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African same-sex sexuality and gender-diversity: an introduction

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Good quality social science and humanities research about same-sex sexuality in Africa is rare. This, does not imply that same-sex sexuality is not practised in Africa. The alarming news reports that appear with increasing regularity about extreme expressions of homophobia in some African countries (in recent times most notably Nigeria and Uganda) indicate that same-sex sexual relations are indeed part of the African sexual landscape. Discussions about same-sex sexuality being ‘un-African’ would be moot, if African people did not engage in it. In contrast, there are also supportive news reports, such as the recent traditional African gay wedding in the town of KwaDukuza (the birthplace of Nobel Laureate, Albert Luthuli), South Africa where Tshepo Modisane and Thoba Sithole married each other in a public ceremony to confirm as Modisane says their public expression as “a sign that black gay men can commit and build a family through a happy and loving marriage” (<http://www.mambaonline.com/article.asp?artid=8020>).

However, our understanding of same-sex sexuality in Africa has increased to a dramatic extent in response to the HIV epidemic, recognising that in the recent past we did not know much in relation to the relationship between same-sex sexuality and HIV, outside of the richer countries of the West (Johnson 2007; Reddy, Sandfort, and Rispel 2009). Although this epidemic, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, was long believed to be exclusively characterised by heterosexual transmission, research in the recent past strongly indicates that in these countries, the odds of being infected with HIV is higher among men who have sex with men than among men in general (Beyrer et al. 2010; Lane et al. 2011; Rispel et al. 2011; Sanders et al. 2013). Attention to same-sex transmission of HIV has also contributed to the proliferation of community-based organisations with a focus on same-sex sexuality. A consequence of this growth is an increasing societal visibility of same-sex sexuality, which likely also contributed to the mobilisation of counter forces in religion, politics, culture, tradition and indeed the law. The HIV-related literature on same-sex sexuality, however, has its limitations. This literature is primarily of an epidemiological nature, focusing on HIV prevalence (see, however, Lorway 2006) and on men (see, however, Sandfort et al. 2013). Overall, it provides us with another lens, albeit an incomplete one, with which to understand the story of same-sex sexuality.

To begin to address this problem, we organised a conference entitled “African Same-sex Sexuality and Gender Diversity,” which was held from February 13 to February 16, 2011 in Pretoria, South Africa. The aims of the conference were to:

- promote understanding and further study of male and female same-sex sexual practices, identities and communities, including expressions of gender diversity, in Sub-Saharan Africa;
- promote understanding of social and structural prejudice towards sexual and gender diversity and strategies to address this prejudice;
- explore how social and structural factors affect the well-being and health of persons engaging in same-sex sexual practices or with gender diverse backgrounds and identify ways of enabling the social environment and reducing vulnerability; and
- support capacity building in research and advocacy and to strengthen the development of MSM/WSW/transgendered communities.

To stimulate local knowledge building and expertise, we deliberately ensured conference participation from persons from across Africa. Over 85 people participated, coming from countries including Botswana, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, Uganda. The conference was a collaborative initiative between a number of organisations, including AMSHeR (African Men for Sexual Health and Rights, South Africa), Behind the Mask (South Africa), GALCK (Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya; Kenya), Gender DynamiX (South Africa), HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies (USA), Hivos (Netherlands), Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC; South Africa), Humure (Burundi), the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC; South Africa), UNDP (Southern & Eastern Africa), and Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA; South Africa).

The question could be raised whether there is something specific about African same-sex sexualities that warrants special attention. We would argue that same-sex sexual expression in Africa has many aspects and facets in common with such expression on other parts of the world. There are, however, a variety of factors that contribute to a certain uniqueness of same-sex sexual expression in Africa. In acknowledging this uniqueness, we do not, however, suggest that there is one uniform and homogeneous expression of same-sex sexuality across the African continent. On the contrary, African same-sex sexualities are likely to include a wide range of nuanced expressions, hence the use of the plural.

Compared to countries on other continents, African countries seem in recent times to have been the least accepting of same-sex sexuality and sexual relations (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Africa is the continent with the highest number of countries in which homosexuality is illegal (Itaborahy, 2012). One of the exceptions is South Africa. However, despite all legal changes that promote equality of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons, there are still issues to be addressed in South Africa, such as the unequal age of consent regarding heterosexual and same-sex sexual relations, and violence against Black lesbians in particular (Mkhize et al.

2010). More importantly, there is a huge gap between what has been accomplished legally and lives realities on the ground. While the law hardly discriminates on grounds of sexual orientation, socially same-sex sexuality remains only marginally accepted in South African society.

Reinforcing the low social acceptance of homosexuality in Africa is religion. While there are in general few institutionalised religions that are explicitly supportive of same-sex sexual expressions and lifestyles, religion is likely to have a stronger impact on the lives of African persons. Compared to other continents, African countries stand out in terms of the endorsement of the importance of religion (almost complete), the attendance of religious services, and the number of religious organisations (<https://worldview.gallup.com/>). Historical factors play a role as well, in particular the legacy of colonial histories and the need to claim independent national identities. The related tendency to promote what are considered to be traditional 'African values', has regularly implied a rejection of same-sex sexuality.

The legal, social and political climate has consequences for how same-sex sexuality is experienced and expressed. The illegality and the lack of social acceptance of same-sex sexuality make lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons particularly vulnerable to crimes of blackmail and extortion (Thoreson and Cook 2011). Discussion of the latter took precedence at the conference, and focused on how the victims of these crimes rarely know that extortion actually is a crime and that, for a variety of reasons, they rarely report their experiences to the police. There is fear of not being believed or of aggravating the situation. Strategies were discussed to educate the LGBTI community about blackmail. However, there are likely to be other consequences of the low social acceptance, including the increased prevalence of transactional sex as well as bisexual behaviour (the latter as a consequence of the pressure to get married or to procreate).

Another prominent feature in some African countries is the centrality of gender and received notions of masculinity and femininity in the expression of same-sex sexuality compared to some high income countries. This is evidenced by the book titles of two seminal publications about African same-sex sexualities: *Tommy boys, lesbian men, and ancestral wives: female same-sex practices in Africa* (Morgan and Wieringa 2005) and *Boy-wives and female husbands: studies in African homosexualities* (Murray and Roscoe 1998). The gendered aspect of male same-sex sexual expression (drawing on received ideas of masculinity and femininity) is particularly focus on in the work of Graeme Reid (2013).

These were some of the core issues explored at the conference and which are profiled in some of the conference presentations, included this special issue of *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. The contributions included here are diverse in terms of topic, methodology, conceptual approach, and geographic background. While some of them address familiar issues, others deal with themes that have rarely received attention in research on same-sex sexuality and gender diversity.

The first three articles in this special issue address HIV and AIDS. In the first of these, Dramé, Peitzmeier, Lopes, Ndaw, Sow, Diouf and Baral summarise what has been learned in

West Africa about HIV prevention, treatment, and care services for gay men and other men who have sex with men. Focusing on the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry and Senegal, they discuss what is known about the prevalence of HIV, pointing to increased prevalence among men who have sex with men compared to men of reproductive age in the general population, a pattern that is evidenced in many other African countries. The authors demonstrate how HIV-related research has made clear that the term men who have sex with men and the label 'MSM' comprise a variety of same-sex sexual expressions, including male sex work. In discussing the responses to HIV among men who have sex with other men, they explain how HIV prevention has evolved in a context with many structural barriers, including religion and stigma. They further motivate for the importance of combination HIV prevention that addresses these structural barriers and present recommendations for research, advocacy, and service provision to impact on and improve the health and human rights context for same-sex attracted men in West Africa.

In the second paper, Matebeni, Reddy, Sandfort, and Southey-Swartz address an aspect of the HIV epidemic that thus far has received little attention: namely, HIV among lesbians. Given the perception that the female-to-female transmission of HIV is unlikely, lesbians have been widely overlooked in HIV prevention and service programmes. This lack of recognition results in a struggle for lesbians living with HIV to understand the possibility of female-to-female transmission. Based on a community participatory study, the authors document how self-identifying African lesbians living with HIV in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe challenge popular notions around lesbian risk. "I thought we are safe" is what some of these women thought, especially those who reported exclusive sexual relationships with women. The challenge of accepting one's HIV positive status is complicated by the wide-ranging misconceptions about risk. Questions about effective prevention of HIV transmission seem dominant. The paper argues for increased attention for the health needs of lesbians living with HIV, and for HIV prevention that addresses the needs of women who have sex with women more generally.

Based on in-depth interviews that foreground HIV and other sexual health needs of male sex workers in Nigeria the third paper, by Okanlawon, Anene, Adebowale, and Titilayo demonstrate how male sex workers manage their lives in a context in which the prohibition of homosexuality and sex work exacerbate their risk of discrimination and violations. The authors argue that successfully addressing the men's sexual health needs would require rights-based interventions. Additionally, the authors stress the importance of empowering male sex workers economically to make them less dependent upon on income from the often risky sexual activities they engage in for survival.

Two papers centre on gender then follow, each highlighting gender and its inflections in unique ways. In "Ghanaian youth and festive transvestition: Breaking the frame of traditional gender identities," Geoffrion analyses cross-dressing events among young Ghanaian men, based on participant observation, individual interviews and focus group discussion. Surprisingly, Geoffrion maintains that in the Ghanaian context, where the idea and concept of homosexuality is only recently gaining attention, these activities are not expressions of same-sex sexuality. However, cross-dressing events seem to reproduce and

reinforce gender binaries as well as heteronormativity, while at the same time offering opportunities to question categories of sex, gender and sexuality, albeit in a prescribed way.

Gender also plays a different role in a unique contribution in Theron and Collier's descriptions of the experiences of the South African female partners of masculine identifying transgender persons. Based on semi-structured interviews, they explore how (non-transgender) women in intimate relationships with transgender persons understand their sexual orientation, and how family and the wider community respond to their relationships. While these women did not change the way they label their sexual orientation from before to after their relationship with a transgender partner, their experiences seemed to vary. Lack of understanding from family and friends is a common theme. The authors argue in turn for attention to the specific emotional and informational support needs identified in the study.

As indicated previously, the pervasiveness of religion in the lives of many African people, including persons who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual cannot be overemphasised in the African context. The dilemma, anxiety, and trauma resulting from reconciling religion and sexual orientation is convincingly analysed by Joachim Nteten Mbetbo in his paper. Based on individual and group interviews and structured questionnaires, the author explores the extent to which gay men living with HIV feel free to express and enjoy their faith while simultaneously acknowledging their sexuality in a context in which most faith-based organisations are vehemently opposed to homosexuality. For most men in this study, religion and sexuality encapsulated two central dimensions of their identity, despite the religious rejection of same-sex sexuality. At the same time, religious attitudes made some men feel forced to make choices between their sexuality and their religion; they made spiritual fulfilment for these men more problematic, withholding an important source of support and the men's efforts to cope with their HIV status.

In the final contribution, McAllister explores what Western globalised gay identity concepts and cultures might mean for emerging sexual minority communities in low and middle income countries. Based on semi-structured interviews with self-identifying gay men in Botswana about their perspectives on modern gay culture, he argues that the adoption of the Western image of gay culture implies a major threat to these emerging sexual minority communities, in that it confirms the idea that homosexuality has been imported from the West and, as a presumed "neo-colonial conspiracy", will undermine what are perceived to be African values. Complicating the situation is the tendency for global gay discourse to be a major source of encouragement for sexual minorities in Africa. In order to counter the argument that homosexuality is un-African, McAllister proposes a communication strategy which instead of the adoption of the Western model of gayness would entail an adaptation of this, creating local ways of being gay by integrating cultural elements and promoting the 'Tswanaisation' of gay culture.

To round off this edition, we have included a review section that directly covers some of the broader themes discussed. These texts include Sylvia Tamale's *African Sexualities: A Reader* (2011), a valuable compendium of critical readings on gender politics, sexuality and African identities reviewed by Hannah Botsis; Alleyn Diesel's *Reclaiming the L-Word*:

Sappho's daughters out in Africa (2011), a collection of life narratives, poetry and an essay by a group of South African lesbians is reviewed by Lisa Wiebesiek-Pienaar; a documentary film, *Getting Out* (2011) produced by Daniel Neumann, Alexander Chapman and Chris Dolan on African LGBT refugees who flee persecution because of their sexual orientation from their countries of birth is the subject of Xolani Tshabalala's review; *Homosexuality in Islam* (2010) by Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle addresses reconciliation of Muslim faith with sexual identity, and is reviewed by Erin MacIver; Tracy Morison reviews *Trans: transgendered life stories from South Africa* (2009) by Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais and Joy Wellbeloved; and finally two books by Marc Epprecht, *Unspoken Facts: a history of homosexualities in Africa* (2008) and *Heterosexual Africa? The history of an idea from the age of exploration to the age of AIDS* (2008) are reviewed by Keletso Mafokane and Akua Gyamerah respectively.

Overall, the contributions in this special issue of *Culture, Health and Sexuality* represent a further development of critical scholarship on African sexualities, showcasing in most instances emerging work by new and young scholars/activists and, in our view, reflecting some of the successful presentations made at the conference which was the subject of productive exchange and debate among participants. The varied papers included in this issue confirm that there is still much complexity, contention and intellectual questions that warrant further investigation into African sexualities. Arising out of a conference that was evaluated as highly successful, the main sponsor, Hivos, the international development organization guided by humanist values, has decided that a follow-up conference should be organised, again with the aim of promoting the understanding of male and female same-sex sexual practices, identities and communities, including expressions of gender diversity in Africa. This second conference is scheduled to take place in March, 2014 in Nairobi, Kenya.¹ We look forward to seeing you there.

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¹Information regarding this meeting can be found at www.asssgd.org

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