AFRICAN SAME-SEX SEXUALITY AND GENDER DIVERSITY: AN INTRODUCTION

Theo Sandfort, Njoki Ngumi, Fabienne Simenel, Kevin Mwachiro, and Vasu Reddy
This book is the outcome of the second African Same-sex Sexualities and Gender Diversity (ASSS&GD) Conference, held in Nairobi, Kenya, 17-20 March, 2014.1 The conference set out to identify and celebrate indigenous and evolving male, female and/or gender variant same-sex sexual practices, identities and communities, including expressions of gender diversity, and to promote their social acceptance and their physical and social well-being. About 60 persons – all scholarly engaged in or knowledgeable about the study of same-sex practices, identities, and communities from a liberating or emancipatory perspective, and sexual rights advocates – participated in the conference. 16 sub-Saharan African countries where represented. In total 40 papers were presented and discussed (abstracts from all these presentations are included at the end of this book).

The papers presented at this conference and the contributions included in this volume can be described to be ‘queer’: they reflect a diversity of understandings of what same-sex attraction and gender diversity might mean, and they offer a range of analyses of what needs to be done and distinctive perspectives on how change can be accomplished on a continent that has ongoing struggles with non-normative sexualities and is consistently bent on re-defining African sexuality. What the contributions in this collection have in common is their sheer audacity and boldness in responding to homophobia and transphobia, and they are virulently resistant to the status quo of suppression in the name of traditional values, severe criminalisation, and paternalistic international aid. In short these contributions are boldly queer. Hence this collection’s title.

What is in a name

Queer is also one of the terms used to discuss African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity. Referring to persons, a more commonly used label is LGBT, an acronym denoting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. Some participants added an ‘I’ to this acronym to also include intersex persons, illustrating the desire to be inclusive, with the risk, though, of being perfunctory, which sometimes also applies to the letters B and T of the acronym.

Using queer and LGBT in the African context can be seen as an unfortunate adoption of Western constructions and labels. However, other than the terms ‘sexual minority persons’ – which we prefer not to use because of its possible association with inferiority – LGBT is the only commonly used term that encompasses persons who practice same-sex sexuality or are gender nonconforming. Furthermore, most conference participants used LGBT without misgivings and the acronym seems to be widely adopted by people and organisations in Africa.

The use of LGBT throughout this book does not imply that all people covered by the label actually use that label to describe themselves. At the conference, the need was discussed to reflect on the use and meanings of labels and to also extract oneself from some labels. In addition, as several conference participants revealed, there are a number of viable indigenous labels that refer to specific expressions of same-sex sexuality or gender diversity. We hope that such labels will not get lost and continue to be used. As Zethu Matebeni argued at the conference, return to the use of these words is crucial to claiming traditional roots.
Categorising persons under the umbrella term LGBT might oversimplify differences and suggest that these persons all deal with the same issues. Even though there is overlap, as argued by the conference participants, differences between groups are critical. It was actually noted that the privileged position of one group is likely to contribute to the struggle, marginalisation and oppression of another. Also, the LGBT label ignores that there might be tensions between the groups it brings together as well. In reading this book, we would like the reader to keep in mind that despite the systematic use of LGBT, this label encompasses a wide variety of differently valued expressions.

**The global context**

African same-sex sexuality and gender diversity have become strongly contested and debated issues. As a consequence of globalisation, with greater access to information, and a stronger involvement of the international community, the visibility of African LGBT communities has increased. Partly in response to this increasing visibility, oppositional voices to the recognition and protection of LGBT rights have become pronounced and louder. In this response, same-sex sexuality is conceived as deviating from traditional African values and as a bad habit imported from the West. While as a part of the colonial project same-sex sexuality has been criminalised in most African countries, laws are sharpened in some countries, engendering a societal backlash against LGBT persons.

The discourse of human rights seems to have little traction in a context where people, because of their sexual behaviour, are not considered to have any.

It is too easy to consider the situation in Africa in an isolated way, historically as well as geographically. The comparatively benign situation in the West has a rather recent origin, which can be easily forgotten. Furthermore, Africa is not the only place where a backlash or lack of progress can be observed. In the opening chapter of this book, Mark Gevisser spotlights the African situation regarding same-sex sexuality and gender diversity into a global context and engages the issue in terms of recent developments in Russia, China and other countries. He also analyses ‘homonationalism’ and the way people in the West have used the support of LGBT people as a way of justifying racism and imperialism. Discussing the question whether the US cultural wars have gone global, he points to the fact that that concept ignores the agency of the people affected.

The heightened criminalisation in some African countries strongly impact local communities. Chiedu Chike Ifekandu describes in *The Fallout of Nigeria’s Anti-gay Law and Opportunities for the Future for LGBTI Persons and Communities* how physical spaces where LGBTI can convene are disappearing and the importance of virtual spaces which are on the rise. Virtual places are relatively safe and offer not only possibilities to interact, but also to mobilise a community. Ifekandu puts the struggle in context in discussing the hardships that LGBT persons in Uganda encounter, by explaining that change in the West was not achieved overnight, but was rather the outcome of a long process that required ongoing advocacy, resistance and persistence.
Centrality of health

Reflected in the contributions is the centrality of health – more specifically STI and HIV, and then particularly in men who have sex with men – in discussions about African same-sex sexuality and gender diversity. Making up a balance, the attention for health seems uneven, as if attention for LGBT issues has to be legitimised from a health perspective. The focus on health seems justified by the disproportionate impact of the HIV epidemic, especially in African countries where epidemics are still seen as heterosexual and homosexual transmission has long been overlooked and ignored. There is, however, more to same-sex sexuality and gender diversity in Africa that requires scholarly engagement. In discussing research needs, it was for instance argued at the conference that there should be more exploration of African contexts, the spaces where LGBT persons are living, and less on identities and definitions or international terminologies.

Health is central to two key contributions in this book. Lucille Ebong discusses in her chapter *One Step Forward and So Many Back: Access to Health Care for an LGBTI Ugandan* how stigmatisation but more critically anti-gay laws obstruct access to healthcare for LGBT persons. Anti-gay laws also make it more difficult for healthcare providers to carry out their work in the healthcare system that in itself needs strengthening. Juliet Kushaba demonstrates in her contribution *Doomed if They Do, Doomed if They Don’t* how stigmatisation keeps lesbian women who are married in various ways from seeking the care they need.

A broader conception of health includes the notion of belonging and feeling at home, particularly among African LGBT migrants, as addressed in Irene Fubara-Manuel's *A Place Like Home*. Can African LGBT persons, marginalised in their home country, find a home in other countries, where, being black, they are confronted with different forms of marginalisation? Is home simply a physical space or does it refers to a common experience and shared ideas? Wherever home is, there are always "outsiders within". To ensure well-being for all, reflection on presentation, citizenship and race needs to be likewise an ongoing project.

Africa is not one country

A few issues discussed at the conference seem to be relatively more specific to the African situation, of which religion is a core theme. Western scholars easily overlook how ingrained religion is in the daily lives of African people. That is also the case for LGBT persons, putting them in the impossible situation of being condemned by the institution and finding hope in spirituality. Another such issue is traditional values, for instance regarding the role of the family, leaving LGBT people torn between meeting and fulfilling expectations or losing support and what should be considered ‘African’. Graeme Reid, a participant at the conference observed ironically that the notions of “unAfrican” and “unChristian” often go hand in hand. The equation of masculinity and heterosexuality poses further problems for LGBT persons.
The conference presentations also showed, however, that Africa is not a homogeneous and uniform country and that the circumstances in which LGBT persons live vary between as well within countries. With the reality that Africa is not one country, it also became clear that strategies for change not only require understanding of local circumstances but have to be adapted, taking local circumstances into account. What might work in one context does not necessarily have to work in other situations. While legal circumstances might limit what is possible in some countries, legal actions, such as appealing to the African Charter or United Nations treaties, might be very effective in other countries. If situations allow, it seems that disclosure – sharing personal experiences and stories – can be an effective tool. “Evidence from our own lives and research is the greatest power against misinformation and disinformation” observed one of the conference participants. Unfortunately, in many African countries disclosure might put one in serious danger with the looming possibility of severe penalties such as imprisonment and sometimes death.

Diversity of circumstances is also central to a piece of performance art presented at the conference by Ato Malinda, based on intimate stories collected among lesbian women in Kenya. Contingent upon individual circumstances women are often confronted with different challenges, with a lot more room in “the oasis of liberalism in the middle class.” Pictures of the act, taken by Daniel Jack Lyons, and a clarification of her performance are included in this book.

**Ways forward**

Another recurrent theme at the conference was the tension between tradition and change. While apparently tradition and change seem to exclude each other, Graeme Reid observed that there was a need to challenge the false dichotomies between a wholesome tradition and decadent modernity. Exploring ideas around tradition is important because there is power behind them, and there could be value in asserting the local against global uniformity. In *LGBT Activism and “Traditional Values”: Promoting Dialogue through Indigenous Cultural Values in Botswana*, John McAllister argues convincingly how embedding action in tradition is likely to be more effective than the groundless adoption of Western approaches to LGBT liberation.

Western involvement in the African LGBT struggle was addressed in various presentations. While Western engagement as such was appreciated, the concrete actions, such as threats to withdraw funding, were not always experienced as helpful, but rather play into the hands of those in power. In such situations it is sometimes disheartening to see the short-term memory of the Western world; acceptance of same-sex sexuality has been low in many countries and the acknowledgment of same-sex unions is a recent adjustment. Furthermore, as Kehinde Okanlawon argues in *Resisting the Hypocritical Western Narrative of Victimhood and Celebrating the Resistance against Homophobia in Nigeria*, the focus on African countries detracts from the ongoing homophobia in Western countries. Okanlawon also demonstrates how the attention from Western countries may promote an image of victimhood and takes away the agency demonstrated by LGBT persons living in countries such as Uganda and Nigeria.
In terms of moving forward, conference participants highlighted the importance of embracing intersectionality (the relationship between forms and systems of oppression, discrimination and domination) that identify how oppressive institutions (such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia) are interconnected. In “Coming Out” of a Straight Man: Reflections on a Personal Journey toward Self-acceptance, Godfrey Dalitso Kangaude offers in that respect a moving account that demonstrates how a culture of respect for sexuality and rights requires embracing sexuality and intimacy more generally.

Agency and ownership were critical terms evident in discussions about the future of activism and research. An emerging consensus at the conference is that Africans need to produce their own accounts and presentations of queer life that speak to critical issues and that are relevant, impactful, and empowering. Stella Nyanzi argues, in the final chapter, for the need of formal queer scholarship that is African. She outlines the current vulnerabilities of such scholarship, but also how the knowledge produced by future African queer scholars will diffuse and undo ignorance. As such it will affect the African psyche, and alter politics and legislation.

**Other expressions**

Some of the contributions to this book result from conference activities other than formal presentations. One of these was a group interview, facilitated by Kevin Mwachiro about *Communication for Research and Advocacy*; Zethu Matebeni, Frans Mom and Mark Gevisser participated on the panel. The interest among participants in making research palatable for uses in advocacy is encouraging. Common writing challenges and difficulties were also discussed, chief being the fact that many people struggle with writing because of the language and formats through which they have to do it: English as opposed to indigenous languages, academic and report language as opposed to lay language. It was also raised in this discussion that sometimes more creative forms of expression needed to be utilised for knowledge development.

In addition to various paper presentations and discussions, the conference also included the demonstration of a photovoice project, facilitated by Daniel Jack Lyons and Theo Sandfort, in which five of the conference participants participated. With pictures and accompanying narrative accounts, participants as subalterns (members of a social group who are socially and politically oppressed and relegated to the margins of society) addressed the question what life as an LGBT person in their country and community looks like, and how this is impacted by social, cultural, and political circumstances. The question, as one of the participants framed it, is whether even if the *subaltern speaks*, the oppressor will listen.²
Furthermore, there was an interview session with the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, who came out as homosexual in a lost chapter that was excluded from his 2011 memoir *One Day I Will Write about This Place*. Kevin Mwachiro discussed with him the impact of publishing this lost chapter as well as his views on same-sex sexuality in Africa, reflecting both optimism and a realistic awareness of the dangers present in most African countries for queer persons. ‘Seeking knowledge’ is the most important advice Wainaina has for young Africans who struggle with their sexuality, echoing what Stella Nyanzi more generally states about queer African scholarship.

There also was an opportunity at the conference for participants to have one’s photograph taken. “Can you tell?” was the question Daniel Jack Lyons asked conference attendees who agreed to participate. The participants’ photographs, included in this book, indicate how much openness is possible while the pictures subscripts make clear that the need to hide is not random; we assume that the reader will be able to figure out “Who Can Tell”. Coming out and disclosing one’s sexuality is usually seen as having beneficial effects for LGBT persons. It fosters identity development, facilitates social support and promotes mental health. Despite these advantages, coming out might also compromise individual safety as it puts that individual in danger, especially in a context where severe laws limit homosexual expression.

**In conclusion**
This book does not pretend to offer final and definitive answers to the challenges and questions of same-sex sexualities and gender diversity in Africa. In fact, the conference ended with more questions than we commenced with. How can creating knowledge in the African context produce change and promote acceptance of gender and sexual diversity? Do the funding politics of international NGOs affect the construction of African homosexuality? As we define the issues, what picture of African same-sex sexualities and gender diversity have we been drawing and how can we better conceptualise and think about LGBT issues in Africa with reference to gender, class, social (in)justice, and the relationship between the past and the present?

This book is a first product to emerge from the second African Same-sex Sexualities and Gender Diversity Conference. Participants were invited to contribute to this book on a voluntary basis by writing papers, which a number of them did. Consequently, the book presents narratives and perspectives from those participants who were willing and able to write, and does not pretend to represent nor cover Africa as a whole. Other presentations from this conference will appear in a special issue of a scientific journal that is in currently under development. With these publications, we want to make the results, discussions and ideas produced in these conferences available for as wide an audience as possible.
The ASSS&GD Conference cannot be seen as a one-off event. This conference is a product as well as an initiator and instigator of a growing understanding of same-sex sexuality and gender diversity in the African context. We wish for this process to be encouraged, nourished and stimulated by on-going debate, research and exchange among – fortunately – an increasing pool of courageous activists, scholars and opinion leaders on the continent. More scholarly work is needed, as well as advocacy that will increase resilience in this population, strengthen local communities, and improve the context and circumstances under in which LGBT people live. If owned by African scholars and activists, both the scholarship and activism will thrive in very productive ways.

Notes

1 The conference was a joint initiative of Hivos (Netherlands, main sponsor), the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies (New York), and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, South Africa). Persons and institutions involved in the organisation of the conference are listed in this book’s Appendix. The first conference took place in Pretoria, South Africa, 13-16 February, 2011; outcomes of that conference were published in a special issue of the journal Culture, Health & Sexuality (Volume 15, Supplement 1, 2013).

2 For a complete presentation of the project see: http://danieljacklyons.wix.com/asssgd-photovoice.