

The Emerging Homosexual Mobilization in French-speaking Africa

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For a few years, a certain visibility of homosexuality has emerged in many African countries. After more than twenty years of denial of the homosexual transmission of HIV in Africa, the fight against the epidemic among men who have sex with men (MSM) has become a priority of many western and international organizations. In that context, a homosexual mobilization has appeared in several French-speaking African countries. One of the aims of my research, based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Bamako (Mali), Abidjan (Ivory Coast) and Dakar (Senegal) from 2003 to 2011, was to analyze the emergence of that mobilization in different contexts.

In many countries of Africa, collective action among those who engage in same-sex sexuality appears in great part to result from opportunities extended by the context of the fight against the epidemic and from the support offered by foreign and international backers in this arena. The situation in Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal is exemplary of the recent processes of mobilization through the question of AIDS and that of homosexuality in Sub Saharan Africa, as social mobilization is emerging through actions taken toward MSM by AIDS related organizations. The actions of these organizations, only in initial stages, already contribute in a way to the legitimization of both the expression and the acceptance of homosexuality, in a context that tolerates same-sex sexuality only on the condition of its silence. But those mobilizations sometimes have to face public or legal hostility against homosexuality such as in Senegal or in Mali.

The comparative approach based on multi-sited ethnography can help to understand the dialectic relationship between public stigmatization and collective action and the way specific contextual factors contribute to the emergence or non-emergence of homosexual mobilization in African countries. It also helps to understand that the collective action and the transnational exchanges that it is presupposed reinforce a syncretic model of homosexuality in many countries of Sub Saharan Africa, rather than the imposition of a Western model, as the burden of local contexts weigh much more heavily than those of outside interventions.