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# Rethinking Sexuality from Africa<sup>1</sup>

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The study of sexuality in Africa has come of age. Although Caldwell's famous but reductive "African sexuality" thesis (cf. Ahlberg 1994) has shaped writing on sex in Africa over the last decade or so, a new interdisciplinary field of scholarship has emerged, incorporating researchers from history, epidemiology, literature, sociology, biomedicine, anthropology and political science. This scholarly literature on African sexual realities and erotic worlds has, to a certain extent, managed to untie itself from the HIV, health and development framework from which it sprang. Not only has this literature become much more diverse – taking on board politics, economy, religion, identity, activism and pleasure – it also exploded, with sex and sexuality becoming increasingly popular topics for research.

There are many reasons for the explosion and diversification of sexuality studies in Africa. Sexual landscapes are profoundly

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changing as economic hardships further transform gender relations and blatant inequalities spark a diverse array of religious programmes for moral renewal. Deviant sexual practices and dissident erotic desires tend to become increasingly politicized on a national and continental level through misogynist and sexist reactions, homophobic legislation and official discourses feeding an imaginary opposition between morally degrading "Western" influences and authentic "African" moralities. Moreover, new processes of erotic identification emerge at the interface of global cultural flows and older matrices of sex, gender and desire. Cosmopolitan aspirations are also expressed through new erotic practices of self-making that feed off neoliberal ideologies of consumer-

ism. And the sexual and reproductive rights discourse, along with its underlying premise of the self as a rights-bearing individual, is being appropriated and transformed by many actors in different settings and with different results.

But not only are African realities on the ground changing, so are scholarly practices. While the interdisciplinary field of sexuality studies has come to "Africa", African studies and many African scholars have also found their way to sexuality studies. Whereas most feminists have been remarkably silent about sex for a long time (focussing, instead, on gender, female agency, matrifocal cultural logics and the huge debate on so-called "harmful traditional practices"), many are now explicitly preoccupied with erotics and pleasure, taking into account issues of sexuality in ways that are meaningful for African women themselves. Moreover, researchers from all over the continent are courageously confronting the heteronormative regimes of knowledge in their

respective academic settings, unearthing often-hidden queer lives, worlds and stories, and aligning with broader political contestations that question the phallogocentric and heterosexist narratives of the powers that be.

In this brief essay, we argue that African contemporary realities suggest innovative analytical directions that are of global heuristic value for sexuality studies. Whereas, in many Western contexts, “sexuality” is starting to break down under its own conceptual weight (Halberstam 2012), scholars in and from Africa have long recognized its limitations as an analytical frame for understanding various sexual and gendered subject positions. In Douglas Clarke’s words: “Africa has a model for queer theory that is largely unexplored in the Western world” (2013: 175).

The rapprochement between African studies and sexuality studies is, however, in no way consensual. It is generating frictions and tensions of its own, not in the least because both fields mutually question the terms upon which their engagement takes place. In other words, whenever “Africa” and “sexuality” come together – as tropes, constructs, imaginaries, heuristic devices or activist rallying cries – they immediately start to undermine one another’s conceptual reach and trouble one another’s political unconscious. Any study, reflection, report or reading in sexualities in African societies must therefore start from a profound reflection on the terminology we use while writing and thinking sex from Africa.

### Sexuality

“Sexuality” is an ambiguous and slippery term. It can be used to refer to a biological drive or a human capacity to be sexually aroused and have erotic experiences. It might also denote conscious or unconscious impulses, desires and fantasies. It often refers to one’s so-called sexual orientation or object choice and, thus, comes in many forms – heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality or asexuality – that might, or might not, give rise to so many sexual identities. Or, it can be a seemingly straightforward way to describe sexual behaviour and/or sexual practices. Alternatively, sexuality can be taken as a particular discourse on sex or, rather, as the *effect* of a set of intersecting discourses: medical, psychological, pedagogical,

moral. As such, sexuality is – as Michel Foucault famously stated – an “especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (1978). In this latter sense, sexuality is not only a specific power/knowledge regime that regulates sex but also its main product or outcome. In other words, it produces subjects for whom “sexuality” constitutes the essential core of their inner self. Sexuality thereby becomes something that one possesses and needs to “know” in order to understand one’s innermost drives and desires. For these reasons, sexuality is a peculiarly sensitive conductor of cultural ideologies, social influences and political divisions.

Many scholars in the humanities and social sciences therefore understand sexuality as a social construction that arose at a particular time and place, and for very specific reasons. Hence, before using “sexuality” as a concept for understanding cultural practices of particular groups in Africa, as much literature on the subject does, we first need to turn our attention to the cultural roots of how the idea of sexuality came into being in the first place.

In its narrow sense, sexuality is nothing but the invention of nineteenth century modern European sexology. It denotes a very specific way of producing and organizing knowledge about sex, which first gave rise to the supposedly deviant category of the “homosexual” and, only later, to its supposedly normal mirror category of the “heterosexual”. According to Foucault, the scientific study of sex thus produced sexuality when it transformed the (sinful) erotic practice of “sodomy” into a sexual identity: while “[t]he sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 1978: 43). This distinction between sexual *practices* and *identities* is a necessary – though not always sufficient – condition for a critical study of sex beyond the categorizing drive of early sexology. Indeed, as many studies on diverse erotic realities convincingly demonstrate, sexual practices are usually more fluid and ambiguous than what seemingly fixed sexual identities might suggest. Particularly, the fixed relationship between biological sex – or genitals – and gender in Euro-American discourse is not – or, rather, was not – self-evident in the majority of cultures around the globe. The hegemonic globalization and presence of biomedical knowledge (in tandem with Christian discourse) has, ironically, brought cultures more together

when endorsing certain ideas of gender, body and desire, while at the same time producing a diverse array of erotic dissidences.

This constructivist understanding of sexuality as a modern European invention rather than as a human capacity characterized by a universal or biological essence, raises interesting questions for scholars studying sex outside the recent West. If, indeed, sexuality is a relatively recent and culture-specific form for thinking – and experiencing – desire, how should one study sex in situations where and when “sexuality” does not, or did not, exist as such? The question raises methodological and epistemological challenges for researchers trying to make sense of different erotic realities with conceptual tools that have been forged relatively recently in Western contexts.

Speaking as a historian of sexuality in Africa, Marc Epprecht, for instance, argues that “the word homosexuality, notably, suggests a clarity arising from a specific history of scientific inquiry, social relations, and political struggle that did not historically exist in Africa and still does not very accurately describe the majority of men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women” (2008: 8). Different authors and scholars therefore often prefer other terms as alternatives to the monolithic concept of “sexuality”, in order to avoid its essentializing tendencies and the problems to which it gives rise when used *across* cultures and societies. At the very least, feminist scholar Sylvia Tamale argues, we should “speak of sexualities *in the plural* in recognition of the complex structures within which sexuality is constructed and in recognition of its pluralist articulations” (2011: 2, our emphasis). Furthermore, scholars often try to avoid the ideologically loaded term “homosexuality” by using words like “same-sex sexualities” or “non-normative sexualities”. Or, they shun “sexuality” altogether by taking refuge behind words such as (same-sex) sexual “attractions”, “practices”, “desires”, “intimacies” or “love”. Alternatively, some use rather technical terms like “men who have sex with men” (MSM) or “women who have sex with women” (WSW), which have been coined in HIV prevention discourse to reach out to people who “do” it without identifying as such. For other writers and scholars, still, “queer” is a catchall or political term for all kinds of sexual and

gender dissidence, without therefore denying “the limitations of the terminology in relation to our African neo-colonial realities” (Ekine and Abbas 2013: 3,4).

However, while the proliferation of such terms, words and labels effectively points at the underlying trouble of “sexuality” in cross-cultural studies of sex, the real problem is more than merely a question of terminology. Indeed, as anthropologist Serena Dankwa posits, what is the “it” we indicate with sexuality? Analysing the tacit knowledge that is constitutive of informal circles of women “doing *supi*” in southern Ghana, she states that “[i] is established in context and expressed in a language of allusion. But since those who consider themselves practitioners and originators of this knowledge have no interest in pinning it down, its actual content is in flux and remains elusive: Does ‘it’ allude to the awareness of the actual possibility of sexual activity between two women? Does ‘it’ imply the knowledge of how to approach and seduce a non-knowledgeable lover, given the negative stereotypes attached to *supi* representations, or the capacity of caring for and effectively initiating a woman in such a way that would continually attract her to women and make her an insider herself? Does the ‘it’ denote erotic and sexual competence or the skilful capacity of keeping secrets discreet?” (2009: 2002).

In the introduction to the edited volume *Understanding Global Sexualities* (2012), social anthropologist Henrietta Moore pushes the question and probes sexuality’s “ontological status” as “more [...] than a problem of nominalism [or] the argument that ‘they’ – whoever they are – may not have a word for sexuality (emic category), but that we can still deploy sexuality as a comparative, analytic term (etic category)” (ibid: 11-12). She argues that we cannot understand people’s gendered and sexual experiences by imposing analytic categories that would fundamentally misrepresent what is actually happening in many settings. As social scientists, we therefore “need to rethink the nature of the sexual subject, and resituate that subject within broader regimes of power and affect that are not necessarily captured appropriately by the term sexuality” (ibid: 15). Such a re-conceptualization “involve[s] not only a break with the analytic category of sexuality and the pre-theoretical commitments in which it is founded, but a radical rethinking of sex as

the site of rights, and of sexual identities and categories as the self-evident starting point for policy and programme intervention” (ibid).

Scholars mount different strategies for dealing with these complex methodological and epistemological issues. Although many of them still use the term “sexuality” in one way or another, the current state of the art in the study of sexuality in Africa suggests that a more sustained critique of the concept is needed. In the introduction to her ground-breaking 2004 volume, Signe Arnfred stated that “[t]he time ha[d] come for re-thinking sexualities in Africa” (2004: 7). Today, so we argue, the time seems ripe for a more fundamental *un*-thinking of sexualities *from* Africa. Whether or not we will eventually resort to the concept of sexuality, and in what form, should depend on empirical studies of the manifold erotic realities and worlds that people create (and contest) on an everyday basis. But, at least at the present moment, a more radical *un*-thinking of “sexuality”, as an ethnocentric concept deeply entangled in European cultural logics, seems necessary. Not only to distance ourselves from the African sexuality thesis and its many transformations but also to open up conditions of possibility for thinking sex otherwise, triggered by and dedicated to the many ways people on the African continent themselves live, feel and think sex.

One cannot uncritically impose “sexuality” as a heuristic device on past and present African realities and expect it to do the same analytical work as it supposedly does in many Western contexts.

But a similar critical attitude is also needed towards the second master trope that is invariably present in contemporary sexuality studies on the African continent. “Africa” is, indeed, just like “sexuality”, a loaded term with a specific genealogy that needs to be taken into account if and when one decides to use words like “Africa” or “African” in one’s description or analysis. In fact, both critical moves have to be undertaken *simultaneously*, insofar as a critique of the ethnocentricity of sexuality (from an African perspective) necessitates a parallel critique of Africa (from a sexual perspective). When the deconstruction of sexuality is not combined with a similar deconstruction of Africa, well-founded critiques of ethnocentricity might revive the troublesome divide between “Africa”

and “the West” (Bakare-Yusuf 2004). On the other hand, any critical analysis of the ideological construction of Africa needs to take into account its *sexual* connotations to lay bare how, historically speaking, the sexualisation and racialization of Africa operated together, as well as to unveil how current heterosexist ideologies define supposedly true African subjects (Nyeck 2011).

## Africa

While “Africa” might seem to be a merely descriptive term that straightforwardly refers to a particular continent on our planet, it is the outcome of a historical process of construction that resulted in the somewhat arbitrary delineation of a particular landmass and several islands as Africa. As a word of Greco-Roman (and possibly Berber) origins, it initially denoted the Roman province of Africa and only comprised present-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria (Mazrui 2005: 69-70). Later, with the expansion of Islam and the impact of European imperialism and colonization, Africa became the name for the continent that most of us know today. European empire builders, explorers and colonial mapmakers thereby defined Africa as a geographical unit that was artificially cut off from the Arab world, the Middle East and the Asian continent and came to stand for an enormous area of great climatic, geological, political and cultural diversity.

Moreover, as Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe showed in *The Invention of Africa* (1994), the term “Africa” is the product of a historical process, in which it came to serve as the ultimate “paradigm of difference” for Western imaginations and practices. Long before the colonial conquest, European narratives already created a particular notion of Africa as Europe’s quintessential Other. Africa thereby stood for all against which Europe could define itself: wild, exotic, backwards, traditional, emotional and superstitious, rather than civilized, rational, modern or scientific. “Africa,” so the Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe argued, “is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray – a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate” (1977: 792). This ideology of otherness not only justified and enabled imperial expansion and colonial projects of subjection and modernization, but also characterized Western literary

and scientific discourses, which reveal next to nothing about the supposed African Other while telling a great deal about the Africanists' own imaginations and fantasies (Said 1978).

In his analysis of the discursive production of Africa in European and American nineteenth century intellectual life, Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) demonstrates how the modern notion of "race" was also lutely fundamental to Africa's supposed otherness. According to racial ideologies, black skin indeed became a signifier and explanation for dark morals and practices – but also, and very explicitly so, for a dark "sexuality". Stereotypes of black hypersexuality thus affected the libidinal construction of Africa (Gilman 1985; Magubane 2001), which came to function as, what Anne McClintock calls, "a pornotropics for the European imagination [or] a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (1995: 22). The African was thereby created as a sexual Other, a mirror image for the construction and maintenance of the European self. While, for some, this African was an innocent noble savage, for others (s)he was an uncontrollable lustful primitive. In both cases, "the" African was supposed to be closer to nature and therefore inherently sexual: a racially fetishized object of fear and desire for the white (male) colonizer (Fanon 1952). Unfortunately, such deep-seated stereotypes of inherently excessive black sexuality as are still very much with us today, quietly informing apparently scientific accounts of "African sexuality" (Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin 1989) and present-day politics (Ratele 2004) or explicitly staged and performed in all kinds of interracial pornography (Hendriks 2014).

"Africa" is, however, not only a product of the European imagination. It is also a notion that has been re-appropriated by intellectuals and politicians who came to identify themselves and their peoples as "African", often as a political reaction against Western domination and colonization. Indeed, while the first African intellectuals were often formally educated by Western missionaries and, thus, often Christian converts, "they refused to define themselves in the image of their colonial benefactors. Rather they redefined themselves, combining the best of the two

worlds into what became a modern African identity and a unique contribution to African modernity" (Ndletyana 2008: 5). Debates about African nationalism also evolved in close interaction with notions of Africanity as they were being outlined by Pan-Africanist thinkers in the New World (Falola 2001). In the latter sense, Africa (as a common place of origin) and the notion of being African (as a characteristic one shares with people of similar descent) was a Pan-Africanist product: a transatlantic and diasporic re-invention of "Africa" through the common experiences of slavery and racial violence. "The idea of one Africa uniting the thoughts and ideas of all native people of the dark continent," W.E.B. Du Bois once wrote, indeed seems to "stem naturally from the West Indies and the United States" (1946: 7).

The notion of being African was at the centre of these redefinitions. People of very distinct ethnic origins felt united in their experiences and began to think of Africa as one land, and see themselves as one people. In direct response to colonial discourses on racial inferiority, African intellectuals reclaimed their denied humanity and revalorized the traditions, customs and supposedly specific character of the black "race". African nationalism was thereby thus heavily indebted to racial ideologies that, although explicitly contesting and reversing racial hierarchies, often understood Africa in essentially racial terms (Appiah 1992). While the resulting discourses on Africanity hold great political value in a globalizing world, characterized by old and new racialized inequalities, their postulations of sameness and timelessness can, however, result in their own exclusions. The reification of African culture and tradition, and the identification of "authentic" African moralities and psyches, can lead to the exclusion of people who are, for one reason or another, supposed to be inauthentic or corrupted by outside influences, and therefore not truly African. Basile Ndjio (2012), for instance, shows how the idea of an "African" virility, as a defence against Euro-centrism and colonial emasculation, has violent consequences for those perceived to be insufficiently African, male and thus "heterosexual".

As a trope and political invention, "Africa" is, thus, at least as problematic as "sexuality". First, it imposes a fictional and static unity on an extremely diverse

and dynamic reality. Second, it is often exclusively apprehended through a paradigm of difference, which neglects the many similarities and historical connections with the rest of the world (Mudimbe 1994). Third, being mobilized in partially contradicting discourses, Africa does different things for different people at different times and can, therefore, not be taken for granted (Witte and Spronk 2014). Hence, as Stephan Palmié (2007) has argued, Africa and Africanness are not ontological givens but questions that need to be empirically investigated, with regard to the historical forces and discursive formations that lastingly Africanized the continent and its people, and the various strategies by which actors in Africa and beyond employ specific notions of Africanity.

Creating an "African" field of "sexuality studies", by bringing together the range of scholarship dealing with sexual intimacies and erotic desires originating from a diverse array of African settings, inevitably raises doubts about the heuristic and political value of Africa as its organizing trope. But notwithstanding such valid questions, we believe it remains productive to use terms like "Africa" or "sexualities" as a way to bring together scholars who, in many different ways, speak to each other about topics and issues they seem to have in common. However, rather than assuming the existence of a clearly defined field of African sexuality studies or simply researching sexualities *in* Africa, we propose to study sexualities *from* Africa, introducing a deceptively small lexicological difference that reflects a much broader epistemological and political stance.

### Rethinking sexuality from Africa

Despite its many pitfalls and difficulties, Africa is first and foremost a place *from where* to think, read, write, talk and disturb. Taking up recent debates about Southern theory or Theory from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Connell 2007, and Rosa's critique on the former two), we propose to explore African contemporary realities as innovative analytical directions of global heuristic value for sexuality studies. As Rosa (2014: 865) postulates, the South is, first and foremost, a project that "forms part of a 'new spirit' in which contemporary social science develops. [O]ne of the features of this new spirit would be 'encounters and

temporary, but reactivatable connections with various groups, operated at potentially considerable social, professional, geographical and cultural distance. The project is the occasion and reason for the connection. [It posits] the need to bring the social processes taking place outside of Euro-America to the core of social theory". In other words, the so-called South is the ground to theorize from.

However, conceiving Africa as a place from where to think immediately begs the question of *who* is doing the thinking. Who, in other words, can think, write or read "from" Africa? First of all, this question directly touches upon the structural financial and institutional inequalities between scholars working on the continent and those working in, usually, more privileged academic contexts. For many scholars in African universities, chronic lack of funding for fundamental research produces a vicious circle of enormous teaching loads and a heavy reliance on consultancy work (which, in turn, requires explicitly framing one's findings in donor language). Moreover, many African researchers do not have sufficient access to academic journals and experience great difficulties in attending international conferences. In addition, scholars on the continent are hindered by editorial gate-keeping and a citation gap that often prevents their work from being published in international journals (Briggs & Weather 2016). This has resulted in a vicious circle of the devaluation of African creativity, agency and value systems, and an internalized sense of inadequacy (Nyamnjoh 2012: 129). Nevertheless, despite such financial obstacles and structural inequalities, many scholars working from African institutional settings today are doing highly original work on sexualities.

Scholars based in the global North and/or white scholars working in Africa have therefore a responsibility to acknowledge their privileged position as researchers. For some of our colleagues, the call for re-thinking (or even *un*-thinking) sexuality from Africa, coming from two well-paid white European-based anthropologists might perhaps sound disingenuous or even politically suspect. Yet, by building on a long tradition of "provincializing" Europe (Chakrabarty 1992), postcolonial critique (Mbembe 2001) and decolonial analysis (Mignolo 2014), we aim to incorporate the North as merely one of many sites in a world of plurality – a world that can be (and must be) read from

Africa as much as it is read from elsewhere. To think "from" Africa implies, therefore, not an (African) origin for its *object* of thought but rather a place for *thinking* itself, as an always already situated process of knowledge production. Refusing to understand "African" as a racialized or otherwise essentialized trait or characteristic indeed implies that – in theory – *everyone* can occupy "Africa" as a place from where to think. One's licence to think from Africa does not, therefore, depend on one's *being* "African" but on a radical openness and willingness to be intimately affected by multiple realities on the African continent today. Rather than analysing African realities by using (and exploring the limitations of) supposedly universal concepts – such as "sexuality" – we therefore need to look for *theory* in the same place where we might, otherwise, merely look for "data": i.e. out there in everyday experiences, understandings and imaginings on the African continent.

#### Note

1. This essay is based on the research conducted for the introduction written for the Readings in Sexualities from Africa, International African Institute / Indiana University Press, forthcoming.

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