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# Christianity, Sexuality and Citizenship in Africa: Critical Intersections

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**Abstract**
Citizenship in sub-Saharan Africa has undergone profound changes in recent decades as part of wider social and political dynamics. One notable development is the emergence of Christianity, especially in its Pentecostal-Charismatic forms, as a public religion. Christian actors, beliefs and practices have increasingly come to manifest themselves in the public sphere, actively engage with politics, define narratives of nationhood, and shape notions of citizenship. A second major development is the emergence of sexuality as a critical site of citizenship and nationhood in postcolonial Africa. On the one hand, many political and religious leaders are invested in a popular ideology of the heterosexual family as the basis of nation-building, while on the other hand, LGBT communities are becoming more visible and claim recognition from the state. The contributions to this special issue engage these two contrasting developments, examining the interconnections between Christianity, sexuality and citizenship empirically and theoretically through case studies in various African contexts and from several academic disciplines and critical perspectives.

**Keywords**
Africa, Christianity, Pentecostalism, Sexuality, Citizenship

## Citizenship in Contemporary Africa

Apprehending the African socio-political milieu has never been an easy task, and the contemporary moment, riddled as it is with contradictory intimations, is no different. On the one hand, the casual observer finds grounds for optimism in the steady consolidation of liberal democracy and the increasing popularity, if not quite total acceptance, of norms regarding accountability of holders of public office to the generality of the citizenry. This modest progress owes largely to the expansion of the public sphere, enabled in part by the dizzying advance of digitization. On the other hand, the same casual observer's buoyant

mood is likely to be dampened by a nagging feeling that, with respect to the chronic afflictions of the postcolonial African state, the more things have changed, the more, it seems, they have remained the same.

This balance of elation and despondency is a useful matrix for analysing citizenship in contemporary Africa. While scholarship on citizenship in Africa rightly pivots on the people's lingering alienation from the state (Peter Ekeh's thesis on the 'two publics' [1975] remains the definitive formulation of this sentiment), it is worth keeping in mind that the gulf did not always seem apparent in the immediate post-independence period, a moment of high nationalism characterized by a profound sense of belonging. Whether due to sheer relief at the departure of colonial administrations, or, more frequently, genuine confidence in the potential of their indigenous successors, many wore the badge of citizenship of the newly independent nations with evident pride.

In one sense, the melting away of this civic pride has been the overriding theme of postcolonial African politics. For many of the newly independent states, this process of civic disenchantment was set in motion by the rapid descent of the successor regimes into political turmoil, and soon after the takeover of power by sundry military regimes. Although, on capturing power, most military rulers presented themselves as polar opposites of ethnically minded politicians, and proudly proclaimed national cohesion as the *raison d'etre* of their administrations, in short order, their technocratic and political limitations would be exposed. In retrospect, not only did martial rule fail to repair the damaged civic pride, in a majority of cases, it may in fact have inflicted deeper cuts.

That said, a certain civic renewal might also have been one of the unintended consequences of the military era. To the extent that military politics drove a wedge between state and society, it also forced a needed reckoning with the question of belonging, specifically the kind of political architecture that best conduces to the appropriate dynamic between state and society in the post-military era. In this regard, mobilization to dethrone the military was a discursive boon, especially insofar as it elicited productive debates on the character of state power, the rights and obligations of citizenship, and the need to agree on and maintain distinctions between the public and private domains.

Nevertheless, while these issues were deemed essential, at least among the intelligentsia, public reflection on them was, even at the best of times, episodic, and the fact that, in recent times, they seem to have forced their way back to some sort of general attention can be attributed largely to the perceived failings of liberal democracy across Africa. These failings have been copiously documented – arbitrary use of state power, the mobilization of public resources for private gain, and a continuing inability to translate political gains into economic advantage for all and sundry, to name three of the most critical – and their presence and persistence in a majority of African states has triggered a nascent continental soul-searching on the properties and promises of liberal democracy.

With regard to citizenship, this soul-searching (pun not intended) has assumed two related forms. The first is a renewed scrutiny of the role of the state, focusing specifically on whether, as currently conceived, it provides the best vehicle to deliver what Gianfranco Poggi (2003, 43) calls 'the maximisation of private welfare'. The unique flavour of this scrutiny, anchored as it is in the matrix of contemporary lamentations about neoliberal capture of the

state (Hilgers 2012; cf. Konings 2011, Haque 2008) cannot be denied; nonetheless, it is of historic vintage, vividly reminiscent of older concerns about the need to institute a 'social state' that is attuned to the needs of the African masses (for example, see Olukoshi 2002). The second form of this soul-searching concerns the circumstances under which liberal democracy itself might qualify as a technology for systematic exclusion. Born of disillusionment with the steady depreciation of liberal democracy into routine electoralism, the concern here echoes Colin Crouch's critique (2004) of the perceived tendency of democratic institutions to become a shell of themselves.

Globally, the response to these, especially the latter, has been a recrudescence of new ideas and practices aimed at reinvigorating citizenship via a refashioning of the state-society dialectic. In Africa, disenchantment with the state has been the spark for a spiritual turn, one that has to do on the one hand with a perennial longing for 'connection,' and on the other hand with a specific scramble for 'new forms of identity that will be more profitable' (Chabal 2009, 102). As Achille Mbembe (2001, 93) captures this complex dynamic: 'most of the religious and healing movements proliferating in Africa today constitute visible, if ambiguous, sites where new normative systems, new common languages, and the constitution of new authorities are being negotiated.'

**Christianity as a Public and Political Religion**

Accordingly, one of the key assumptions of this special issue is that Christian beliefs, practices and actors are at the heart of dynamics of citizenship in many contemporary African societies. In part, this assumption is informed by the mere statistical observation that Christianity has become the religion with the largest number of adherents in sub-Saharan Africa. According to a recent report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 'the share of the population that is Christian in sub-Saharan Africa climbed from 9% in 1910 to 63% in 2010' (Pew Forum 2011, 10). This increase in the Christian population as a percentage of the overall population becomes more impressive when we take into account the enormous population growth in the countries concerned. Thus, the rise from a 9% to a 63% Christian population translates, according to the Pew Forum, to a roughly 60-fold increase in absolute numbers, 'from fewer than 9 million in 1910 to more than 516 million in 2010' (Pew Forum 2011, 15). The remarkable growth of Christianity in Africa came as a surprise to many observers who expected that the religion, due to its problematic links to the colonial project, would actually lose appeal to many Africans in the postcolonial era. These expectations have proved to be illusory as in fact the opposite happened, with Christianity ensuring its popularity among African populations and establishing itself as an ever more influential factor in post-independent societies.

This leads us to the second, and more important, factor informing our assumption that Christianity is crucial to understanding contemporary citizenship dynamics in Africa. Not only has Christianity grown dramatically, meaning that a higher number of African citizens identify as Christian than ever before, the nature of Christianity in Africa, and subsequently its manifestations and effects in African societies has, in recent decades, witnessed a considerable transformation. This process of change, which can be referred to as the charismatization or Pentecostalization of African Christianity, has been well-documented in

an ever-growing body of scholarship examining the historical backgrounds and socio-cultural contexts of what Allan Anderson (Anderson 2001) has described as an 'African reformation', as well as the theological characteristics, the cultural manifestations, and the social, economic and political effects of the Pentecostal-Charismatic forms of Christianity that have become highly popular and prominent in Africa (Kalu 2008; Lindhardt 2015). Pentecostal Christianity is an umbrella category for a wide variety of ministries, movements and groups that share a 'family resemblance', that is, they are all 'concerned primarily with the *experience* of the working of the Holy Spirit and the *practice* of spiritual gifts' (Anderson 2010, 17). In classical Pentecostalism, which emerged in North America in the early 20th century and soon after also spread in Africa, typical examples of these experiential and charismatic expressions of faith are ecstatic forms of worship, intense prayer, and speaking in tongues. Indigenous forms of Pentecostalism in Africa (often referred to as African independent churches), which emerged in the twentieth century, were (and still are) mostly associated with practices of prophecy and healing (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). A further innovation in the African Pentecostal scene took place from around the 1970s-1980s, with the emergence of a new type of churches variably referred to as neo-Pentecostal or Pentecostal-Charismatic (Meyer 2004). These are commonly associated with popular forms of communication and presentation, the use of modern media, a strong global orientation, participation in transnational networks, a theological emphasis on the 'prosperity gospel', and a concern with deliverance and spiritual warfare (Gifford 2004; Adogame 2011).

At this juncture, we pause to interject a caveat. By drawing attention to, and focusing on, the emergence and impact of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (PCC), we do not mean to suggest that other forms of African Christianity are no longer relevant. As Ogbu Kalu reminds us, 'the astonishing growth [of Pentecostalism] in Africa must be understood within the larger perspective that all religious forms are growing' (Kalu 2008, 5). Contemporary Christianity in Africa is enormously diverse, but nearly all traditions and denominations are vibrant and thriving (Kollman 2010). However, it is undeniable that the rise of PCC has had a profound impact on African Christianity more generally. Anderson claims that 'African Christianity as a whole – Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and independent – has moved considerably in a "Pentecostal" or Charismatic direction, quite apart from the enormous growth among Pentecostal churches themselves' (Anderson 2015, 54). Martin Lindhardt points to an even wider impact, beyond the religious sphere, when he writes: 'What is significant are the ways in which PC/C has shaped the orientations of African Christianity and extended its influence into other spheres of postcolonial societies' (Lindhardt 2015, 1).

Of particular interest in the light of the theme of this special issue, is that the remarkable rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs) in Africa, and their success up to date, has frequently been explained with reference to their socio-economic and socio-political significance. Thus, Lindhardt locates the explosive growth of PCCs in the 1980s, a decade in which 'African countries experienced economic crises of varying severity, dissipating the initial post-colonial optimism in the abilities of newly founded states to provide economic development and social security to their citizens' (Lindhardt 2015, 6). The implicit link alluded to here has been developed by several scholars, who have argued that PCCs provide people with the spiritual as well as practical means to cope with social and

economic hardships, give them a sense of agency and control over their lives, and help them navigate ethical ways of living under the conditions of postcoloniality and neoliberal capitalism (e.g. Freeman 2012). Along similar lines, but explicitly referring to PCCs socio-political role, Birgit Meyer writes:

> What is likely at stake is the way in which charismatic movements impinge on the imagination of communities, once the privileged sphere of the nation-state. Although our world is a world of nation-states, current African politics shows the incapacity of postcolonial states to bind the citizens into the vision of the nation. (Meyer 2004, 466)

Hence the suggestion that a key explanation of the appeal of PC Christianity has to do with the ability of these churches to address, in explicitly religious ways, the concerns as well as the aspirations of the populations of African postcolonial societies, to present a political imaginary and a spiritual vision of citizenship, and to engage in particular forms of nation-building.

At the dawn of independence, it was the mainline churches – Catholic and Protestant – that played a key role in postcolonial nation-building in Africa, as they were actively involved in the building of a culture of democracy, human rights, and governance (Gifford 1995, 1998). Pentecostal churches, on the other hand, were often associated with an apolitical stance as they were oriented towards the 'other-worldly' Kingdom of God. However, the PCCs that emerged from around the 1980s, even if they did not engage in politics in the way the mainline churches did, were far from apolitical. In fact, contemporary Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity can be considered an epitome of what Jose Casanova has conceptualized as 'public religions in the modern world', that is, forms of religion that transgress typically Western distinctions such as between religion and politics, and between church and state (Casanova 1994). PCCs transgress such distinctions in a very particular way, as they present a worldview in which political and spiritual power are closely intertwined as the world itself is perceived as the arena for a battle between divine and demonic forces. This worldview profoundly shapes the ways in which PCCs engage the public sphere and create a new political culture, such as through discourses and practices of spiritual warfare (Heuser 2015; Burgess 2012; Englund 2011). In this Pentecostal political imaginary, both the individual citizen and the nation-state are conceived of through a distinctly Christian lens. Thus, Ruth Marshall in her study of Nigerian PCC argues that the programme of born-again conversion serves as 'a means of creating the ideal citizen, one who will provide a living incarnation of the *nomos* of a pacified and ordered political realm' (Marshall 2009, 14). In other words, conversion initiates the born-again Christian into a process of personal mastery through a range of religious practices (e.g. fasting, giving testimony, intense prayer) – a process that constitutes a 'political spirituality' because, in the end, it is concerned with bringing about collective, national redemption. In their recent account of the Pentecostal-Charismatic politics of citizenship in Africa, Barbara Bompani and Caroline Valois capture the complex links between individual, spiritual and moral conversion, on the one hand, and public transformation and social-political redemption, on the other, as follows:

> Charismatic movements employ distinct practices of subjectification aimed at governing and transforming African publics that extend beyond spiritual compliance but greatly constitute the political, economic and moral parameters of the African state. These practices rely on a vision of a Christian citizen that works to redefine the public sphere, penetrating the political and social imaginary. A conception of Christian citizenship involves the creation of a citizenry that actively participates in and contributes to – politically, economically and morally – the broader polity. (…) Christian citizens are charged with not only transforming their own lives, a process that reflects the unending process of rebirth that begins with conversion, but also their broader communities and nations as well. Within this vision Christian citizens have the capacity to experience a moral transformation that enables not only a more prosperous life, but establish a citizenry equipped to spiritually, economically and politically regenerate sub-Saharan Africa. (Bompani and Valois 2018, 7)

This project of working towards social and political transformation through the modelling of born-again Christians as ideal citizens obviously has profound effects on the ways in which PCCs present themselves in the public sphere and exert political influence. The declaration of Zambia as 'a Christian nation' by then-President (and born-again Christian) Frederick Chiluba in the 1990s is only one example (Phiri 2003). Even if this declaration, now enshrined in the country's constitution, has not brought about the promised economic prosperity and moral regeneration of the Zambian nation, it has created a political culture in which Pentecostals are strongly concerned with defending the presumed Christian character of the nation and fighting anything that is considered a threat to it (van Klinken 2016b; Haynes 2015). In Nigeria, the Pentecostal project of Christian citizenship has profound repercussions for interreligious relations, specifically in relation to Islam (Ojo 2007; Obadare 2006, cf. Obadare 2018, forthcoming). Last but not least, in a range of African countries Pentecostal politics of citizenship also has serious effects on issues of gender and sexuality (Boyd 2014; Parsitau 2009; Obadare 2015; van Klinken 2018). Indeed, as several contributions to this special issue demonstrate, contemporary African contexts often witness conflicts between diverging notions of Pentecostal Christian citizenship and of gender and sexual citizenship.

**Politics of Sexuality and Citizenship in Africa**

The focus of this special issue on sexual citizenship is informed by the critical observation that issues of gender and sexuality have become a major battleground where citizenship is both claimed and contested in contemporary Africa. Although we focus primarily on sexuality, we wish to state at the outset that we agree with Sylvia Tamale's claim that 'sexuality and gender go hand in hand; both are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central and crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies' (Tamale 2011, 11). The various dimensions of sexuality that Tamale mentions – including 'sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal and interpersonal sexual relations' (ibid, 11-12) – all have gender-specific connotations and implications. Moreover, inasmuch as the focus of this special issue

is contemporary, it is nonetheless important to be aware of the long history of contestations over sexuality and gender in Africa. During the colonial period, both missionaries and colonial administrations were concerned with policing African practices of sex, intimacy, and relationships, and with reshaping their underlying cultural values and meanings, as part of the mission of "civilising the natives". Polygamy and traditional initiation rites were among the most contested issues at the time but were embedded in a broader sexual politics of promoting Victorian values of 'decency' and 'morality,' as well as of a patriarchal gender politics that domesticated women's bodies while formalising men's public roles (Becker 2005; Oyewumi 1997). After independence, this "civilising mission" was often extended by the new postcolonial governments, whose officials had typically been trained in mission schools (van Klinken 2018). However, as Basile Ndjio points out, in the postcolonial era these gender and sexual politics were framed, no longer in a narrative of being "good" colonial subjects, but in a narrative of African identity and authenticity:

> It is through the 'nationalization' of the sexuality of its citizens that, in many African countries, the post-colonial state has managed to draw boundaries between Africans and Westerners, citizens and strangers, authentic and deracinated Africans, good and bad citizens, loyal and disloyal subjects. (Ndjio 2013, 128)

This nationalization of African sexuality was undergirded by a heteronormative-reproductive ideal. In recent years, with the globalization of originally Western notions of lesbian and gay identities and rights, this ideal has taken explicit anti-homosexual proportions such as expressed in the popular notion of homosexuality being "un-African" and a "Western invention" (Msibi 2011). Indeed, issues of homosexuality, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights, and sexual diversity more broadly, have become a key site for the contestation over sexual citizenship in contemporary Africa (Awondo 2010; Currier and Cruz 2013; O'Mara 2013; cf. Evans 1993). The controversy over Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2013) is only one among many examples from across the continent (Bompani and Valois 2016; Boyd 2013). However, the fact that the Ugandan parliament, at the time of passing this Bill also passed an Anti-Pornography Bill (baptized by opponents as the anti-miniskirts bill) makes clear that it is not just homosexuality, but sexuality more generally that is a site of critical contestation and political mobilization in contemporary Africa. Again, in the words of Ndjio, 'in this part of the world, sexuality is increasingly appearing as a marker of citizenship, and especially a critical mode either for claiming one's citizen's rights or denying other people their rights as citizens' (Ndjio 2013, 126).

Religion is inherently part of these mobilizations, with non-normative forms of sexuality not only being widely considered as "un-African" but also as "un-Christian" and/or "un-Islamic" (Ndzovu 2016; van Klinken 2013; van Klinken and Chitando 2016). Many political and religious leaders in Africa are heavily invested in this narrative, not least those who are associated with Pentecostal Christianity (Bompani 2016; Ukah 2016; van Klinken 2014). At the same time, sexual minorities frequently mobilize religious arguments in support of their cause (Chitando and Mapuranga 2016; van Klinken 2016a). Thus, religion in general, and (Pentecostal) Christianity in particular, in rather complex ways have become part of, and

contribute to, public contestations over gender, sexuality and citizenship in contemporary Africa. Not only are religious actors, as well as religious beliefs and practices, involved in the contestation over gender, sexuality and citizenship – they also contribute to erotic and political economies (see Obadare's contribution in this special issue) in which moral and gendered subjectivity is (re)shaped and sexual citizenship is (re)defined. It is precisely those intricate intersections of contemporary Christianity, sexuality, and citizenship that are explored and examined in the various contributions to this special issue.

**Contributions**

In addition to this introductory article, the special issue includes six articles. It opens with an article by Marian Burchardt, entitled "Masculinity, Sexual Citizenship and Religion in Post-apartheid South Africa: A Field-Theoretical Approach". Problematizing the tendency to analyse black South African masculinity in a somewhat simplistic scheme of "liberal" versus "traditional", Burchardt builds on his ethnographic research in Cape Town as well as on Bourdieu's theory of social fields to develop an alternative approach. Acknowledging the complexity of masculinity, he proposes a fourfold matrix to understand what he calls the "field of masculinities" in which his research participants – Pentecostal men living in the townships – navigate the politics of gender and sexual citizenship. He argues that South African Pentecostal masculinity is not a stable and fixed configuration of gendered attitudes, values and performances, but a set of cultural distinctions that shift with the problem-space these distinctions address as well as the values they are meant to articulate.

From South Africa, the focus in the second article shifts to Kenya in East Africa. Damaris Parsitau and Adriaan van Klinken, in their article "Pentecostal Intimacies: Women and Intimate Citizenship in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness in Kenya", provide a detailed analysis of the intersections of gender, sexuality and citizenship in a prominent neo-Pentecostal movement in Kenya that aims at a moral and spiritual regeneration of the nation. Reading the discourses and practices of the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness of the charismatic prophet, David Owuor, through the lens of intimate citizenship, they demonstrate how this case study, on the one hand, stands in a long history of "politics of the womb" in colonial and post-colonial Kenya, but on the other hand is intelligible in relation to the situation of moral, spiritual and political uncertainty as well as of the ambiguity of sexual modernity in contemporary Kenya. Hence, the article critically unpacks the multiple ways in which Pentecostal language and imagery not only polices, but also (re)shapes religious, political and sexual intimacy.

Continuing the focus on Pentecostal forms of Christianity, the subsequent articles lead the reader to West Africa. Ebenezer Obadare follows up on the theme of Pentecostal intimacy, understood in a very particular – that is, erotic – way. In his article, "The Charismatic Porn-star: Social Citizenship and the West-African Pentecostal Erotic", Obadare offers an in-depth examination of the role of the pastor in Nigerian neo-Pentecostal congregations, analysing the emphasis on ecstatic spiritual performance in terms of a Pentecostal erotic economy. This economy, he argues, has profound implications for scholarly understanding of the character of social and political citizenship in Nigeria. Apart

from drawing critical attention to the political uses of eroticization, the article also alerts to the intricate connections between sexuality and power in African religious worlds.

From the erotic figure of the pastor, the focus in the next article by Nathanael Homewood shifts to another spectacular category of personhood in West African Pentecostal imagination: the fetus. In "The Fantastic Fetus: The Fetus as a Super-Citizen in Ghanaian Pentecostalism", Homewood provides an innovative and critical analysis of ethnographic data from Pentecostal spaces in Accra, Ghana. Offering a case study of the discursive and ritual practices concerning pregnancy and fertility in one particular church, he demonstrates how the concern with "miracle babies" reflects a notion of the fetus as a super-citizen. Discussing how the fetus is made public and freighted with extraordinary supernatural significance, he explores the crucial question of how Pentecostals grant the fetus with citizenship status and what this implies for the conceptualization of citizenship. Homewood develops a nuanced gender-critical reading that acknowledges the patriarchal undertones of this particular Pentecostal discourse, yet simultaneously recognizes female agency in the narratives about "miracle babies".

Where the preceding articles discuss questions of gender and sexual citizenship in mostly heterosexual contexts and frameworks, the last two articles in this special issue shift the focus to a topic of emerging political and academic concern: the politics of homosexuality and sexual diversity in contemporary Africa. Asonzeh Ukah, in his article "Pentecostal Apocalypticism: Hate Speech, Contested Citizenship, and Religious Discourses on Same-Sex Relations in Nigeria", explores the tensions that exist between two sets of rights – freedom of religion and expression, on the one hand, and the right to be protected against discrimination and hatred, on the other. Examining these tensions in the context of Nigeria, he specifically focuses on the role of Pentecostal Christianity and its apocalyptic rhetoric in public debates about homosexuality, demonstrating the intimate intersections of Pentecostalism as a public and political religion, sexuality, and contested citizenship rights in the country.

The special issue concludes with an article by Adriaan van Klinken, entitled "Citizenship of Love: The Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics of Sexual Citizenship in a Kenyan Gay Music Video". The article shifts the focus from the way in which the citizenship of sexual minorities is contested, to the way in which sexual minorities make claims towards a recognition of their citizenship and rights. More specifically, on the basis of a close reading of the Kenyan music video *Same Love* (2016) as constituting an 'act of citizenship', Van Klinken demonstrates how Christian beliefs and symbols are appropriated in the video to build a narrative of African, Christian and queer citizenship. Hence, the article explores the new possibilities of cultural, sexual and religious citizenship created through popular culture and public space in contemporary Africa.

Together, the articles collected in this special issue give a rich and in-depth account of the most critical issues concerning sexuality, gender and citizenship in contemporary Africa, in contexts where public and political culture to a considerable extent is influenced and defined by Pentecostal-Charismatic forms of Christianity. Several of the articles also acknowledge the existence of alternative discourses and trajectories within African Christianities, such as Ukah's reference to the relatively nuanced contribution of the Catholic Church to debates about homosexuality, and Van Klinken's discussion of the emergence of a

Christian counter-discourse that seeks to affirm gay and lesbian human rights. Further comparative research is required to assess how sexuality, gender and citizenship have become sites for religious competition and profiling, not only within Christianity, but also in the dynamics between Christian and other religious communities.

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