

Sexuality, Politics, and the Occult in Africa: Critical Perspectives

Call for abstracts

Rationale

Current literature on witchcraft and the occult in post-colonial Africa is replete with references to erotic rituals and sexuality-related practices. However, little research has specifically addressed the widespread invocation of sexuality in discourses of the occult on the continent (Niehaus, 2002, Izugbara, 2009). In their work on occult economies, the Comaroffs (1998) noted that postcolonial Africa is buzzing with accounts of ‘freakish’ and ‘satanic’ misuse, largely through shocking sexual rituals and practices, of the life force of less privileged people by the rich and powerful. Based on their ethnography of witchcraft-related violence in South Africa, they argue that the antisocial greed of these so-called predators is frequently cast, among other ways, in idioms of perverted production and reproduction, in images and tales of un-generative sexuality, rape, and deadly sexual exchanges.

Meyer’s (1995) study of confessions of satanic wealth in Ghana also drew attention to prevalent beliefs regarding the parasitical, magical appropriation and perversion of human sexuality for the purpose of acquiring wealth and power. The theme of sexuality and witchcraft resonates in her subsequent analysis of popular imaginations of the peripatetic Mami Water (2001), in which she notes that sexual encounters with this eroticized sea-dwelling woman or her equally amorous and seductive agents and angelings are generally thought to be an avenue through which many people become rich and powerful in contemporary Ghana.

In Francis Nyamnjoh’s *Fishing in Troubled Waters* (2005), which interrogates metaphors of consumerism, commoditized sex, and sexualized commodities in Dakar, Senegal, rumors of wealth derived from bizarre sexual rituals also feature strongly. In line with current scholarly traditions, Nyamnjoh maintained that these claims emerge and arise as the interdependencies between contemporary economic realities, globalization, status, and pleasure, seduction and livelihood are worked out, negotiated, and performed. Niehaus’ study of narratives surrounding the sexual practices of witches in the South African Lowveld also highlighted sexuality as a significant element in accounts of witchcraft.

Despite the important leads provided by these scholars, thorough analyses of occult sexual economic activities and of the prominence of sexuality in the tales of occult and political activities in

Africa remain rare. The dearth of scholarly literature specifically addressing the growing invocation of sexuality in lay accounts and narratives of the occult in Africa hinders scholarly understanding of the role of sexuality as a key social force on the continent. In much of recorded history, sexuality has been linked to an astonishing range of issues; politics, religion, spirituality, health, technology, architecture, the occult, etc (Shah, 2006, Pearson, 2005, Smyth, 2006). Besides the silence which surrounds sexuality in most cultures, making it easily susceptible to misunderstanding, rumors, and misrepresentations, sexuality-related behaviors are also largely perceived as intimate, presenting a potential for exchange of positive and negative energies. In the current era of HIV/AIDS for instance, the ancient belief that sex with virgins has curative potential has re-emerged to promote random episodes of rape, sometimes involving girls as young as four in some parts of Africa. There are also pervasive accounts of ritual rape and snatching of genitals for the purpose of acquiring or securing wealth, status and power. Other current accounts mention the use of sexual magic, love potions, and witchcraft by men and women in struggles for control over partners and their possessions, exemplified in narratives of sexual encounters and relationships between often younger persons and older rich or powerful men and women.

Extant analyses see contemporary narratives of witchcraft and the occult as upshots of current historical processes or global political and economic changes. Auslander (1993) sees fantastic narratives as idioms initiating, crystallizing, and sustaining valid commentaries on a broad range of current social and political experiences and therefore a reflection of the complexities of modern economy and society. The Comaroffs (1999) contend that beliefs in magical economies are fueled by contemporary inequality. They argue that modernity and its corollary, consumerism gone awry, create an omnivorous sexuality (Nyamjoh, 2005; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1995). Currently, sexuality has become increasingly commoditized, and people with influence or those ravenously searching for wealth and power have also become less and less bound by popular decency and morality (Smith, 2007). Nyamjoh (2005) argues that post-colonial societies are characterized both by acute poverty and dramatic and luring images of desire, abundance, and pleasure. The postcolony is therefore a context where morality has become both very unpopular and hardly rewarded. In this context, unparalleled consumption-which is the new god, is also increasingly sexualized, and now connotes the ability to enjoy the sexiest, juiciest and rarest, having anything and everything that one sees, can get, or that is available, sexually speaking (Nyamjoh, 2005).

It is against this background that we propose an edited multidisciplinary and cross-national volume to address the interaction of sexuality, the occult, and politics in contemporary Africa. The goal of the book is to enlarge social scientific understanding of the social possibilities, experiences, and fantasies surrounding the interface of sexuality, the occult, and politics in Africa. Rather than contribute to the anthropological fascination with wild and exotic ‘African cultures’, this anthology intends to address the relationship between sexuality and the occult as is it practiced and narrated in everyday life all over the continent and understand it against the background of global as well as regional political and socio-economic histories. Among the key questions to be interrogated in this book are: What connections exist among sexuality, the occult, and power in Africa? How is the relationship between sexuality, politics, and the occult depicted and imagined in different spaces and places in Africa? What are the sources of the tales, stories, and fantasies that circulate about the interaction of sexuality, politics, and the occult in Africa? What political and economic issues drive beliefs and narratives surrounding occult sexual encounters and what agonies, hopes, visions, endeavors, aspirations, etc. do accounts of occult sexual encounters and economies invoke and speak to? Relying on a range of disciplines and perspectives as well as experiences from African countries, the proposed book will seek to answer the above and other related questions.

The readership

The book is intended for public readership but will be particularly useful to scholars in the disciplines of anthropology, religion, sociology, history, psychology, and public health, and indeed everybody with an interest in African politics, culture, and history. More importantly, it promises to be a unique contribution to the study of the complex relationship between the supernatural, sexuality, society, and politics in Africa.

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Deadlines

Submission of abstracts – September 16, 2009

Submission of full papers- December 16, 2009