, 2013; Epprecht, 2006, 2008; 2009, 2010; Gevisser & Cameron, 1994; Hoad, 2007; Kendall, 1997; Khamasi & Maina-Chinkuyu, 2005; Maticka-Tyndale, Tiemoko & Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2007; McFadden, 1992; Murray and Roscoe, 1998; Tamale, 2005, 2007, 2011), a growing body of critical literature is taking shape that increasingly also analyses the deep entanglement between genders, sexualities and heteronormativity on the African continent.

Stimulating research on how contemporary sexualities deepen debates and develop new questions on policy-making and continental-focused issues, such as youth negotiation of HIV cultures and dialogues between religion and sexualities activism, are explored in Bennett and Tamale (2017). A noticeable trend in the grey literature features several self-published arguments that provide both pro-homosexuality perspectives and some counternarratives about the unAfrican notion of homosexuality and gender diversity (see for example, Mujanja, 2017; Nzonzidi, 2018; Owanole, 2016). In another study, the experiences and narratives of transgendered asylum seekers from countries within Africa to South Africa, gathered through a series of life story interviews explores the differences between the possibilities of constitutional law, and the pervasive politics/logic of binary 'sex/gender' within South African society (see Camminga, 2019). The complex and critical role of religion and Christianity in particular (Chitando & Van Klinken, 2016; Kaoma, 2018; Mbote, Sandfort, Waweru & Zapfel, 2018; Van Klinken & Chitando, 2016; Van Klinken & Obadare, 2018; Van Klinken, 2019) and readings that offer context-specific and cultural interpretations (Currier, 2019; Helie & Hoodfar, 2012; M'Baye & Muhonja, 2019) are the subject of public and politicized homophobia in many African societies today (see Epprecht, 2013). The latter is most significantly represented in the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda (Kintu, 2018; Nkabahona & Byaruhanga, 2017; Rodriguez, 2019).

Beyond public politics and struggles, attention has also increasingly turned to artistic, literary and cultural engagements with heteronormativity and gender diversity in a variety of African contexts (see Munro, 2012; Van Klinken, 2019; Xaba & Martin, 2018; Zabus, 2013), including within South African schooling systems (see Msibi, 2018) and queer kinship arrangements in South Africa (Morison, Lynch & Reddy, 2018). Spronk & Hendricks (2020)

recently published readings in sexualities from Africa that feature an understanding of the rich diversity of sexualities, in which easy categorisation is resisted. Focusing instead on erotic realities, sexual practices and gendered changes, the readings in Spronk and Hendricks (2020) cover domains such as health and biopolitics, transactional sex, same-sex relationships and identity, religion and tradition, pleasure and agency against a broader politico-economic canvas shaped in relation to personal life. Even more pertinent is the ongoing negotiation of queer presence in African contexts, with a new set of readings that render visible the ongoing transformations and resistance within African societies (Nyeck, 2020).

This special edition of *Sexualities* advances the growing body of literature in the field by both established and emerging voices and has its origins in part with a second edition of a conference on African Same-Sex Sexualities and Gender Diversity, which took place in March 2014 in Nairobi, Kenya. About sixty persons, all scholarly engaged in or knowledgeable about same-sex practices, identities and communities, together with sexual rights advocates from sixteen sub-Saharan African countries, participated in the conference. They presented and discussed a great diversity of topics related to strategic interventions, lived realities, research and activism (some essays are featured in Sandfort, Simenel, Mwachiro & Reddy, 2015). For this edition some papers from this conference are included as well as additional commissioned papers from authors who did not participate at the Nairobi gathering.

The articles in this issue of *Sexualities* show the growth of fresh and critical thinking that interrogates heteronormative logics, examines the material realities and experience of gender diverse people, and challenges the parameters and assumptions of African sexualities and gender diversity. Collectively, the papers draw on a wide range of data and methodological tools, which is in part also a value in the study of sexual and gender diversity.

Without homogenising the focus of the papers, there are some common threads to their intent and purpose. The papers featured here put patriarchy, heteronormativity and homophobia 'on trial'. In other words, the analyses question, problematize and interrupt heteronormativity by compelling readers to consider the important relationship between academic and activist spaces. The papers likewise challenge sexual taxonomies and constitutive binaries such as normativity/subversion; activism/passivity; shame/pleasure; solitude/pleasure; corporeality/nationalism. They also capture the idea that sexualities are neither transhistorical nor innate but manifests in various, erratic and capricious ways. The idea of sexuality and its diversity centres on the idea that, inducing affective responses, it is messy, and ultimately more elusive. In as much as the articles zero in on specific issues, there is the emergent idea that the negotiation of sexualities is also contingent on the politics of sexuality, as sexuality circulates in networks of power, institutions, and embedded cultural contexts.

Contributors to this special issue also focus their critical lenses on how African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity functions in a range of African geopolitical, social, cultural and historical contexts (papers notably foreground the contexts of Senegal, Malawi, Ghana,

Botswana, Zimbabwe, Cote d' Ivoire, Kenya and South Africa). The papers demonstrate that context matters: inequality, social norms, and political regimes shape the ways how, for example, discriminatory, oppressive and emancipatory laws take hold – or not – in society. The volume advances the conversation by engaging the costs of marginalisation, vulnerability, patriarchy, homophobias, and by attending to the effects and consequences of gender binary dichotomies in a profoundly and unequal and heteronormative world. In another interpretation of the papers, it is discernible that they offer a diverse range of approaches to analyse affective and political economies, and also ask how sexual and gender diversity transform questions of embodiment, nation, subjectivity, complicity and resistance.

Centred on the materiality of experience and the discursive dimensions of sexuality and gender diversity, the six contributions in this edition foreground two noticeable themes. We have grouped the papers that firstly represent arguments attending to media production and visibility focused on nuanced readings of homophobia and rights. In this group of papers (see Mbaye, Otu, Milani and Burnett, and Currier) discourse plays a key role. A second set of papers coalesce around material and lived experience and identity. In this set of papers the question of identity, terminology and language feature prominently (see Oliveira, Marnell and Kahn, and Kesupile and McAllister). Read another way, the papers assembled in this edition equally have much to say about language, not necessarily in a purely linguistic sense, but also in respect of how language (in its verbal, visual and other semiotic modes) is an indispensable tool through which to make sense of sexual and erotic activities.

The journal issue begins with Mbaye's essay, "The Spectacle of the 'Other': Media Representations of Same-Sex Sexuality in Senegal". The paper investigates media representation of same-sex sexuality focusing on French-language Senegalese newspapers since 2000. The paper addresses the discursive homonegative image of homosexuality promoted by this new type of press in which the argument is made that these particular media in Senegal use oversimplification and stereotyping to generate a specific representation of homosexuality. The analysis centres on how the discourse contributes to a heteronormative vision of Senegalese society and helps in the production of an 'other'. Drawing on discourse analysis, the conclusion is drawn that the media's negative portrayal of homosexuality in Senegal contributes to and augments circulating social meanings and representations that propagate assumptions about gay and lesbian people being a menace to society.

Focusing on Malawi, Currier's paper, "Prison same-sex sexualities in the context of politicized homophobia in Malawi" provides an analysis of 109 Malawian newspaper articles published between 1995 and 2016 that mention prison sex. Her article explains how and why male-male sex and male/male rape in Malawian prisons have gone unnoticed since 1995. Currier's analysis motivates that competing explanations for prison sex in Malawi contributed to the episodic and compartmentalized nature of public discourses about prison sex and the reasons why it did not become a usable trope of politicized homophobia. In her analysis, news media are deployed to understand the invisibility of prison sex in politicized homophobia because news media contribute significantly to political and 'cultural ideology' and specific political discourses around sexuality in Africa.

Otu's contribution "Queer slacktivism as silent activism? The contested politics of queer subjectivities on GhanaWeb" examines the ways in which the comments section of news and opinions on homosexuality featured on GhanaWeb's (2006 – 2012) illuminates how Ghanaians police homosexuality and the extent to which such policing is both challenged and transgressed by sympathizers of queer rights. Using Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and Stephanie Camp's idea of rival geography, Otu highlights how language and space are difficult domains that inform queer slacktivist politics. The paper makes the case that opinions featured on the website are themselves extended versions of the debates between the nation-state and LGBTI human rights organisations in the sociopolitical sphere.

Milani and Burnett in "Queer counterpoints: Making 'mistakes' in loveLife's 'Make your move'" deploy Said's concept of "counterpoints" and queer theoretical thinking to analyse an episode that was part of the reality television series 'Make Your Move' produced by the South African NGO loveLife and focused on a self-identified lesbian woman in Soweto. Milani and Burnett offer a contrapuntal reading of the episode by analysing several *queer counterpoints* in several interrelated domains, namely societal, textual and at critical discourse levels. They conclude that norms governing gender and sexuality in a rapidly evolving society such as South Africa's are best understood as complex and contested. . In their view, a contrapuntal reading is a valuable tool for bringing these tensions under scrutiny without succumbing to the urge to resolve them.

In their paper "'It's about being safe and free to be who you are': Exploring the lived experiences of queer migrants and asylum seekers in South Africa," Oliveira, Marnell and Khan share findings from a number of arts-based interventions exploring the lived experiences of queer migrants living in Johannesburg. Their analysis is facilitated by two guiding questions: (1) How do queer migrants understand their journeys to and lives in South Africa? and (2) How do queer migrants understand their sexuality and gender in the context of their migration? In responding to these questions, Oliveira, Marnell and Kahn reveal the complex ways in which queer migrants construct their identities and navigate various forms of injustice. Central to the methodological frame of this paper is the need for researcher-activists to rethink pedagogical and epistemological positions that are taken for granted. Oliveira, Marnell and Kahn maintain that there is an urgency to disrupt claims to authority and 'authentic' modes of being – whether in relation to sexuality, gender, nationhood or any other oppressive social categories.

Finally, Kesupile and McAllister's "'Indigeneity' and 'authenticity' in African trans activism" focuses on trans activism, in particular the use of terminologies and concepts from the neocolonial North to challenge a gender binary that is itself colonial in origin but has nonetheless come to be seen as authentically African. The paper is based on interviews with eight African trans activists selected through opportunity sampling, five from southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe), two from West Africa (Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire), and one from East Africa (Kenya). The paper interrogates the positionality of trans activists who work mainly in English and French using Northern discourses of gender and sexuality. Kesupile and McAllister explore the resulting challenges and contradictions from the perspective of activists themselves and calls for an alternative approach to trans activism based on acknowledging the dynamic, mixed character of "indigeneity" and the socially constructed nature of *all* gender concepts in their localised and situated contexts.

Collectively, the essays assembled in this edition of *Sexualities* represent some new insights in the development of scholarship on African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity by established and emerging voices. Even in their diverse focus and methodological reach, the articles push forward critical conversations in new and searching directions about the knowledge politics of sexualities (see also McEwen, 2016). For one, the papers gathered here represent the importance of language in understanding cultural norms, attitudes, homophobia and transphobia. At another level the arguments and insights militate against homoerasure and homophobia, reconfirming that sexuality is not private, but forever present in public opinion, public discourse and public action. In fact, the papers decentre the West and the North as a primary reference point. A key metatext in the papers is that homophobia (often viewed as a behaviour) should rather be seen in the context of a set of institutional practices (to a large extent state-sponsored, culturally determined and fuelled by individual attitudes and social institutions, including religion). In several instances, a key theoretical point to be extrapolated from the papers (even though not explicitly discussed) are the ideological uses of homophobia in which hegemonic masculinities mobilise, navigate and secure particular interests (see Awondo, Geschiere and Reid, 2012; Msibi, 2011; Ratele, 2014; Tamale, 2013 for an extended argument).

We hope that this special issue represents a small contribution in the important project of exploring the nexus of African sexualities and gender diversity. We anticipate that it will inspire further scholarship in the field related to national contexts and activist efforts at meaningful and substantive gender and social change. More important, we believe that the rich repertoire of articles (including activist) perspectives that offer useful insights, will help scholars and activists test the potential of African sexualities and gender diversity claims to become a shared transformative agenda for real and meaningful equality both on the African continent and in the global world.

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