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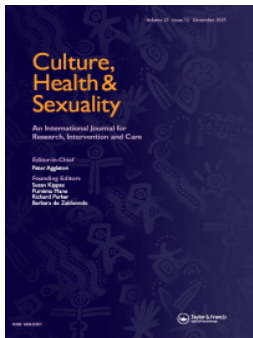
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EDITORIAL

Religion, culture and sexuality in Africa: critical ethnographic perspectives

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Introduction

Religious beliefs, discourses and forms of belonging deeply influence people's sexual lives, in Africa and elsewhere. At the same time, intimate sexual relations have their own experiential qualities and some level of autonomy in relation to other cultural practices (Giddens 1992). Hence, they may become, or are framed, as a source of tension in society. In this *Culture, Health & Sexuality* special Collection, we seek to take stock of research on religion, culture and sexuality published in the journal over the past two decades and highlight some of the theoretical ideas underpinning it.

The focus is on research conducted in Africa where a substantial number of global health programme and 'intervention' studies have taken place, alongside conceptions of the body and intimacies that critically engage Western notions of the same (see Brown et al. 2010). In doing so, our concern is to draw attention to the value of ethnographic approaches that attend to how communities make sense of such programmes and interventions through a focus on five sets of issues: culture, sexual orientations, public polemics, moralities and epistemics. Ethnographic approaches and global health studies complement each other in important ways. With their interpretive and qualitative methodologies, ethnographic approaches are especially apposite as a means of uncovering the cultural meanings that underlie sexual practices, and which steer religious beliefs and world-making activities. Conversely, global public health studies have informed ethnographies of religion, culture and sexualities with regard to how local understandings and processes have been subjected to global interventions (Golomski and Nyawo 2017; Van Raemdonck 2019). The aim of this introduction to the Collection is to pinpoint the crucial conceptual junctures involved in these phenomena.

Studying religion and sexuality ethnographically

Sexuality has been an important lens through which cultural change has been examined in anthropological theory and in terms of providing a window into cultural change for the past century (Mead 1928). Contemporary researchers studying sexuality have taken up earlier insights of classical anthropology, using them to understand the global concerns about sexuality that came with the HIV pandemic during the 1990s, and subsequently with ongoing sexuality and gender diversity debates. Significantly, anthropologists and their work have contributed to denaturalising earlier reified views of sexual relationships that coupled heteronormativity with binary gender constructions (Nyanzi 2013).

These events took place in tandem with significant processes of religious change in Africa, including the rise of charismatic Christianity and reformist Islam. The emergence and later growth of an entire sector of faith-based organisations (FBOs) providing support to health initiatives, and the profound mediatisation of religious campaigning, contributed significantly to the influence of religious voices in public debates regarding sexuality in many African countries (Achigibah et al. 2024; Beckmann, Gusman and Shroff 2014; Dilger, Burchardt and van Dijk 2010; Meyer 2011). These developments dovetailed with a renewed scholarly interest in materiality (Houtman and Meyer 2012), public culture (Englund 2011) and emotion (Riis and Woodhead 2010).

In the past three decades, classical anthropology's emphasis on kinship relations, patterns of reproduction, family responsibilities and dependencies as central to the organisation of human society acquired new significance in the study of sexualities (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012). In many cases, religion, including African historical traditions and Christianity and Islam, was often seen as being in line with fecundist notions that placed sexuality at the service of reproduction (Ellingson 2002). Although religious support for mothers and child-care, family-planning and other health services is commonplace, these directives led to the problematisation of sexuality within the context of pre- or extra-marital relations, same-sex relationships, abortion and so on.

Ethnography as a research method and social practice has also drawn attention to the everyday realities of 'conservative' and often highly influential moral agendas as they impact on sex and sexuality (van Klinken and Obadare 2018). However, recent research such as that showcased in many of the papers included in this Collection has placed greater emphasis on the Janus-faced interaction of religious ideologies and practices. This is visible, for instance, in relation to how religion fosters sexual pleasure (Beckmann 2010; Burchardt 2011) and offers guidance on sexual intimacies and romance through counselling and other forms of support (e.g. Van Dijk 2013), simultaneously reinforcing a particular sexual morality. It can also be seen in the way that religion offers teenage girls both a restrictive sexual context *and* a context of security when they are protected from the uninvited sexual advances of men (Pincock 2020). Ethnographies of this kind also demonstrate how religious notions are situated in the complex relationships between sexuality and gender.

In our view, five conceptual concerns that emerge from this Collection are particularly significant for understanding the religion–culture–sexuality nexus in Africa and beyond. First, while the influence of cultural meanings, norms and scripts regarding sexuality is beyond dispute, what counts as 'culture' is contested. On the one hand, religion may be viewed as a central element of collective culture and is hence inseparable from it. Religious ideologies supporting heteronormativity and patriarchy exemplify this. On the other hand, in public discourses people often also distinguish between 'African culture' and religion (Nyanzi 2013). Such distinctions have been buttressed by the work of reformist Muslims and evangelical Christians seeking to delegitimise or even stigmatise certain sexual practices as dangerous. The notion of 'African culture', for example, has been extensively used to portray the concept of same-sex relationships as 'un-African' and, variously, to embrace it or reject it as alien (Ntetmen Mbetbo 2013; Nyanzi 2013). This religious embrace of 'culture' can also be part of a critical appraisal of public-health interventions such as male circumcision, Golomski and Nyawo (2017, 855) show when they write:

> In consideration of medical male circumcision, Swazi culture becomes a ground for self-identified Christians to eschew the global health campaign as outside of bodily, sexual and social conventions of what it means to be a contemporary gendered and religious person.

In line with such ways of appropriation and collective uses of the term 'culture', in urban Africa especially we can see the rise of cultural milieux in which Christians and neo-traditionalists may coalesce in their rejection of matters that are perceived to be 'un-African', 'un-Biblical' or detrimental to the moral development of young people or society at large (Ehrisman 2014; Nyanzi 2013).

Second, rising public contestation over homosexuality and same-sex relationships has drawn attention to the diversity of sexual orientations, pleasures and relationships present on the African continent (Alio et al. 2022; Ntetmen Mbetbo 2013). Religious groups are recorded as instigating and exacerbating such contestations. Transnational religious alliances, such as those connecting religious groups in Africa to the Christian Right in the USA (see Beckmann, Gusman and Shroff 2014), have played a major role in this regard, paralleling yet often opposing transnational efforts to promote the rights of sexual minorities and LGBTQ+ communities. Such dynamics are mirrored in the ways in which public religious discourses and the everyday life experiences of sexuality of diverse individuals interact. One South African Muslim cleric suggested:

> My beloved brother! You are certainly aware that the sin of homosexuality is *haram*. But do you know how serious this crime is and just how despicable it is in the sight of Allâh Ta'âla? … The acts of homosexuality and lesbianism are certainly a perversion and a serious deviation from the inherent nature of man. These acts of defiance against human nature are also even viler and uglier than adultery. (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012, 272)

Such strident views have been credited with creating a sense of alienation from religion among sexuality- and gender-diverse individuals. For example, one gay man in Cameroon told ethnographer Ntetmen Mbetbo (2013, 82):

> I was a member of a Pentecostal church because I like it when prayers are done with authority. But since I discovered in the Bible that homosexuality is condemned, I no more feel that my prayers can be heard, no matter how powerful it is.

However, such polemics often hide the more nuanced negotiations between religious identities and sexual desire that are present in everyday negotiations that take place beneath public controversies and the binary opposition between religion and same-sex relationships (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012).

Third, there is an important distinction to be made between sexuality as an element of public culture and sexuality as a set of intimate, unspoken desires and practices. As already mentioned, powerful public polemics regarding sexuality heavily impact public sentiment in relation to sexual subjectivity and practice, leading to violence, oppression and the loss of liberties. Religious opinion-formers have significantly shaped these polemics. This may occur in response to awareness campaigns around gender-related human rights (Van Raemdonck 2019). Simultaneously, however, secrecy and silence, and invisibility and privacy, continue

to be major factors shaping the unfolding of sexual experiences, especially of those not condoned by religious ideologies, or those of kinship, nation and nature (Burchardt 2013a).

Significantly, whereas modernisation theory suggests that sexuality becomes increasingly subject to individual choice, it remains entangled with culture in various guises (e.g. Van Raemdonck 2019) and with religion even when people reject religious ideologies about sex, or fail to embrace them (Burchardt 2013a). The arrival of HIV in particular resulted in a process whereby religious practices and interventions appeared to create forms of 'openness' about discrete matters of private and intimate lives that were new to both religious practitioners and their followers (Burchardt 2013b; Nguyen 2009). The introduction of medicalised discourses into religious practices and discourses helped to shape these new forms of openness, as well as the expression in the public domain of religious concerns about particular sexual practices and sentiments (Young et al. 2022).

Fourth, in theorising the relationships between religion, culture and sexuality, there is a need to differentiate between three modalities of religion: (1) as belonging; (2) as a moral system; and (3) as a *nomos* (Berger 1967) – or modality of world-making. Relating to the first, religion contributes to the ordering of sexual relationships by providing categories of membership, including some and excluding others. This is related but not identical to the way in which religious moral systems work. One element here is that the moral notions of religions oscillate between explicit ethical codes and implicit ordinary ethical practices of judgement that often manifest themselves in subtle forms of behaviour such as gestures and whispers (see Bochow, Kirsch and van Dijk 2017; Lambek 2010). As these authors also indicate, moral rules, arguably, not only champion adherence but, importantly, engender emotional and affective responses in people. Religions provide rules about sex that can significantly shape sexual subjectivities and conduct (Ural and Burchardt 2024).

Lastly, religion and culture can be construed as cognitive forces that frame how people apprehend the world. These modes of world-making are differentiated regarding socially validated notions of 'adolescence' (Pincock 2020) and 'gender'. In this sense, religion operates as an epistemic force by which particular knowledges are not only circulated but also produced, especially in relation to the meaning and significance of certain sexual practices, pathological factors of transmission and contamination in the face of an epidemic, or the social psychology of how attraction and desire influence a person's behaviour (Van Dijk 2020). At an epistemological level, therefore, global health approaches shape religious notions and understandings, often in surprising ways.

Due to diverse dynamics such as fertility transitions and the ongoing HIV and AIDS crisis, the selected contributions to this Collection make clear how the five dimensions we mentioned at the start of this introduction – culture, sexual orientations, public polemics, moralities and epistemics – continue to play a role in shaping the religion–sexuality nexus in Africa. An ethnographic exploration of these tensions and conjectures is particularly valuable as this kind of research explores the domains created by the everyday practices of people, institutions and communities. While we do not deny the critical ethical questions that an ethnography of actual sexual practices and intimacies produces, the collection of papers we have brought together here shows how ethnography is dynamically developing in interaction with its (African) context of research, and the lived experiences of its interlocutors.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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