

STANDPOINT

Out of the Closet: Unveiling Sexuality Discourses in Uganda

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Introduction: February 2003

The issue of homosexuality took centre stage in Uganda during the month of February 2003, with the media being dominated by emotive views and opinions from the public. This wave of homophobia was triggered by a recommendation emanating from a section of the women's movement that urged the proposed Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) to address the rights of homosexuals as members of the category of marginalised social groups in Uganda. [1] The newspaper report that activated much of the homophobic furore was entitled "Makerere [University] Don Defends Gays." [2] I had come out strongly in support of homosexuals and articulated my position in the national and international media. For this reason, I was caught in the eye of the homophobic storm, and became a "punching bag" for the public to relieve its pent-up rage.

It is impossible to describe the depth of the ugliness, rage, revulsion, disgust and malevolence exhibited by the vocal homophobic public. The few voices in support of homosexual rights were drowned out by deafening homophobic outcries. Through radio, television, newspapers and the Internet, I endured the most virulent verbal attacks, including calls for the "lynching" and "crucifying" of Tamale. [3] I had previously been aware of the intolerance towards and prejudice against homosexuals in Uganda. I must confess, however, that the degree and extent of this bias came as a nasty shock to me; such bigotry and injustice I had read about only in history books on slavery and apartheid. That society could vilify the harmless, private, victimless acts of consenting adults defies logic.

Soon after the newspaper report referred to above, I received an SMS message on my cell phone from one of my friends: "Congs Sylvia; on your way to becoming a millionaire!" She later explained that there was an assumption that my support for the rights of homosexuals meant that money was going to pour in from gay and lesbian organisations in Western Europe and North America to "facilitate" my work. Many more comments along similar lines followed in the electronic and print media. Implicit in these was the supposition that I was involved in a campaign that was driven from the West. The public seemed to think that there was a network of homosexual organisations "out there" with an explicit agenda to "recruit" young African men and women into their "decadent, perverted habits." It is of course interesting that the public never seems to consider heteronormativity as a form of "recruiting" individuals into heterosexuality.

I should have been prepared for the virulent reactions, given my activist experience in the women's movement and the injustice I had seen meted out against Ugandan women over the years. But the February furore acted as an important eye-opener to me in

several different respects, leading me to ask whether I had been naïve about my society's sense of fairness and justice, and whether my isolation in the "ivory tower" had sheltered me from the reality outside. The homophobic storm engulfed me and presented huge challenges to my legal and feminist scholarship. The study I decided to undertake on the subject is ongoing. What I intend to do here is to reflect on the contestations and discourses around homosexuality in Uganda with reference to questions of gender, power and identity in the contemporary African setting.

Sexual Politics in Uganda

One of the most efficient ways that patriarchy uses sexuality as a tool to create and sustain gender hierarchy in African societies is by enshrouding it in secrecy and taboos. Another option is to use the law to prohibit all "sex outlaws" in the social ghettos of society. Prominent among the sex outlaws that have historically resisted and subverted dominant cultures are homosexuals, bisexuals and transgendered individuals. Punitive laws against prostitution, abortion, adultery, erotica and prostitutes serve a similar purpose. By maintaining a tight grip on certain activities, and silencing the voices of those individuals and groups that engage in them, the patriarchal state makes it extremely difficult for these individuals and groups to organise and fight for their human rights. Socio-cultural norms and religious beliefs (such as virginity testing, female genital mutilation, female chastity, occult sexuality, taboos around polyandry, and so on) constitute the screws that keep the clamp of sexual repression firmly in place.

I have met many Ugandan gays and lesbians who have never had any form of interaction (direct or indirect) with whites. Some organisations, such as the Gays and Lesbians Alliance (GALA) have members throughout rural Uganda. A good number are non-literate or semi-literate. It is quite clear that whether they arrived at their homosexuality through "nature" or "nurture" (I personally do not think that it matters either way), outside influence played no part in determining their sexuality. When we turn to the past, we find that, contrary to popular belief, homosexuality in Uganda predates colonialism and other forms of subjugation (Murray and Roscoe, 1998). Historically, as was the case elsewhere in the world, homosexual practices were neither fully condoned nor totally suppressed (Feminist Review, 1987). Among the Langi of northern Uganda, the mudoko dako "males" were treated as women and could marry men (Driberg, 1923). Homosexuality was also acknowledged among the Iteso (Laurance, 1957), the Bahima (Mushanga, 1973), the Banyoro (Needham, 1973) and the Baganda (Southwold, 1973). Indeed, there is a long history of homosexuality in the Buganda monarchy; it was an open secret, for example, that Kabaka (king) Mwanga was gay (Faupel, 1962). Trends both in the present and the past reveal that it is time for Africans to bury the tired myth that homosexuality is "unAfrican". (Some other myths and reductionist beliefs that I have heard during the course of my research include "homosexuals are naturally violent", "most gay men are paedophiles", "same-sex boarding schools breed homosexuals", and so on.) Ironically, it is the dominant Judaeo-Christian and Arabic religions upon which most African anti-homosexuality proponents rely, that are foreign imports.

Political, cultural and religious fundamentalisms have played a crucial role in suppressing and stifling sexual pluralism in Uganda. During the month of February, I appeared on several radio talk shows and gave public lectures on the topic of homosexuality. The level of hypocrisy, the double standards and the selective sexual morality that such fundamentalists exhibited always took me by surprise. Any variation in sexual activity and sexual partners from heteronormativity is considered "pathological",

"deviant", "unnatural", and condemned in the strongest possible terms. The gendered politics implicit in these views are crucial, since sexual activities that go against the grain of mainstream ones subvert conventional gendered relations and hierarchies. Sexuality therefore becomes a critical site for maintaining patriarchy and reproducing African women's oppression.

The gendered dimensions of sexuality are very clear when we consider the implicit erasure of lesbian identity in Ugandan society. Even the law seems to be more preoccupied with male-on-male sex when it criminalises intercourse "against the order of nature." [4] Somehow, the dominant phallogentric culture maintains the stereotype of women as the passive recipients of penetrative male pleasure; sex that is not penetrative does not count as "real" sex. In fact, Ugandan women's sexuality is often reduced to their conventional mothering role, and conflated with their reproductive capacities (Tamale, 2001). What is therefore particularly threatening to patriarchy is the idea of intimate same-sex relationships where a dominating male is absent, and where women's sexuality can be defined without reference to reproduction. The main factor in the patriarchal equation is missing; that is, power along sex lines, and thus the preservation of the gender hierarchy.

The mainstream aversion to same-sex relations consequently reflects a greater fear. Homosexuality threatens to undermine male power bases in the Ugandan "private" sphere (at the level of interpersonal relationships and conventional definitions of the "family"), as well as in public discourses (where myths abound about what it means to be a man or a woman). Homosexuality presents a challenge to the deep-seated masculine power within African sexual relations, and disrupts the core of the heterosexist social order.

The Complexities of Subversion: "Kuchu" Culture in Uganda

There are several stigmatised terms to describe homosexuals in Uganda, but the commonest one is abasiyazi (others include kyafoko and eyumayuma). However, Ugandan gays and lesbians identify themselves simply with the term kuchu (plural, kuchus). (I had never heard this term before undertaking this study and very few in mainstream society know that it exists.) Society considers them a moral outrage, but they have rejected all negative labels and constructed an alternative positive and empowering self-identification. Most of the gays and lesbians I have interviewed [5] have assumed the kuchu identity and consider it as the prime factor in their personal identity. "Straight kuchus" take a lot of pride in their orientation, and many consider bisexuals as "not real", somewhat akin to "sellouts". [6] They perceive bisexuals as people who wish to have their cake and eat it.

Under the repressive conditions of state- and religious-inspired homophobia in Uganda, it is not surprising that most homosexuals find it difficult to "come out" of their closeted lives or to be open about their sexual orientation. Most blend within the wider society and even live under the cover of heterosexual relationships while maintaining their homosexual relationships underground. The tendency is to construct "comfort zones" where they complacently live a different and segregated lifestyle. Gay and lesbian clubs in particular offer comfort zones for homosexuals, until they are rudely awoken by an incident such as the one in February.

Kuchuism has taken on a particular and vital importance to homosexuals in Uganda.

Because homosexuals in Uganda do not feel a sense of belonging in relation to the dominant culture, they have had to reconstruct affirming identities for themselves. Wendy Clark helps to explain this when she shows how the questions of "identity" and "self" gain particular significance when there is a part of oneself that is hidden and in direct and immediate opposition to the social and cultural mores of society (1987: 208).

The recognised forms of self-definition among kuchus allow individuals within the kuchu subculture to identify one another within the patriarchal heterosexual social system. This identification among gay men often consists of gestures or mannerisms that repudiate conventional masculinity. Lesbians tend to use mode of dress to distinguish themselves from heterosexual women, with almost all the female kuchus I have met in Kampala routinely wearing trousers, shirts, baseball caps and other forms of "masculine" attire. Many interpret this as lesbians' desire to be "like men" or to adopt the role of "pseudomen". Kuchus themselves find such interpretations laughable, and believe they are simply asserting their right to dress styles that are comfortable. The self-definition of lesbians and gays therefore involves their subversive performance and statement-making as gender outlaws in society.

There are several gay and lesbian organisations in Uganda, including "Gay and Lesbian Alliance", "Gay Uganda", "Spectrum", "Right Companion", "Lesgabix" and "Integrity". Most of these act as support groups, with very few engaged in activist work to improve their status. Moreover, the different groups are not connected in any way, with some sustaining their memberships exclusively through cyberspace. The avoidance of public visibility by gay and lesbian organisations can be explained by the severity of Ugandan law, in terms of which homosexuality is illegal and carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The anonymous involvement and communication that many organisations afford also proves safe when individuals, especially those in socially esteemed professions or high office, need to preserve the mainstream sexual identity that is often assumed to be part of their social status. Overall, the exceedingly hostile context in which lesbians and gays live and work makes it extremely difficult for homosexuals to demand their rights in Uganda with a unified voice.

Sexuality in the Ugandan Women's Movement

The women's movement in Uganda has not yet embraced issues of sexual orientation with any degree of enthusiasm. It is especially significant that the kuchu subculture among Ugandan lesbians is entirely disconnected from the women's movement. In fact, the cross-section of the women's movement that urged the Equal Opportunities Commission to support the rights of homosexuals was by no means representative of the mainstream women's movement in Uganda. Indeed, the silence of the women's movement was quite conspicuous during the month of February, when I came under virulent attack from a homophobic society. [7] Yet the fact that some gender activists recognised the need to support the rights of gays and lesbians is important, especially given that this stand could mean the loss of a job or ambitions for public office.

When we presented our recommendations to the Minister of Gender, herself a women's rights activist, she advised that we drop "sexual orientation" from our recommendations, as it was bound "to erase all the other good things" that we had recommended in the report. Minister Zoe Bakoku-Bakoru reasoned that it was not strategic, "not yet time" to bring up such issues before Ugandan lawmakers. The question is: When will it be time? Today, on this continent, we often hear the same excuse in relation to women's rights to

participate in decision-making, to control resources, to realise their full potential.

The silence around sexual rights within the Ugandan women's movement may be attributed in part to the taboos surrounding all sexual matters in our society. But the HIV/AIDS pandemic has in many ways flung open the doors on sexuality. In particular, it has forced into the open the myths and secrets in relationships and identities that are often silenced or taken for granted. For women's rights activists, "the personal" has never confronted and intersected with "the political" in so explicit and bold a fashion as it has with contemporary issues of sex and sexuality. Although many of us in the women's movement still find it difficult to rid our consciousness of the "taboo web" that dims our understanding of the intrinsic link between sexuality and women's oppression and subordination, the process of disentanglement has begun.

Homosexuality represents one of the last bastions of legally-backed and state-sanctioned oppression and intolerance on the African continent. In Uganda, the controversy and wide coverage of the issue in February 2003 forced the country's sexuality skeletons out of the closet, and compelled many Ugandans to rethink their stance on homosexuality. The discussion bulletin on the online edition of the New Vision newspaper logged an unprecedented number of postings on this topic. Even now, six months later, a vigorous and continuing debate has been sustained among members of the Ugandan educated elite who have access to the Internet. Overall, the prominence of public debate around homosexuality has placed the topic firmly within the wider ambit of democratic practice.

In the context of this wider ambit, homophobia clearly becomes a gendered concern. Institutions such as culture, the law and religion are vehicles that states use to perpetuate patriarchy and women's subordination. By maintaining a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, the state seeks to enforce conventional gender relationships and identities, and to keep a stranglehold on public discourse about these topics. We cannot allow the fire that was lit with the activating of public debate in February 2003 to go out.

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Footnotes

[1] The recommendations were reproduced in the New Vision of 10 February 2003 (see Supplement on p.34 "The Proposed Equal Opportunities Commission of Uganda"). There had been several homophobic "waves" prior to this. For example, in September 1999, President Museveni instructed the police to arrest and prosecute all homosexuals after an alleged homosexual "wedding" had been reported in the local papers (see Monitor, 28 September 1999).

[2] New Vision, 5 February 2003, p.3.

[3] See online Discussion Board of the New Vision under the topic "To Be or Not to Be Gay (Homosexual)" at www.newvision.co.ug/bulletinboard/

[4] See section 140 of the Ugandan Penal Code.

[5] So far, I have interviewed approximately 60 male and female kuchus. Naturally, the best suited sampling method for this kind of project has been the "snowball" method, in which one self-identified kuchu introduces me to another.

[6] It is interesting to note how kuchus subvert the use of the term "straight" (which normally describes heterosexuals) in reference to themselves.

[7] A handful of feminists sent me private e-mails in support of my position, but only one wrote to the media in support. See Sarah Mukasa, "I Say Three Cheers to Sylvia Tamale", New Vision, 1 March 2003.

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