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## Enacting future Analysis

Report on »Religion, Sexuality, and Identity in Africa and the African Diaspora« the 7th biennial Conference of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR). Held at the University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, July 26th – 29th 2016

**Anne Beutter**

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# Enacting future Analysis

Report on »Religion, Sexuality, and Identity in Africa and the African Diaspora« the 7th biennial Conference of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR). Held at the University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, July 26th – 29th 2016

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- 1 This conference was a statement. By choosing »Religion, Sexuality, and Identity in Africa and the African Diaspora« as a title, the organizers decided to bring a set of topics to the table which have a virulent prominence in emic debates that contrasts its relative neglect in the etic scholarly discourse. It is a bold move and speaks for the vitality of the association to set this topic prominently on the agenda of the discipline. Ever the more since the issues are contested in society as well as in the academic body that makes up the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR).
- 2 The AASR, in its own diversity of membership, with a variety of backgrounds from within and outside the African continent and an atmosphere that I, as one of the younger participants, felt to be colloquial with little hierarchies, an atmosphere that stimulates interaction of mutual respect and encouragement, may be the right place to address them. The venue in a rather light and publicly accessible space on the main campus of the University of Ghana speaks to the confident way in which this conference addressed a set of highly sensitive questions, as Zethu Matabeni pointed out in conversation. Contributions such as her account and analysis of the murder of queer women in South Africa, as well as the imploring tone of the introductory keynote address by Rev. Prof. em. John S. Pobee to convene at the occasion of this conference in a spirit of openness and to be prepared to mutually listen to one another, made it clear that such an atmosphere of confidence is not to be taken for granted. In the panels I attended, this was by and large lived up to. Even if at times we were in a more or less friendly tone navigating open dissent, sometimes curbed only by the tacit performance of panel chairs, the serene reaction of presenters or sheer time limit.
- 3 The fact that quite a number of presentations would not take place and panels were therefore merged or cancelled made the program somewhat patchy. It left some presentations rather atomized in their panels and the main strands came to bear in the

consecutive sessions. It came as no surprise that homosexuality was a prominent and at the same time the most controversial theme leading us through the four days of the conference. On the one hand, we witnessed the quest for conceptual frameworks to account for the specificity of African LGBT-identities. On the other hand, LGBT-Discourse was discussed as a neo-colonial reconfiguration of African identities, while drawing on Christian normative parameters. Apart from that, a host of studies presented in several concurrent sessions approached questions of gender equality, gender equity and women's rights as well as gender based violence occurring in a variety of settings on the continent and in the diasporic societies. From there a third theme of paramount concern emerged: the female body as a contested site for the manifestation of normativities. Thus, we find the elaboration of male and female identities and sexuality related norms through the focus on female bodies not only to be a practice in the field of religions but also in our scholarly research on the latter, as Brenda Bartelink remarked.

- 4 The contributions that spoke to me the most were those subtle and descriptive analyses of emic constellations such as Rose Mary Amenga-Etego's account of local language games that portray sexuality and gender-constellations, and how these intersect with globalized debates; Nankani discourse conceives a person as married not only to a husband or wife but to his or her family as a whole. It is therefore perfectly legitimate for a woman to be introduced as »my wife« by her husband's sister. A local language game that may be misinterpreted when entering a discursive setting where debates on homosexuality are a more current topic.
- 5 Amenga-Etego's contribution is an example of how Prof. Kofi Asare Opoku's appeal in the third plenary that »African traditions are crying for the attention of African scholars« may look like in practice. Future work will also show how this, in turn, links up with methodological and theoretical ideas that revisit existing feminist, postcolonial and queer theory with regards to historical and contemporary African realities as sketched by Adriaan van Klinken in the first plenary.
- 6 It seems to be an effect of the very topic as well as of its novelty to the African Study of Religions that quite some effort was expended into ascertaining one's own normative position in the anticipated controversies. This observation does call for a heightened interest in the questions of how to balance engaged scholarship, descriptive distance, reflexive subjectivity as well as one's own experiences. These questions were addressed in several discussions in formal as well as informal settings during the conference. The presented research, as well as the conference itself, showed that the African Study of Religions deals with intellectual realities that emerge from different local settings and converge in a more globalized reality. This experience occurs on the emic as well as on the etic level. It may have been specifically virulent as we have set out to discuss formations of and approaches to sexuality and gender at a conference where approximately 70 scholars based in different countries within the African continent and all over the world convened. In all this we may look at the seventh biannual conference of the AASR itself as an embodiment of our discipline's state of the art.

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