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The state of the art

Sexuality research in Africa

— Rachel Spronk

17 Jun 2015

[affection](#), [Africa](#), [knowledge](#), [sexuality](#)

15–19 February 2015

Naivasha, Kenya



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This conference arose from the desire to bring together scholars from across Africa who are all working on sexuality, yet from different (disciplinary) approaches and within different networks. It was structured in six panels: Education – the art of teaching about sex; Heterosexualities – the art of ideologies and practices; Erotica – the art of making love and sex; Religion – the art of faith and freedom; LGBT –

the art of being; and Reproduction and HIV/AIDS – the art of sexual health. Papers addressed the specific angle of each panel and fed back into broader debates as agreed upon beforehand. This summary presents the debates rather than the individual papers.

Over the course of the past three decades there has been an explosion of work in the field of sexuality in Africa. The rise of the women's movement, the AIDS pandemic, and public debates about homosexuality have put the hitherto neglected topic of sexual behaviour onto the research agenda. While sexuality used to be studied mainly in relation to reproduction and descent systems, nowadays the field extends to sexual practices, identities, desires, pleasures, and much more. Yet as the field continues to grow, it is apparent that a number of critical issues remain. From 15 to 19 February 2015 a group twenty-five scholars from thirteen African countries and three non-African countries met in Naivasha, Kenya, to assess the body of research on sexualities in Africa. Our goals were to: a) understand the sociogenesis of the position of sexuality research in Africa as well as to b) appraise future directions. Rather than seeing sexuality as a subtheme of other topics, such as reproduction, HIV/AIDS, or LGBT issues, we looked at those topics, and others, from the standpoint of sex and sexuality. We aimed to generate further knowledge in order to influence public debates and policy interventions.

Sexuality has become a central theme in many debates in Africa and about Africa. Changing patterns of marriage and sexual debut, AIDS and (safe) sex, circumcision, etc. are constant foci of public debates among politicians, religious leaders, and elders, and they are a continuous preoccupation in African media. Especially the debate on LGBT rights shows how matters of sexuality stir national and cultural sentiments. Sexuality, as a seemingly private aspect of humanity, has a strong social component that influences people's personal lives tremendously. Sexuality has personal as well as social meanings; it has cultural, political, and biomedical standpoints; and it is a field that is characterized by a multitude of local and professional experts. Therefore we approached sexuality as a multilevel field of themes and perspectives to understand how sexuality has become a significant and volatile subject.

First, sexuality is central in people's personal lives, as people engage in sex for pleasure, emotional fulfilment, money, intimacy, and much more. It is thus central to people's self-definitions – to their being wo/man, being adult, being respected, etc. While every culture, community, or social group holds strong views on the proper sexual conduct of its members, and every person must position her- or himself towards these moral discourses on sexuality, it does not mean that people strictly abide by them. On the contrary, most people manoeuvre around cultural expectations regarding sexuality, showing that strongly held beliefs cannot always be taken at face value.

Sexuality is, second, central to the moral and practical organisation of society, especially in times of social change. Patterns of gender and sexuality are often experienced as fundamental to the moral and social order. In local debates about globalization and modernity, questions of identity and culture are brought to the fore and consequently questions of sexuality become politicized. Whether it concerns circumcision, same-sex sexuality, or female sexuality, such debates are preoccupied with sexuality, juxtaposing 'African culture' with 'westernization'. Strongly held beliefs may therefore not always be about sexual practices but can be seen as indicators of discontent.

Third, the sexualities of people in Africa have been a preoccupation of a variety of experts for many decades. Sexuality has always had a place, even if it is a hidden one, at the heart of the development agenda – from concerns regarding population and environment, to practices in education and efforts to promote reproductive health.

We delineated six specific themes of research on sexuality. One of the earliest themes in sexuality research was reproduction, formerly known as population control, which has morphed into what we now know as sexual and reproductive health rights. As part of this shift, the study of sex as a problem of HIV, which marked the first years of sexuality research, has also broadened into looking at it as a rights and health issue. These shifts demonstrate how the study of sexuality has changed: from experts defining the problem and deciding the solution, to bringing more voices and agency into policy making and programmes.

The second long-term preoccupation has been sexuality education. There is a rich literature attesting to the different and varied practices and channels through which sexuality education was carried out in African societies before colonisation. Through time, formal education and missionary activities increasingly impacted the social institutions responsible for sexuality education, such as puberty rites. We explored how the nature of sexuality education has changed over the last decades and, especially, how religion has become an important factor in the debate.

Third, a newer addition to sexuality research is religion. Religious actors play an important role in public debates about sexuality, and religious institutions have enormous influence over national curricula. We discussed how religious agency also raises questions of freedom in relation to sexuality. Rather than seeing religious expectations as restrictions we also explicitly discussed how religion enables people to make informed choices (from people's own perspectives). Matters of love, desire, and pleasure are validated as well as restricted by religious and cultural authorities.

Fourth, another contentious and sensitive issue is LGBT rights. Politicians, policy makers, and activists from Africa as well as outside hold strong views and clash

easily. We discussed the need to study the global debate about LGBT rights from different angles. One focus is the public and often polarised discussion, and another is people's own perspectives, whether they identify with LGBT identities or not. Rather than perceiving LGBT matters as being in opposition to heterosexualities, we explored how they are related. The opposition to what is commonly called homosexuality needs to be explored further by studying ideas and practices of heterosexuality as well.

Fifth, a new terrain in sexuality studies may be an analytic approach to LGBT and heterosexualities that brings them in line with rather than in opposition to each other. It may be a valuable standpoint to understand why many people refuse to label themselves 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual', or 'transgender', and how local labels do not always correspond to the 'LGBT'. Further, the study of heterosexualities as its own subject has been neglected and needs to be incorporated into the research agenda. Analysing heteronormative discourses may present new avenues in the study of sex in relation to HIV/AIDS.

Sixth, we discussed how the study of love, desire, and pleasure presents a unique opportunity to understand contradictions between people's desires and social expectations. The study of affection, in particular, presents a serious lacunae in the study of sexualities in Africa that needs to be addressed. People may have many different motivations to engage in sex, and sexual encounters may be same-sex, opposite-sex, concurrent, and serial. We discussed the need to actively engage with global health discourses and agendas while continuing to theorise about sexuality and its complexities. While sexual health is an important policy goal (and therefore shapes the kind of studies being conducted), especially within global public health, it is also a personal wish. It can be a challenge to bring personal desires and policy together when people's needs and choices contradict policy.

Throughout these debates we discussed the methodological challenges in the study of sexuality. Sexuality is thus as much a product of culture and politics as it is of nature, encompassing both individual experiences and desires and shared ideas and values. It is to be studied as a relational concept, connected to multiple axes of difference such as gender, desire, religion, age, class, and ethnicity, among others. Sharing best practices and unforeseen failures is crucial to the future of the study of sexualities in Africa, which, we believe, is coming of age on the continent.

This international conference was organized by Professor Isaac Nyamongo, University of Nairobi (Kenya), Dr. Georgina Oduro, University of Cape Coast (Ghana) and Dr. Rachel Spronk, University of Amsterdam (Netherlands) and with financial support from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development (AIGHD).

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