

## ***The Sexual History of the Global South: Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America.***

Wieringa, Saskia & Horacio Sívori (eds.) 2013. London & New York: Zed Books.

*Reviewed by Tom Claes*

This edited volume is one of a number of excellent volumes and books published by Zed Books on the globalisation of gender and sexuality. This specific collection grew out of a long-term comparative research programme called the SEPHIS Programme (*South–South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development*). The program initially started in 1994 and had as its central aim “to reinsert a historically grounded perspective into the thinking about the development of the ‘global South’” and to foster “dialog and collaboration between researchers with diverse visions of development and history, to encourage comparative research, and to strengthen research capacity in the South” (p. vii). In 2007 the programme added “the training of a new generation of researchers in comparative and historically grounded approaches to practices and ideologies surrounding sexuality in different parts of the global South” to its objectives, thus allowing “young scholars in the humanities and social sciences to engage in new field research and link it with national and international debates and advocacy for sexual rights” (p. vii). Central to this research and training programme was the important insight that the historical dimension is crucial in order to come to grips with the “complex interplay between cultural genealogies and the politics of gender relations and sexual behaviour” (p. vii). This led to the inclusion of research topics like the “legal regulation of and public policies on sexuality, sex- and gender-based claims of identities, sexual expression, and sexual knowledge” (p. vii), all these “located within wider processes of state formation and global transformations” that “are often connected to a strengthening of patriarchal relations, heteronormativity, and conservative control in many parts of the world” (p. viii). The program also had an activist component in which links between social science research and human and sexual rights advocacy were promoted.

The authors of the chapters in this volume were all trained within the SEPHIS program. They met on several occasions between 2008 and 2010, sharing their research insights and experiences and discussing these with an international group of experienced researchers and activists at different locations in the global South (Rio de Janeiro, Dhaka, Cairo and Yogyakarta). As such, this book is a contribution to a “growing body of transnational sexuality studies by scholars from the global South trained in their own countries, reflecting on theoretical, political, and empirical inter-

ests emerging at the crossroads of local, regional, and global circuits of intellectual exchange” (p. 3).

All this makes this volume into an exceptionally rewarding one, not only for the reader, but for the authors as well. This collection is a prime example of the synergy between research and activism and is, thanks to its origin, forward looking and promising of future inspiring research.

The editors Saskia Wieringa and Horacio Sívori are well known and respected authors in the field of gender studies, development studies and global sexualities research. In their excellent introduction (*Sexual politics in the global South: framing the discourse*) they formulate some fundamental questions regarding the general outlook of the book and the historical and comparative research program out of which it grew. They raise the important question of what a ‘global South’ perspective could mean to the historical study of sexuality and sexual politics. One thing to avoid is to rush headlong and uncritically into researching these ‘southern sexualities’ because if “sexuality – as a separate domain of human experience and an object of regulation – is a recent Western invention produced by discourses of modernity about identity, subjectivity, bodies, and population control, [then] what space is there to investigate non-Western historical discourses on sexuality and sexual politics?” (p.1). To complicate matters even further, the editors ask what the methodological repercussions of all this could be for investigating “not only the genealogies and figurations of the sexual in different sociocultural contexts, but also the constitution of the gaze that sees ‘non-Western’ sexuality as fundamentally distinct from the modern?” (p. 1) How should we think beyond the colonial and post-colonial world and perspective? What is the place and best way to research, e.g., China and the Arab world? Or by extension: “[h]ow to do justice to the manifold local contexts that feed into the production of global discourses on sexuality? How to document the often overlooked agency and desires of individuals and collectives whose location at the margins of a Eurocentric, (post-) colonial discourse sets them apart as pre-rational or ‘traditional’?” (p.1)

Wieringa and Sívori thoughtfully discuss two theoretical issues that run through the empirical contributions in this volume: “the interrogation of the colonialist gaze that has constituted sexuality and sexual subjects as an object of scientific inquiry, state repression, and bio-political intervention in the global South; and the conception of sexualities as an inherently localized phenomenon” (p. 4).

Recently, “traditional hegemonic narratives relegating experiences and narratives of the global south to a marginal, subordinate, or ‘developing’ status” (p. 5) have increasingly become challenged. Instead of ‘exotic others’ researchers from the global South now are what Wieringa and Sívori label as “agents of a double engagement, at once involved in local political and also theoretical debates drawing upon, and challenging, assumptions widely established in global social science research” (p. 5) They note that this by no means is an easy task because “[t]he field of sexuality studies is itself part of a power/knowledge regime where conventions are generated and contested, ethical standpoints elaborated, and esthetic sensibilities developed” (p. 5) This collection is a fine example of this ‘double engagement’. The editors champion a methodological outlook that is not essentialist and acknowledges

that "the lived experiences of gender identification and sexual orientation are a paramount foundation of individual and collective social commitments." (p. 8)

The editors rightly criticize the Northern-centred bias of many studies on 'global sexuality' like Altman's and Binnies' 'classic' works in this field. They urge us to look at the global South "not merely as places where metropolitan sexual politics have been applied, and sexual subjects have been colonized, but as contexts where the sexual realm has been invented and reinvented with specific meanings" (p. 15). The authors in this volume do just this. They show us in great empirical detail the wide variety that global Southern sexualities can take. The chapters are a fine showcase of how to successfully deal methodologically with the complexities of describing, theorising and interpreting these sexualities. They show us how "[m]ultiple, hybrid, alternative modernities are being produced" (p. 17) and how by "displacing modern Western sexualities from the center of observation" the hegemony of Western conceptualizations of sexuality can successfully be challenged (p. 18).

The bulk of the book is composed of twelve original research-based contributions that reflect the diverse backgrounds and interests of the young scholars involved. This makes for a kaleidoscopic topical and methodological read.

Huang Yingying (The rise of sex and sexuality studies in post-1978 China) looks at the emergence of sex and sexuality research in post-Mao reformist China. Many claim that China is undergoing a sexual revolution with more freedoms and repertoires becoming available. Are sexuality studies following suit? Following leads from Foucault and Bourdieu, Yingying opens her chapter with a reflection on the categorisation of 'sex' and 'sexuality' in Chinese culture and language. From the eighties onwards and under the influence of the emerging discipline of sexology, a predominant biological interpretation of the Chinese concept of *xing* was challenged in the nineties by a more constructivist social scientific interpretation, and the term *shehui xingbie* was introduced for 'gender'. But discussions on how best to 'translate' the notion of sexuality, just as on appropriate ways to study Chinese sexuality remain. Sexuality studies took off from the early eighties onwards and were originally heavily influenced by a medico-sexological framework. This framework has recently been challenged, but it still remains the governing paradigm informing a dominant medicalised discourse on sexuality. To a lesser degree she also sees three other discourses operating: a discourse in which the subordination and oppression of women's bodies and sexuality is thematised; a popular culture discourse as part of the current sexual revolution; and lastly a discourse in which notions of 'self-control' and 'respect for oneself' are mobilised as an traditionalist antidote to the perceived negative moral and social impact of 'westernization'. As such, contemporary Chinese sexuality research exemplifies ongoing discussions on imaginative nation-building and the emergence of sexual subjectivities, against the backdrop of worries about the impact of the west.

Hardik Brata Biswas (The obscene modern and the pornographic family: adventures in Bangla pornography) analyses what she calls "the discursive creation of a 'new woman'" in nineteenth-century Bengal print erotica and the focus on incestuous relations and the transgression of the incest taboo within the Hindu family in pornography published in Kolkata over the past two centuries. She concludes that, in contrast to some occasions of western-produced pornography, Bengali pornography

consolidates the heteronormative structures of family, marriage, and the consumption of women by men.

Abel Sierra Madero (*Sexing the nation's body during the Cuban republican era*) looks at the role of the internal and the foreign sexual 'other' in moralistic public-discourse articulations of the nation during the first decades of the Cuban republican era (1902–59). He analyses the moral anxieties in public discourses in newspaper articles and literary works from the first decades of the twentieth century about two particular sexual 'others': *pepillitos* (gay men) and *garzonas* (lesbians). He very interestingly links the adverse reactions against the *garzonas* in particular with feminist debates and activism at that time.

For his chapter (*Government and the control of venereal diseases in colonial Tanzania, 1920–60*) Musa Sadock has delved deep in the *Tanzania National Archives* and the *Mbeya Zonal Archives*. He examined VD registers and medical reports from the period under British administration and conducted interviews with experts in the Mbozi district. After presenting a history of the population and STD of colonial Mbozi, he presents us a detailed analysis of the colonial government's bio-political efforts to control marginal sexualities through colonial government's hygiene and medical policies.

Diego Sempol (*Violence and the emergence of gay and lesbian activism in Argentina, 1983–90*) shows how violence against gays and lesbians played a crucial role in the emergence of gay and lesbian activism in Argentinian politics and society during the 1980s and how this links with discussions on what democracy could and should mean. Sempol also shows that during this process it became clear that the discourse of human rights entailed a great potential of politicization for social action, as well as great flexibility to embrace new subjects and issues.

In his chapter (*Sexuality and nationalist ideologies in post-colonial Cameroon*) Basile Ndjio investigates how in post-colonial Cameroon, bodies and sexuality were primed to a hegemonic heterosexual nationalism. He looks in detail at the ways in which in Cameroon a dominant heterosexual identity was forged by state sexual policies and how in that process homosexual men and women and sexual dissidents became portrayed as a threat to the post-colonial moral, sexual and gender order. This was also a process in which history was rewritten in an effort to erase all traces of the countries sexual past and an African heterosexual masculinity became a central point of reference. Ndjio does a fine job of filling in, in minute detail the nationalist ambitions in post-colonial Africa to construe an exclusive heterosexual African sexual identity ('heterotitude'). He also notices that this moral economy of alterity poses a challenge to the Foucauldian framework because it is through "the 'nationalization' of the sexuality of its citizens that (...) the post-colonial state has managed to draw boundaries between Africans and Westerners, insiders and outsiders, citizens and strangers, authentic and deracinated Africans, good and bad citizens, loyal and disloyal subjects" (p. 128) and "pan-Africanist thought (...) constructed the sexuality of African men and women on the basis of dominant sexual codes establishing heterosexual relationships as the sexual norm" (p. 129).

Iman Al-Ghafari (*The 'lesbian' existence in Arab cultures: historical and sociological perspectives*) "examines the possibility of 'lesbian' existence in Arab cultures from a lesbian perspective that analyzes the varying degrees and types of socio-po-

litical control exercised over the female body in Arab history" (p. 144). The chapter is a fascinating exploration of the possibilities and methodological implications of using and developing 'western' notions, like 'lesbianism', as transhistorical categories for the analysis of sexualities and sexual identities in the global South. She shows how Butler's notion of 'gender performativity' when applied to Arab cultures obscures an already invisible lesbian identity instead of making it visible. In her chapter Al-Ghafari searches for the "tenacious lesbian soul that steadily defends her lesbian specificity throughout her entire life" (p. 145), one that cannot be reduced to certain practices and pleasures of 'lesbian sex'.

In 'Public women' and the 'obscene' body: an exploration of abolition debates in India" Nitya Vasudevan's compares the state regulationist and legal reactions towards three instances of publicly sexualized female performances and practices. She analyses how recent controversies and clashes regarding the legislation on and regulation of female 'bar dancers' differ from earlier abolitionist campaigns against and the abolition of the *devadasi* system in Southern India (a practice in which young girls were married to a deity or temple and that often led to a life of prostitution) and the ban on *lavani tamasha* (an eroticized form of song-and dance musical theatre) in Western India in the mid-twentieth century. The ban on dance bars in 2005 met with fierce opposition from feminists and from the women affected by the ban and it was lifted in 2006. Central to these debates was the language of rights and the interpretation of bar dancing as a legitimate and non-obscene way of earning a living. This testifies to the changing nature of India's 'modernising' culture to a 'stage of sleaze', the slipperiness of notions of the obscene and the complexity of the interplay between the private and the public, the 'decent' and the obscene.

Alberto Teutle López (Male homoeroticism, homosexual identity, and AIDS in Mexico City in the 1980s) charts the transformations in the organization of male homoerotic sociability in Mexico City between the late 1970s and the late 1980s in relation to the impact of the AIDS epidemic. He analyses the public representations of male homosexuality in local newspapers, magazines, cinema, and literature together with the recollections about their reception by men he interviewed. He documents how the increasing public visibility of homosexuality in the media, political mobilizing, and the establishment of new commercial entertainment venues, coincided with the emergence what he calls a new sexual regime of male-identified gays in which new representations of public gayness established new forms of social regulation.

Rajeev Kumaramkandath (Canons of desire: male homosexuality in twenty-first-century Keralam) looks at clandestine same-sex intimacies in cruising sites between male-bodied individuals in Keralam. Focusing on the subjectivities and agency of the men involved, he explores the meanings and diverse and localised manifestations of same-sex desire in a context of intense policing of gender conformity and national family values.

Fabíola Cordeiro's chapter (Female criminality in Brazil: a study on gender and sexuality in a women's prison) takes us to prison. She examines the social and institutional management of sexuality at Talavera Bruce Penitentiary in Rio de Janeiro. She scrutinizes the disciplinary mechanism of institutional monitoring and intervention, shows how a normative framework that guides a resocializing ideal for the

female prisoners is at work, and looks at the ways in which the inmates' sexual and emotional relations are lived and experienced.

The volume ends on a positive note. Tsitsi B. Masvawure challenges (Sexual pleasure and premarital sexual adventures of young women in Zimbabwe) the dominant picture in writings on female sexuality in Africa in which women are often portrayed as sexually passive and unwilling participants and as sexually 'immoral' and 'loose' if they show any interest in sex at all. Based on interviews with young female students at the campus of the University of Zimbabwe and on wider research aimed at establishing a historical context for her findings, she argues that African women sometimes can and do embody an active pleasurable sexuality and that narratives of sexual pleasure are not as rare as 'received' (sometimes even 'scholarly') wisdom sometimes might lead us to believe.

In a volume like this, an uneven quality of the contributions is to be expected, but overall the quality is high and all the chapters are highly informative and a rewarding read. The volume has a partial and somewhat prismatic and kaleidoscopic character due to the different subjects discussed, locations involved and methods used. The editors realise this very well – they themselves call it 'somewhat arbitrary' – but given the background of the book this could not be avoided. Perhaps as a result of the predominantly early career nature of the contributions, most chapters are not high on theory, although rewardingly empirical in their elaboration. But building theory out of non-western experience proves particularly hard. Non-western theorists have to fight not only hegemonic western ('colonial') perspectives and academic traditions, but also so-called 'post-colonial' perspectives. Wieringa and Sívori rightly notice "the lack of theoretical impact of "localized, Southern experiences" on "the development of global theories" (p. 5). All the contributions in this volume are, each in their own way, a fruitful contribution to this worthwhile goal.