

Politicising 'the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah': Examining Christian Rightists' war against homosexuality in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) proposes to re-criminalise same-sex relations in Uganda with punishments ranging from monetary fines, to periods of detention, mandatory testing for HIV and even the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality". The main proponents of this bill are fundamental conservative Christians including clergy, politicians and elite professionals. Their strategies are initiated, informed, and influenced by American Christian Right authorities and ideologies based on interpretations of biblical scripture against same-sex practices.

This research will critically examine the effects of the politicisation of the literary construction of homosexuality as 'the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah' based on biblical scriptures, upon local individuals who identify as sexual minorities in Uganda.

Data collection will triangulate qualitative research methods (including individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic participant observation) with systematic literature review and public media content analysis. A monograph and journal articles will be published from the research.

INTRODUCTION

The politicisation of the Christian Right's interpretations of biblical scriptures about same-sex relationships is responsible for the widespread public condemnation of homosexuality as an abomination, evil, sin, decadency and moral degeneration of the end times (Epprecht 2001, Buss and Herman 2003). Labeled 'the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah', homosexual acts and behaviour are socially constructed as unnatural vices which are punishable by a divine God when they manifest in human society (Herman 1997). The premise for this perspective towards homosexuality is the literary text of the bible which is the foundational book for Christians (see for example Genesis 19, 2 Peter 2:6-8, Jude 1:4-8). Thus conservative Christians are actively opposed to the legalisation, de-criminalisation and social acceptance of homosexuality (Kaoma 2009). Consensual same-sex relationships, let alone civil unions threaten the Christian Right's vision for society enshrined in the order of the 'Natural Family' which emphasises authoritarian hierarchy, the authoritative father figure who provides for his family, monogamous marriage to a wife whose gender role as mother is built around pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, as well as well-disciplined subservient children (see Smith 2007 for further discussion). Effeminate men, masculine women, sex for pleasure instead of procreation, single-parent homes, same-sex parenting and the 'debaucheries of homosexual lifestyles' all challenge the Christian Right's agenda for a transformed society. Thus the Christian Right's war against homosexuality is actively integrated into political and social policies and programmes that operate at the international, bilateral, regional and national levels (Zwier 1982, Wilcox 1996, Williams 2010). Parallels of this integration of conservative values into policy and programmes are the GAG rules against funding reproductive health interventions such as abortion services, contraceptive, condoms, or the treatment of sexually transmitted infections among commercial sex workers, using Republican resources from the United States during George Bush's term as president (Johnson 2005). Global health funding was coloured by the Christian Right's agenda which drastically impacted several lives in the global south.

Uganda's recent Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) exemplifies the politicisation of the Christian Right's war against homosexuality (Kaoma 2009). Although homosexuality is already criminalised in the Penal Code which was adopted in the colonial era, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) proposes to recriminalise same-sex relations and mete out several severe punishments including monetary fines, arrests, periods of detention, mandatory testing of HIV, and even the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality" (Tamale 2009). There is a divided response in the country to

this bill with contestations mainly voiced by civil society organisations, human rights advocates, feminists, academics, HIV/AIDS activists, sexual minorities and foreign diplomats. The supporters of this bill are mainly conservative fundamentalists including religious clerics - Christians, Muslims, African Traditional Religious Priests -, parliamentarians, politicians, and public media workers. The main proponents of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) are fundamental Christians whose strategies are initiated, inspired, informed and influenced by American Christian Right authorities and ideologies (Kaoma 2009).

This study will critically examine the effects of the politicisation of the literary construction of homosexuality as 'the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah' based on biblical scriptures, upon local individuals who identify as sexual minorities in Uganda.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

There is a gap in the literature and research-based evidence about homosexuality in Uganda, and in Africa generally (Amory 1997, 1998, Morgan and Wieringa 2005). The limited available literature mainly concentrates on epidemiological and statistical analyses of HIV-high-risk sexual behaviour among men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) such as examinations of the prevalence rates of anal sexual intercourse, anal ulcerations and anal fissures (e.g. Kajubi et al. 2008, Raymond et al. 2009, Ross et al. 2010). A major critique of this literature is that it is largely elitist, contains etic postulations, and very rarely focuses on the local voices and articulations of the sexual minorities who are studied. Since the advent of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009), there is a small but growing body of social-legal scholarship containing legal analyses of the content of the bill and its implications for human rights, service delivery, programme implementation and policy reform (e.g. Kaoma 2009, Tamale 2009, Mujuzi 2009a, b, Kabumba 2009). However, there is a conspicuous lack of qualitative research studies about the contextual, cultural, social, economic, and political factors related to this bill, or its impacts on the lived realities of individuals and groups that identify as sexual minorities in the country. This study will address this gap by conducting ethnographic research aimed at exploring the effects of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) on the lives of sexual minorities in Uganda. In addition to grounded theorisation of the widespread impact of the Christian Right through this bill, empirical data will be generated and published in a monograph as well as academic articles.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study has got four main objectives namely:

- i. To examine the interactions (both positive and negative) between the Christian Right movement and sexual minorities in Uganda.
- ii. To systematically collate and document the strategies adopted by the Christian Right against sexual minorities in Uganda.
- iii. To assess why the Christian Right is opposed to homosexuality in Uganda.
- iv. To explore the responses of the sexual minorities in Uganda to the systematic opposition from the Christian Right in Uganda.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. What is the Christian Right?
- ii. How does the Christian Right manifest on the ground in Uganda? Who are the main proponents of the Christian Right in Uganda? What connections have scholars made between the American Christian Right and the local Ugandan manifestations of the Christian Right?
- iii. What is the position of the Christian Right on homosexuality?
- iv. What strategies has the Christian Right taken against homosexuality in Uganda? How does the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) fit within the wider ambit of these other strategies?
- v. How does the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) impact the lives of sexual minorities in Uganda?

- vi. What (if any) policy, programme and practice recommendations emanate from this study?

METHODS

This research study will be premised on the social constructionist research paradigm. The research design is informed by the grounded theory approach to research.

Data collection will triangulate qualitative research methods (namely individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic participant observation) with systematic literature review, and public media content analysis. Key informant interviews will be held with the main proponents of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) including the parliamentarian who proposed it, and those who have publicly supported him, Pentecostal pastors at the forefront of the social political campaign against homosexuality, as well as sexual minority associations and advocates. All interviews and discussions will be recorded on digital recorder, transcribed verbatim, translated into English where necessary, entered into computer and subjected to thematic analysis using Atlas.ti.

Sampling of study participants will utilise purposive, snow-ball and theoretical sampling techniques. Research participants will be drawn from either Kampala - the capital city or rural districts in southwestern Uganda. The research proposal will be submitted to the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology for review of the scientific rigour and ethical approval.

WORK PLAN

On-going research among sexual minorities in Uganda has revealed growing tensions between the Christian Right and individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ). So far, I have obtained access to the key gate-keepers of the different sexual minority groups in Kampala city. I have also collected some public media resources containing stories about the interactions between fundamental Christians and sexual minorities in Uganda. Additional collection and content analysis of the public media will occur at the start of the fellowship period. Data collection among the different study groups is yet to be conducted. Furthermore, data processing, data analysis and writing up of the results will be undertaken during the fellowship period. The expected result of the project is a monograph and at least two journal articles based on the research. It is hoped that the research will start in the early part of 2011 and end twelve months later in the Spring of 2012.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES

Application for ethical review and approval (January – February 2011)
Literature review and conceptualization of study (January – March 2011)
Design and piloting of instruments (April 2011)
Public media collection and content analysis (January-May 2011)
Data collection (May-July 2011)
Transcription, translation and data entry (June-October 2011)
Coding of qualitative data (August- October of 2011)
Data analysis and generation of first draft (September- November 2011)
Feedback to the research communities (December 2011)
Revision of manuscript (December 2011 - February 2012)
Submission of the manuscript to a publisher (March 2012)

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