

Politique africaine

CALL FOR PAPERS

Thinking Anti-Gender Movements in Africa

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Thinking Anti-Gender Movements in Africa

Anti-gender campaigns have been developing in Africa for around twenty years. As an analytical category, anti-gender embraces a diverse collection of social and political actors who believe in the existence of “a gender theory” and have built it up into a public issue (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). This political task was originally taken up by the Vatican and observed in Europe, and is based on the delegitimisation of gender studies, which are accused of being ideological and non-scientific, and on the designation of gender as “an adversary bearing a denaturalised vision of the gender-related and sexual order” (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2017: 10). Many forms of expression are exploited by opponents of gender: individual positions and public scandalisation, lobbying campaigns and community mobilisations. The anti-gender movement develops discourse and actions in opposition to the concept of gender and gender studies, starting from the social, political and legal transformations secured by the struggles of feminist and sexual minorities that resulted from them. It is a multifaceted conservative rhetoric and *backlash* movement.

Examples of gender opposition have punctuated recent events on the African continent. While a large majority of states have ratified the Maputo Protocol, which recognises abortion rights under certain specific circumstances (Article 14), they have mostly been repressed, and they are the subject of divisive debates in society. A controversy arose in Kenya in 2018 around the closure of medical centres that admitted women who had suffered complications following illegal abortions. Feminists denounced the government’s “negligence” and its “inability” to

guarantee and promote sexual and reproductive health services¹. Despite the campaign led by religious lobbies, they succeed in having these health centres reopened. In many countries with a Muslim majority, it is the issue of the reform of family rights that has placed feminists and conservatives in opposition to each other over the course of many years. Although Morocco has succeeded in reforming its laws (Vairel, 2014), other countries such as Senegal have opted for the status quo (N'Diaye, 2016) or, under pressure from religious groups, have reversed previous gains, as has been the case in Mali (Soares, 2009). Elsewhere on the continent, tensions have focused on homosexuality (Awondo, 2019; Currier, 2018). The “schoolbooks affair”² in Cameroon in 2018 led to a chapter of a biology textbook that made reference to homosexuality being withdrawn. This outcry recalled the “List of homosexuals of the Republic” affair (2006), which had resulted in a wave of homophobia. The criminal repression of homosexuals on the continent has given rise to high-profile cases during which the line between law and morals has been especially tenuous (Dupret and Ferrié, 2004; Abéga, 2007).

These few examples are sufficient to convince one of the urgency of making an empirical investment in these social phenomena. How should the rise in the power of anti-gender rhetoric and mobilisations be understood? What do they teach us about African societies and political spaces?

In the first place, they are a reaction against the struggles of a new generation of militants who are fighting for the recognition and implementation of the rights of women and sexual minorities based on a plural feminism and a more inclusive concept of human rights. These counter-mobilisations are led by a variety of moral entrepreneurs (religious figures, the media and community leaders), and have gradually become organised through the implementation of “sexual moral strategies” (Weiringa, 2009), with the objective of making issues of sex and gender a propaganda tool for imposing themselves on, and acquiring legitimacy in, the public space.

The struggle is not simply “a reaction”: it is proactive. Similar to what is taking place in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017), we are seeing preventive “ideological wars” that seek to prepare people to fight the coming gender. This import of a culture war reflects the influence of American evangelists on the continent (Kaoma, 2009). We know that the regional and international connections of gender opponents play a fundamental role in their organisation. At this level, anti-gender rhetoric and mobilisations remind us of how outward-looking the African continent is (Bayart, 1999), but it is a form of “extrAversion” that is also played out through conservative or absolutist movements that remain the poor relation of the sociology of social movements (Siméant, 2013).

By identifying “gender theory” as the sole enemy – according to the language initially used by the Vatican (Carnac, 2013; Husson, 2015) – the anti-gender movement contributes towards creating and sustaining the confusion over the identity of gender studies, feminist struggles and sexual minorities, whose mobilisations are a long way from always converging, and may be managed separately, or even compete with each other. Aside from the competition that may exist among these groups when it comes to obtaining funds from international aid, feminists, for example, choose to keep their distance from mobilisations in favour of sexual minorities because of their very high degree of social stigmatisation. The dynamic of the

¹ A. Faivre, “Kenya, Le Si Long Chemin des Féministes 4: Ce Tabou de l’Avortement”, *Le Point.fr*, 25 September 2019, accessible online at https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/kenya-le-si-long-chemin-des-feministes-4-ce-tabou-de-l-avortement-25-09-2019-2337753_3826.php

² J. Baret, “Cameroun, un Manuel Scolaire Place l’Homosexualité au Rang de Pratique Déviante”, *Konbini*, 14 March 2018, <https://news.konbini.com/post/cameroun-manuel-scolaire-homosexualite-pratiques-deviantes>

creation of alliances and divisions within what is described as pro-gender as a result of anti-gender³ attacks therefore merits investigation.

The anti-gender movement also systematically castigates “gender ideology” for its “imperialism”. Ultimately, fighting gender means combating the West’s desire to use the cover of universalism to impose its own values, which are seen as destroying the social order of African societies, something African feminists have long criticised it for (Latourès, 2009; Sow, 2012). The criticisms of feminists' demands in the area of family rights are illuminating in this regard: the call for more egalitarian laws would lead to a breakdown in the equilibrium of the family, which is the basic unit of society. This kind of assimilation of gender with a new form of imperialism makes it possible to rally a wide variety of actors far beyond religious groups alone to the cause of anti-gender rhetoric and mobilisations. At the beginning of the 2000s, the stigmatisation of gender as a new imperialism was also a factor in its political reclassification. Under the effect of development policies, it became one of the objectives and indicators of public action, stripped of all critical content (Falquet, 2003; Verschuur, 2009).

This edition has two main objectives. First of all, the construction of anti-gender reasoning and mobilisations in Africa will be documented in detail. Who are the actors involved? What discourse and modes of action do they employ? How does the movement from discourse to protest happen? What resources and networks do they have? Responding to these questions will make it possible to address certain scientific gaps. On the one hand, the anti-gender movement on the African continent has often only been studied indirectly, in particular as part of research dedicated to female or feminist movements or international gender mainstreaming programmes. The reactions of the anti-gender movement have been included in these analyses, but they are not the main purpose of the studies (N’Diaye, 2016; Awondo, 2019). On the other hand, works on anti-gender campaigns have essentially been confined to cases in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017) and North and South America (Avanza and Della Sudda, 2017; Corréa, Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). Only rarely has Africa found a place in studies dedicated to the Global South on this issue (Anderson, 2011). The anti-gender movement has been studied above all from the point of view of homophobia and its transnational conservative Christian networks, and the ties to other conservative mobilisations (*Politix*, 2014) such as masculinist or anti-feminist movements have not been fully grasped.

Anti-gender mobilisations in Africa then need to be envisaged as a privileged analyser of the ongoing process of nationalist expression and political construction. A number of studies have illustrated the intrinsic links between nationalism and questions of gender and sexuality, as accurately portrayed by the term “sexual nationalism” (Jaunait et al. 2013). We know that both colonial administrations and independence leaders placed women, the family and sexuality at the heart of their ideological matrix (Bouilly and Rillon, 2016). Later, exploiting postcolonial tensions, the language that associated “gender ideology” with colonisation, imperialism and cultural imposition became a dominant strategy of conservative movements (Corredor, 2019). The purpose of this contribution is to reactivate an analysis not only of the construction of nations at the dawn of the politicisation of gender and sexuality, but also of the processes of sexual and political subjectivation in Africa (Awondo, 2019).

The expected contributions can be organised around the following four axes:

³ We are well aware that these notions of pro- and anti-gender refer back to a militant division of a *emic*, and not academic, nature (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2017). Despite this, we have chosen not to exclude them, as we believe they reveal a category of discourse that has been mobilised by certain of the actors we have studied.

Axis 1: Profile and mobilisation spaces of the anti-gender movements

This part will focus on the actors who produce the discourse and/or lead the anti-gender campaigns. Who are they, politically and socially? What is the role played by moral entrepreneurs (religious, “traditional” leaders, communities and the media)? How can the contours of a potentially very extensive conservative opposition – ranging from “community of thought” to the best-organised reactionary groups – be traced? Where do intellectuals stand in this societal debate? Do all the actors who are identified as or claimed to be anti-gender develop the same concept of the term, and do they occupy the same positions within national political and social spaces? How are the identities of these groups and any alliances they may form constructed? How can the variations observed across the continent be explained?

Axis 2: The organisations and repertoires of the anti-gender movement

It will be of interest to take account of the difference between “reaction” and “preventive” mobilisations in order to discuss the notion of “counter-movement” (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). History shows that counter-movements are more likely to be born following the success (whether already obtained or potential) of an initial movement crystallising a reaction and in a favourable context, especially as a result of a division of elites. What is the case in Africa? The anti-gender movement also assumes the vague contours of public debate and controversy without their necessarily being translated into an organised movement (Kováts and Petó, 2017). This raises two questions: do these actions have a resonance or social roots that might translate into ordinary practice? The resilience, horizontality and informality of anti-gender actions then invite us to look into the question of how the move is made to collective action and how the “organisational repertoires” are chosen (Clemens, 1993). What modes of action and strategies are used? Can tactical differences and/or innovations be found that can be compared with other anti-gender campaigns across the world?

Axis 3: Circulation and transnationalisation of the anti-gender movement

The way in which “gender circulates” (Bouilly et al., 2019; Cîrstocea et al., 2018) and *a fortiori* the anti-gender movement remains to be questioned. How do anti-gender manifestations become international and transnational? How are the ideological discourses and framings nourished from one space to another, and with what effects? This study makes it possible to discuss structuring conditions beyond the borders of campaigns and mobilisations. It is necessary to investigate the concepts and notions employed on the one hand, and the international division of militant work on the other. What is the local meaning of the concepts of “gender ideology” or “gender theory”? How do African actors use and reappropriate these terms? What emic categories have been developed on the continent? What relationship is there between local and “imported” terminology?

Axis 4: Repoliticising gender through the prism of the anti-gender movement

Finally, how do anti-gender campaigns participate in “repoliticising gender” (Awondo, 2016), and what are the effects on the struggles led by feminists and the defenders of sexual minorities? How do these actors react to the war of values anti-gender proponents seek to impose? In terms of public action, does the politicisation of debates obstruct gender policies or not? Ultimately, what can we learn from the depoliticisation and (re)politicisation of the continuing processes of formation of national identities and political spaces in Africa? The critical discourses on gender have a long history: the question of sexual nationalism has already been mentioned. At

another level, we might also mention the writings of female academics who reject the scientific relevance and heuristic dimension of the concept of gender to describe African societies (Oyewùmí, 2002; Amadiume, 1987). Are the contemporary anti-gender mobilisations the heirs to this militant and intellectual output, whether they claim to be or not? Here, it is a question of looking into the historicity of contemporary mobilisations in order to determine whether we are witnessing a new cycle.

Contributions may refer to one or more of these axes. They will offer original analyses of the plurality of the forms of expression of the anti-gender movement in Africa in both Christian and Muslim contexts. From a methodological standpoint, the contributions will be based on extensive empirical materials – ethnographic, historical or literary – that have been collected by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged.

Calendar

10/09/2021: Deadline for submission of paper proposals (in French or English) to Patrick Awondo (pawondo2005@yahoo.fr), Emmanuelle Bouilly (e.bouilly@sciencespobordeaux.fr) and Marième N'Diaye (mariem.ndiaye@cnrs.fr)

20/09/2021: Notification to authors of acceptance or rejection of their proposal

07/01/2022: deadline for submission of articles to Patrick Awondo (pawondo2005@yahoo.fr), Emmanuelle Bouilly (e.bouilly@sciencespobordeaux.fr) and Marième N'Diaye (mariem.ndiaye@cnrs.fr)

For more information on the format of articles to be submitted, see the instructions to authors: <https://polaf.hypotheses.org/soumettre-un-article/submit-to-the-journal>

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