

What if the “Others” already were “Queer”?

Mikela A Lundahl¹

¹University of Gothenburg, School of Global Studies, Göteborg, SE

mikela.lundahl@globalstudies.gu.se

In this paper I want to discuss problems of translations when western academics, activists and NGOs engage in sexual politics elsewhere, in this case, different parts of Africa. When the concept queer was introduced in the academia in the early 90ties it was as a way to try to conceptualise gender and sexuality outside the western modern framing (Butler, Kulick, Massad). The underlying ontology was that gender and sexuality always is situated, both in time and space, and that the division in two genders, and two sexualities, hetero and homosexuality, is not a given, but rather a concrete historical situated way for a certain society to organize the reproductive sphere. The queer concept was a new tool to scrutinize this organisation, and also to on a more equal level compare it to alternative organisations. It had a utopian aspect about it, since it was thought to open for new ways of organising sexuality in the future. Queer denaturalize given assumptions within the field of gender and sexuality.

In the political sphere, among activists and NGOs, the concept is used different, more narrowly, as an umbrella for those who do not fit within the hetero normative matrix; more or less synonymous with gay/lesbian. The last decades enormous progress has been achieved within the field of human rights for HBT-persons in for example the Scandinavian countries, and that also inspire benevolent action elsewhere. These actions are however quite often ignorant to the situatedness of the categories of gender and sexuality, and is at times quite naively trying to export those categories to contexts where the reproductive organisation is quite different. Also are those actions often blind to already existing subject positions or “spaces” for same-sexed desires and activities. This blindness for the local in the name of human rights risks therefore overwriting queer spaces. What if (some of) the “others” already were “queer” (in the meaning, living a more open construction of the hetero normative matrix than “we” do), but that the mindset development-underdevelopment presume that the others first have to become homo/heterosexuals in order to, eventually, become queers?

What if the development thinking is actually pushing African discourses and legislation “backwards” through its stress on Western designed HBT rights?