Guest Editorial

Gender and sexuality in African discourses

Daniel Yaw Fiaveha and Eyo Mensah

Abstract
This issue examines the role of language and/or cultural expression in discourses around gender and sexuality. We explore the expressions used to describe people in relation to their gender and sexual configurations and practices. The contributions are from scholars writing from West and Eastern African perspectives, and the findings are useful for ongoing discourse and for informing policy direction. We first present an introduction to this issue, where we highlight the problematic areas of gender and sexuality research in Africa and the aim of the study, taking into consideration how spaces in language expressions make us gendered and sexual beings. We also discuss some historical research trajectories in African sexuality, followed by some future prospects. We conclude with a brief overview of each of the papers in the issue.

KEYWORDS: gender, sexuality, gender discourses, sexual desires, sexual expressions, queer, LGBT rights, Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya

1 Introduction
Language is a primary medium for (re)constructing and nuancing gender and sexuality, and understanding the link between language and cultural expression and sexuality is pivotal. This is especially true in the African context where
reductive gender binarity and homophobic ideologies are still deeply rooted and entrenched. This issue examines the role of language and/or cultural expression in constructing discourses around gender and sexuality. It aims to explore the language used to describe people in relation to their gender configurations, sexual identities, and practices. On the one hand, the issue investigates the discursive construction of gender and sexuality, taking into account gender inequality (to promote inclusion and social justice), queer debates, heterosexuality, sexual desires and pleasures, agency, power dynamics, and identity in Africa. On the other hand, it highlights the multiple ways in which language practices related to sexuality are activated as symbolic resources that inform sexual attitudes and behaviour in the form of metaphors, irony, slang, and euphemisms. This triple issue expands contemporary debates on the negotiation of meaning in sexual encounters and practices and discusses how gender and sexuality are foregrounded or enacted in the African sociocultural context. In this issue, we are aiming for a deeper African-centred understanding of how gender and sexuality are discursively represented in different sociocultural settings and spaces and to situate these contemporary constructions vis-à-vis earlier precolonial discourses and broader (post)colonial ‘language expressions’. The contributors also inquire about emerging possibilities and situations that allow for socially affirmative and contested expressions of agencies and desires that are often considered sacred, sensitive, and taboo.

This issue of Sociolinguistic Studies highlights topical debates in gender and sexuality research in Africa, looking at the performance of gender, the construction of sexuality through linguistic and gendered framing, critiquing patriarchal systems, and illuminating counter narratives on the criminalization of queer sexuality in many parts of Africa. This issue also considers how gender and sexuality are shaping the entertainment industry and their role in fiction, and, for the first time, the discourse on gender and sexuality has shifted away from the health-related perspectives that have dominated previous investigations on the subject, and, according to some researchers (such as Spronk, 2007; Fiaveh, 2017), have made sex (in Africa) both eroticized and de-eroticized into an act devoid of meaning. The issue develops a dialectical balance between theory and practice and engages mainly in an empirical examination of gender and sexuality based on textual and contextual information and the emerging realities of the moment. It has documented and brought to the fore the significant progress that has been recorded in the field while potentially increasing possibilities for the evolution of new perspectives in gender and sexuality epistemology in Africa. All in all, this issue has advanced promising lines of inquiry that ‘hinged on a radically different conceptualization’ of African
sexuality (Epprecht, 2018: 1276). We hope that it will serve as a melting pot of different methodologies, theorizations, and analyses for future scholarships in the field.

2 Gender and sexuality in Africa

Gender and sexuality are two sides of the same coin. One can hardly talk about one without the other because they are inextricably intertwined. The concept of gender is fluid and socially constructed and plays a crucial role in defining human sexuality. Discourses of gender performance and ideologies are much more open and accessible than the discreet and sensitive narratives of sexuality. Gender is an overarching category that deals with social demographic variables such as race, class, age, religion, and physical ability. More broadly, sexuality relates to the feelings, identities, practices, and behaviours associated with sex. Sexuality is deeply embedded in the meanings and interpretations of the gender system (Tamale, 2011). Historical and contemporary perspectives in Africa and beyond have revealed that these concepts also serve as an important strategic fulcrum of social and political debates in African countries, and the direction of thought and reflection is heavily influenced by the cultural context(s) under consideration. For instance, the same-sex marriage controversy is still raging in most African countries, while other countries have put an end to the debate either by legalising or criminalising the practice. This evidence points to the multivariate and complex interpretations of African gender and sexuality and the prevalence of diverse discourses on the phenomena. It also demonstrates the futility of the assumptions underlying some previous research on African gender and sexuality.

Existing literature on gender and sexuality discourses in Africa has approached the topics from a variety of sociological, public health, demographic, and historical perspectives, addressing issues such as gender discrimination and inequality (Baliamoune-Lutz, 2006; Adjiwanou and LeGrand, 2014; Bassey and Bubu, 2019), female genital cutting (Cook, Dickens and Fathalla, 2002; Nour, 2008; Perron and Senikas, 2012), premarital cohabitation (Meekers, 1992; Hunter, 2016), queer and LGBT rights (Arnfred, 2004; Nyanzi, 2014; Macharia, 2015; Chitando and Mateveke, 2017), among others. In the past two decades, remarkable advances in research and advocacy on gender and sexuality issues have been made by African and non-African researchers to expand the frontiers of knowledge in the field, change perceptions of gender and sexuality myths, and increase understanding and tolerance of alternative genders and sexualities. Many African state and non-state actors’ attitudes toward gender and sexuality
have remained conservative and closed. The subject of sex is generally taboo in open discussion in many modern discursive contexts, yet precolonial Africa was much more open to integrating the discourse on sexual practices into the public sphere (Fiaveh, 2021; Agbeve, Fiaveh and Anto-Ocrah, 2022). We know about so many myths and cosmologies where sexual practices have been reported in detail, and sexuality was mostly something positive in these mythologies (for instance, Dogon cosmology). Gender and sexuality discourses, in particular, have been relegated to the realm of the unspoken due to deep cultural and religious inhibitions (Izugbara, 2005). This attitude is partly responsible for the decline in pioneering gender and sexuality research and pedagogy over the years on the African continent. It is a period where gender and sexuality are facing varied interpretations and ideological challenges.

The modern conception of gender equality, sexual expression, and sexual rights does not sit well with most cultural beliefs, religious principles, and constitutional provisions in many African states and has become a point of conflict and tension. This is contrary to the global movement that has birthed more inclusivity, tolerance, and accommodation for people with contrary sexual orientations. In this regard, sexuality is conceptualised as ‘a multifaceted social experience’ (Babatunde and Ake, 2015: 52) that allows people to express themselves sexually. One of the reasons for this discrimination is that in Africa, gender and gender roles are still tied to the sexual socialisation of the individual, which is meant to sustain the expression of gender-linked behaviour. In other words, gender socialisation has helped shape behaviour to conform to the expected social and sexual roles of an individual (Alexander, John, Hammond and Lahey, 2021: 1). This is the normative conception of gender, which is mainly influenced by the patriarchal structure and does not open up space for agency and autonomy (Mensah, 2023). The end product of this form of gender restriction is often seen in heterocentrist ideals, which potentially produce different shades of masculinity scripts that promote discrimination, intolerance, and inequality. This has been the bane of homophobia in African discourses on gender and sexuality. Even in countries with progressive agendas and a strong legal framework prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and disability, intolerance toward sexual minorities persists (Sanger, 2010; Mahomed and Trango, 2016).

There are three major historical trajectories in researching African sexuality: the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. During the precolonial and colonial eras, inspiring Western influence and narratives of African gender and sexualities pushed and shaped relevant cultural boundaries. In the past, Africa was often stereotyped not as a continent with diverse peoples and cultures but as
a geographical unit. The indigenous peoples of Africa valued gender and sexuality during this time period. Every culture has embraced a consistent system of sexual socialisation and rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood through rituals and initiations. Sexual attractions were expressed through local fashion, dance performances, and body modification and scarification (Mensah, Inyabri and Mensah, 2018). This was the period in which researchers were all-knowing individuals and the research subjects were mere ‘subjects’ (Tamale, 2011: 20). This was also the time when African gender and sexuality research was grossly misrepresented, especially by early Western explorers and imperialists. During the colonial era, the effects of colonialism and Christian missions really altered African gender and sexuality practices. Religiously motivated relationships were introduced; Christian and civil marriages were inaugurated, and marriage laws were also enacted and implemented. There was colonial intervention in marriages; native courts, which led to high divorce rates, were established (Asaaju, 2020). In this way, a practice like polygamy, which was the most documented system of marriage in precolonial Africa and had attendant social and economic benefits, was prohibited. Significantly, the former colonies saw the edification and sometimes deliberate imposition of heterosexuality by African governments and elites as the only acceptable sexual orientation, which accompanied the suppression, annihilation, or negation of the sexual other (Ndjio, 2012), especially in postcolonial periods. This also justifies the claim by Aniekwu (2006: 143) that discourses on gender and sexuality in Africa are ‘political projects’ that reflect a whole gamut of interests. The period also witnessed an upsurge in research in feminist movements, especially the rise of African feminism, which has spearheaded a new direction of advocacy and activism that places African women at the centre of peculiar gender performance and sexuality (Inyabri, Offong and Mensah, 2022).

3 Future research agenda

There are many gaps to be filled in the literature on gender and sexuality studies in Africa. Future research directions and reflections should be focused on dissecting the multiple meanings of gender and sexuality and unpacking existing stereotypes like reductive binary gender expression. There is a paucity of knowledge on sexuality in the online environment in the African context. Research concerns like online dating, hookups, and other cybersexual activities, which are changing young people’s attitudes and perceptions of sex, have not had any significant impact among African scholars. Barrada, Ruiz-Gómez, Correa and Castro (2019) have argued that online sexual activities have been on the rise in
the past two decades, and beyond their problematic use, they can promote social participation, healthy sexuality, and the well-being of sexual actors. These are some of the emerging realities and sexual demands of a changing world, and African sexuality scholars must not be left behind in engaging new forms of sexuality. There is a compelling need to adjust research agendas and adapt to the needs of technology when defining African gender and sexuality. Researchers need to initiate more health-related studies on gender and sexuality to promote physical and emotional health and well-being. The discreet and often taboo nature of sexual discourses in many African contexts has to be deconstructed to allow access to knowledge (and power) and be able to explicate the essential components of discourses on African gender and sexuality.

There are brighter prospects for the future of gender and sexuality research in Africa. Scholars in the field must begin to appraise developments in the field in a new light. They have to understand the global direction the field is taking and make themselves active agents who can strive to create the desired future of African gender and sexuality research. As the world becomes more connected and globalized, scholars in the field have Herculean tasks to research future-oriented courses and add their voices to topical issues and contemporary debates on African gender and sexuality. The task before African scholars is to help transform the field based on their experiences and perspectives of African realities. They need an identity that will deconstruct patriarchy, resist stereotypes, re-inscribe equality, and debunk discourses about unAfrican sexual practices.

Future research should also appreciate the heterogeneous composition of Africa in terms of peoples, cultures, values, religions, and sexualities, and not represent Africa as a unified whole with the same characteristics and content with respect to sexual behaviours, attitudes, and practices. Some scholars have been accused of making broad generalisations about African sexuality, primarily through the lens of cultural outsiders. There is a compelling need to balance these sorts of narratives. Future research can also harvest possibilities for engaging gender and sexuality from cross-cultural differences and similarities, particularly in the construction of gender identities and female sexuality, and explore ways men and women can be liberated from age-long traditional limitations on their gender expression and sexual orientation. They should be empowered to challenge unequal power relations and assert themselves as agents with sufficient sexual capital. To push gender and sexuality boundaries, research must disentangle men and women from established orthodox rules of engagement and rigid gender categorisation (Mensah, 2020).
4 The contributions in this issue

The contributions in this triple issue cover a wide range of gender and sexuality topics in West and Eastern Africa. It includes body and gender politics and alternative sexualities in the new media, religious and cultural restrictions, changing trends in HIV/AIDS and talk about contraception, sexual slang and metaphors, and discursive histories of queer debates and identities.

For instance, drawing on self-ethnography and media reportage framed within discourses of power, Daniel Yaw Fiaveh (‘LGBQ+ in Ghana: Analysing local and western discourses’) investigates and problematises some of the popular arguments against LGBQ sexualities in Ghanaian discourses and opens up alternative perspectives. The author argues that regardless of the cultural and moral antics in local politics that bedevil the LGBQ community, LGBQ rights cannot achieve any enduring success if the discourse continues to be spearheaded by the West. The conclusion raises many interesting issues, including the need to reconsider the role of the West in local discourse about LGBQ rights and the need to promote narratives that highlight indigenous cultural and character strengths that are imperative. At the same time, there is a need to rethink queer organising and continued resistance may lead to a backlash.

A related discursive engagement with the politics of sexual minorities in Ghana has been proposed by Ernest Yaw Ako (‘Same-sex relationships and recriminalisation of homosexuality in Ghana: A historical analysis’), who adopted a historical analysis to trace early indications and discourses around same-sex (non)sexual relationships in Africa and Ghana in particular. The article discusses how the British introduced colonial-era anti-sodomy laws to disrupt a way of life embraced by precolonial African and Ghanaian societies, especially around a proposed bill on proper human sexuality. The author challenges the assertion that same-sex relationships are a foreign imposition on Ghanaians. To the contrary: notions of the criminality of same-sex relationships are remnants of colonial rule, and there is therefore a need for the country to rethink the current attempts to recriminalise same-sex relationships.

Shifting away from LGBT debates to a linguistic construction of sexuality, Daniel Ochieng Orwenjo (““Chips Funga”: A sociolinguistic analysis of lexical choices in sexual discourses among Kenyan university students’) uses a Sexual Synonyms Scale (SSS) as the main research instrument to survey how lexical choices in sexual discourses shift in different contexts. The study adopts the methods and principles of cognitive sociolinguistics to attempt to understand why Kenyan university students make lexical choices with regard to sexual discourses the way they do. The study reports that lexical choices in sexual
discourse are constrained by various sociological, demographic, and linguistic factors. It is further argued that an understanding of how young people view sexual intercourse and its gratifying appeal is reflected in the lexical choices that they make.

Evidence of gendered linguistic practices where men and women share the same social space or environment but speak different dialects of the same Ubang language in Cross River State, Nigeria, has been explored in two contributions in this volume. As a major vehicle for the transmission of cultural beliefs and values, language profoundly affects male-female relations in Ubang as gender roles are more strictly defined or constructed through it. Liwhu Betiang (‘Language of the sexes, female identity, and exclusion among the Ubang people of Obudu, southeastern Nigeria’) investigates the inventive uses and possibilities of language beyond traditional usage using participatory methods of theatre-for-development, observations, and key informants/interviews to show that while the ‘language of the sexes’ is used to define sexuality and appropriate gender/cultural roles, and even though both sexes cross-communicate, the ‘male language’ in Ubang is also strongly related to the patriarchal cult of masculinity, which excludes the female. The study concludes that the female variant of the language, which must be preserved, may also be a counter-cultural tool used by women against social segregation and gender exclusion in the community.

Similarly, Samson Nzuanke (‘Intergender communication as intralingual translation in Ubang, Southeastern Nigeria’) interrogates the nature of male-female discourse in Ubang by observing Ubang language speakers in naturally occurring communication in their physical environment and analyses their conversations, using Peircean semiotics, the interpretative theory of translation, and Petrilli’s tripod of intralingual translation. It was discovered that male-female communication in Ubang is more a function of intralingual translation. From these studies, we have seen that Ubang men and women speak distinct dialects of the Bendi language with culturally defined stereotypical roles. These images, consciously or unconsciously, control their sense of identity, which in turn controls their behaviour – their sense of being powerful or powerless.

Beyond the above empirical studies on the role of language in promoting more informed and broad thinking about gender and sexuality, Edgar Fred Nabutanyi (‘Language, fiction and heteropatriarchal critique in selected recent Ugandan short fiction’) interrogates the role fiction can play in it. His research shows how Ugandan writers deploy sociolinguistic tools to empower their characters to author their agency and life experiences as same-sex-loving Ugandans. Through sociolinguistic discursive tools, this study refers to a textual analysis that focuses on illocutionary techniques such as letter writing, dialogue, and
stream of consciousness to subversively empower excluded and muted subjects to articulate their essence and humanity. The author employs textual analysis of selected short stories, their analyses, and Ugandan queer theoretical treatises to investigate the works of prominent Ugandan novelists in order to unveil the writers’ subversion of patriarchal tropes of an amorous letter, an ideal heterosexual family, and a romantic date to highlight and/or critique the ostracization of a sexual orientation.

In a related development, Stephen Olabanji Boluwaduro (‘Negotiating body, sex and self-fashioning in Fúji music’) adopts ethnographic and interpretive literary analysis and Black feminist thought to explore the significance of linguistic metaphors and innuendos in affirming or contesting expressions of desires that are sacred, sensitive, or taboo to Fúji, a popular Nigerian musical genre. The author argues that sexual narratives and connotations in Fúji performance are often generated as powerful resources to contest sexual sensitivity and push back on the silence on sexuality; negotiate and solicit artistic identity; and exert influence on public conversations on sexuality. The study affirms the engagement of sensual lyrical content as constitutive of revolutionary art and social transformative sites in which the body is negotiated as a catalyst for sexonomics in the contemporary ‘ear-tearing pants-and-bra’ musical evocations.

Eyo Mensah, Utomobong Nsebot, Eyamba Mensah, Lucy Ushuple and Romanus Aboh (‘“It’s not all about spreading one’s legs”: The discourse of virginity loss among female adolescents in rural Nigeria’) used qualitative data and the social construction of gender to explore the layers of signification and interpretive frames of female adolescents’ experiences of virginity loss in heterosexual relationships in southeastern Nigeria. The findings show ambivalent perceptions of virginity loss and/or preservation: while some were overwhelmed with guilt and tended to align with traditional prescriptions about female sexuality, others viewed it as an extension of the patriarchal subjugation of women and interpreted their experience in terms of agency and resistance. In this way, virginity loss discourses provide a veritable site for doing or undoing gender. Uchenna Oyali (‘Bible translation and lexical elaboration: On translating ‘virgin’ in the Igbo Bible’) also engages in virginity discourse and its representation in a biblical context. The study investigates how the translation of the word ‘virgin’ in the Igbo Bible has enriched the Igbo lexicon and how this lexical enrichment has spread among Igbo speakers. This study adopts the concept of language elaboration to analyse the lexical processes involved in creating these new terms. Then it presents findings from a questionnaire survey on the spread of the innovative terms among Igbo speakers. Igbo innovations have not only spread among Igbo speakers but have also become a springboard for further
lexical creativity. This study thereby showcases the perception of sex and virginity among Igbo people, especially their attribution of holiness to virginity, revealing the impact of Bible translation in reshaping the Igbo language.

Using the biographical narrative of one of the few female chiefs in contemporary Ghana, Nana Kofi Abuna V, Charles Prempeh ("‘I am the daughter of a man’: Transgressing gender boundaries, redefining chieftaincy in the life of Nana Kofi Abuna V’) argues that some traditional leaders are breaking the boundaries of gender to chart new pathways as female chiefs. Nana’s ascent to the stool as a chief diverges from the ‘conventional’ practice of male political domination in Akan traditional societies, whereby acting as a male chief in her traditional area and as an official of the Protestant church, Nana navigates her conflicting roles to submit to the performance of ‘chieffly’ rituals, despite the fact that the centrality of Akan chieftaincy is an ancestral cult with its attendant rituals. By playing ostensibly male roles, this defies culturally imposed gender binaries.

The various studies presented in this issue demonstrate renewed interest in gender and sexuality research by African scholars based in Africa who have reported their research findings on the basis of the realities of African experiences of gender and sexuality and are in better positions to address ‘concerns about language, epistemology, and cultural insider secrets’ (Epprecht, 2009: 1258). In all the contributions, discourses on gender and sexuality are constructed as prominent sites for agency, contestation, creativity, and power play, which also point to the multilayered nature of gender and sexuality realities in Africa. Some contributions highlight the historical development of sexual practices; a few have illuminated and challenged sexual stereotypes; and many are case studies that are nuanced in finely tuned methodology and research ethics as well as rigorously comprehensive in theorisation and analysis. It is believed that this triple issue has charted a renewed direction of investigation into the fundamentals of gender and sexuality studies in Africa and beyond. It will be a useful reference point for future research and will broaden understanding of the changes and continuities inherent in African gender and sexuality politics.

While the selected papers in the volume are mainly from West and Eastern Africa and largely dominated by the former, the analysis the authors engaged in is symptomatic of the discourse on gender and sexuality on the continent and a reflection of the same. We are, however, careful to not oversimplify gender and sexuality in Africa. We sought submissions from experienced researchers all over the world, and authors were free to choose any topic as long as it was relevant to the discursive representation of gender and sexual ideologies, with a particular focus on Africa. All submissions in this issue contain original research.
Gender and sex discourse is a sensitive research design (Fiaveh, 2018, 2019). We believe the contributions will serve as a useful resource in enriching existing discourse and as a springboard for informing policy initiatives and designing programmes along that line.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Professor Xoán Paulo Rodríguez-Yáñez, Editor-in-Chief of Sociolinguistic Studies, for inviting us to edit this issue. We appreciate all our reviewers for the positive energy they invested in this project, and we also thank all the authors for their invaluable contributions to the issue.

About the authors

Daniel Yaw Fiaveh is a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. He is a sex sociologist, turned anthropologist with primary research interests in gender and sex studies, especially contestations around masculinities, representation of men and boys in popular cultures, understanding sexual practices and relationships in postcolonial English West Africa, and social-cultural health.

Eyo Mensah is currently a Senior Research Fellow and Guest Professor of African Studies at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), University of Ghana, Legon. He is also a professorial fellow at FRIAS, University of Freiburg, Germany. His research interests include anthropological linguistics, structural linguistics, ethnopragmatics, and the intersection of language with identity, gender, sexuality, and popular culture.

References


(Received 29th July 2022; accepted 15th September 2022; final revision received 14th December 2022)