

Call for papers *Politique africaine*

Homosexuality in the Public Sphere

The journal *Politique africaine* (<http://www.politique-africaine.com/>) is preparing an issue on the subject of homosexuality in the public sphere.

Abstracts for proposed articles – one page maximum / deadline 30 September 2011 – should be sent to Christophe Broqua (broquachristophe@yahoo.fr). Final drafts will be due 15 December 2011 and the issue will come out in June 2012.

<http://calenda.revues.org/nouvelle20615.html>

Though, no doubt, homosexual practices have a long-standing history in Africa as elsewhere, it is only recently that they have come to the fore on the continent as a matter of concern in and for the public sphere. For a long time the notion prevailed of a purely heterosexual Africa. Ways in which the AIDS pandemic was addressed, both in terms of research and of collective mobilisations, underscores this: it took over twenty years for the question of homosexual transmission of the HIV virus on the continent to be seriously broached.

Political developments in South Africa in the 1990s likely acted as a spark, igniting collective mobilisations around the subject of homosexuality as well as a sequence of events leading to recent political and media controversies. In 1996, South Africa became the first country in the world to constitutionally proscribe discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and then, ten years later, legalised same-sex marriage. Through processes of political debate and decision-making that led up to these watershed moments, the country put a public face on homosexuality on the continent. At the same time as this was taking place, highly public expressions of hostility were sweeping the southern African region – a case in point being the now infamous words of the Zimbabwean president, who likened homosexuals to pigs and dogs and called on “traditional African values” to counter what he claimed was their nefarious influence.

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, the silence that had so long surrounded matters relating to homosexuality continued to lift. This was a result of activism and of work by researchers. Also relevant were events that prompted significant media controversies and, in some cases, full-fledged scandals (Cameroon and Uganda in 2006, Senegal in 2008). The latter in turn led to a distinctly Afro-pessimistic vision of the continent. In the space of a few years, Africa came to be seen by many as a hub of homophobia, as the locus par excellence of violence directed against gay men and women. In but a few instances, discussions of homosexuality on the continent today focus on violence and drama: accounts of murder, imprisonment, “corrective” rape, negative media campaigns and the adoption of laws aimed at doing away with gay rights (one is commonly reminded that homosexuality is illegal in over half of all African countries and is punishable by death in four), skyrocketing HIV infection rates among homosexuals, and so on.

This special issue will centre on the conditions, forms and stakes of the increasing attention paid to homosexuality on the continent. In doing so, it will seek to take a measured view, moving away from the kinds of catastrophe scenarios alluded to above without, however, losing sight of profound underlying problems.

A first key step will be to shed light on events that have made headline news. The goal here will be to cast aside essentialist gazes – all-too-common visions of Africa as a continent hostile to homosexuality across the board – in favour of more nuanced analyses of each event’s specificities and inherent complexities. By way of example: we propose to consider otherwise underplayed or unexamined relations between anti-gay laws currently in vigour and politics prevalent in the colonial era. True, things are not well in Africa, as a comparison with Latin America underscores. In the latter, no country remains in which homosexuality is considered illegal and in some nations specific rights have been voted into law. In Africa, by contrast, no country where homosexuality is punishable by law has amended its legal code to the contrary and, in some cases, such as Burundi (2009), new anti-gay laws have come into vigour quite recently. That said, the situation is far from uniform. In fact, Africa is the continent where one encounters the greatest diversity in the matter – from the world’s most forward-looking stance (in South Africa, as we have seen) to some of the most radically conservative. Too, it is essential to underscore the variability and, often, the ambivalence that characterizes local states of affairs. Again, South Africa is a case in point: fundamental rights are granted to gay women and men in the rainbow nation, yet, simultaneously, these same men and women face significant violence. In some countries where draconian laws prevail, there are nonetheless thriving same-sex communities and cultures.

In cases of mass stigmatisation, it would be useful to cast a careful analytical gaze on how such phenomena unfold, paying particular attention to the wide range of positions involved. In some countries, when arrests take place and the media report on them (often) quite noisily, on occasion heads of state attempt to restore calm (Cameroon is one example); in others, “state homophobia” rules, with heads of state actively encouraging anti-gay stigma. One reason for the latter is, of course, to turn the attention of communities away from more pressing problems. There is more, however, to this, which requires close examination. A key focus for reflection might be the kinds of mechanisms that make it possible for forms of cultural nationalism to be mobilised over and over again to denigrate homosexual practices (with oft-repeated claims of import from abroad), or influences from abroad indeed, but of another kind, notably via the influence of right-wing North American religious groups or via policies of the United States government aiming to curtail the spread of HIV-AIDS by seeking to alter sexual practices and their representation.

Research on homosexuality in Africa over the past decade has tended to focus on gay persons (rather than on the notion of homosexuality more broadly), but far too little attention is still being paid to how these persons are perceived. While one hears a great deal about homophobia in Africa, notably from commentators in the “West”, entirely too little is being published that considers, with a real focus on detail and specificity, contemporary conceptions of homosexuality on the continent and the discourses that attend these. Such a focus would make possible a better comprehension of what is possible – what can and cannot be done in what appear to be the most hostile environments – and how it affects the lives of individuals. Considering the sheer diversity of conceptions relating to homosexuality across the continent would be fundamental in this context. In some settings, to cite but a few examples, it is associated with witchcraft and/or with means of accessing power, political and otherwise. In other settings (or, indeed, sometimes in the same) it is associated with forms of inversion – modes of gender-bending that have a long history, yet find themselves transformed, or re-signified, in the face of “Western” definitions of homosexuality. Contributions on ways in which homosexuality is addressed in literature and the arts would be of considerable interest as well.

There is self-evidently more to the visibility of homosexuality as a focus for concern than the controversies that have drawn so much attention of late. Also key, as alluded to above, are collective mobilisations. In the context of the fight against HIV-AIDS, in attempts to do away with stigma and, more broadly, in support of basic human rights, during the 1990s and in the following decade, a number of organisations emerged – some openly gay, others not, in both Francophone and Anglophone countries, though more so in the latter than the former. Often, there has been a correlation between the emergence of such organisations and official (political and/or religious) attacks against gay identities and practices. Affirmation and condemnation have tended to go hand in hand.

Thinking through these and other matters in historical terms is fundamental, comparing recent developments and mobilisations to ways in which homosexuality was addressed in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Key as well is reflection on local social and political mobilisations and how these relate to broader, transnational networks with which they commonly bear close links and absent which they cannot be fully understood. Internationalisation, here, is key: thus the increasing attention that Africa has been drawing as, yearly over the past decade, people across the world have been observing a national day dedicated to the fight against homophobia. In this globalised context, the very definition of the cause – how it is named, by whom and so on – emerges as a fluctuating and often heavily laden stake. African mobilisations increasingly draw on “Western” categories (LGBTI, MSM) that tend to elide local designations. How this impacts definitions of gender and sexuality and how, in turn, these definitions are both implicated in and produced by battles raging around notions of homosexuality across the continent: these are crucial questions for this issue of the journal. So too are questions relating to how sexual minorities choose to construct themselves, and how they are constructed by others, for purposes of public discourse. Essential as well, is an examination of how (and in some cases if) these constructions and the models they yield circulate, both within Africa and in exchanges between Africa and the “North”.