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Porn in church: Moral geographies of homosexuality in Uganda

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Abstract

This case-study based paper on Uganda critically engages with the strategic visual representation of homosexuality as socially dysfunctional and non-productive, reflecting what in queer studies is called 'queer social negativity'. This depiction ensues from current popular Ugandan understandings of sexuality that are deeply rooted in the socio-moral order of family and kinship promoted by Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. The Ugandan pastor Martin Ssempe – leader of the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition against Homosexuality and successful campaigner for the Anti-Homosexuality Bill – has become internationally known due to his infamous presentation at a press conference in his church where he screened graphic gay porn material. The video of Ssempe's presentation has become an epitome of the moral and religious politics of homosexuality in Uganda generating worldwide controversy. Despite recent scholarship on anti-homosexual rhetoric and politics in Uganda, in which the name of Ssempe is often mentioned, the specific significance of the use of pornographic images by this prominent religious leader has not yet been analysed in depth. The discussion of the reconstructed reality of homosexuality and the modern witch-hunt for homosexuals in Uganda urges us to think about the deep-seated socio-political dynamics and the broader transnational context of religion.

'Eat da poo-poo'

The Ugandan pastor Martin Ssempe – leader of the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition against Homosexuality and successful campaigner for the Anti-Homosexuality Bill that became law in Uganda in February 2014¹ – has become internationally known because of his infamous presentation at a press conference in his church where he screened graphic gay porn material (Figure 1). The film fragments,² depicting practices such as fisting and what Ssempe calls 'anal licking', were presented as an illustration of 'what homosexuals do in the privacy of their bedroom' and of what 'Barack Obama ... wants to bring to Africa as a human right'. Widely circulated on YouTube under the title 'Eat da poo-poo', the video of Ssempe's presentation has become an example of the moral and religious politics of homosexuality in Uganda generating worldwide controversy. Much has been written recently about anti-homosexual rhetoric and politics in Uganda (Cheney 2012; Sadgrove et al. 2012), and the name of Ssempe is often mentioned here. However, the specific significance of the use of pornographic images by this prominent religious leader has not yet been analyzed in depth.

Seeing porn as the product of a neoliberal culture, emphasizing personal freedom and autonomy as the basis of sexual pleasure, the gay porn video fragments are completely alien in the context of the Ugandan church and its anti-modern campaign against homosexuality. Ssempe appropriates the images of (not necessarily representative) homosexual practices to visually frame homosexuality as an inherently perverse practice that is threatening the moral order of society and therefore should be outlawed. Sexual minority organizations in Uganda and more widely in Africa have tried to normalize homosexuality in recent years – that is, to present homosexual relationships

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as an expression of the human capacity for love and the desire for intimacy and hence as an issue of human rights and dignity. Ssempe, however, uses porn images to 'otherize' and 'exceptionalize' homosexuality as an excessive, perverse and in humane sexual practice. His selection of the material not only reflects his preoccupation with anal sex but also, and more critically, exemplifies what Bersani (1987, 222) called 'the heterosexual association of anal sex with ... self-annihilation'. The depiction of homosexuality as socially dysfunctional and non-productive – reflecting what in queer studies is called 'queer social negativity' – is strategic because it appeals to deeply-rooted Ugandan understandings in which sexuality is embedded in the socio-moral order of family and kinship.

Figure 1. Pastor Martin Ssempe cautions 'the African world' about the perils of homosexuality at a press conference in Kampala, Uganda, 16 February 2010.



Photograph courtesy of Bénédicte Desrus.

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Everyday life

The Anti-Homosexuality and Anti-Pornography Bills equate homosexuality and pornography, with both being considered to pose serious dangers to individuals, families and communities and to threaten the moral 'purity' of the nation. Using pornographic metaphors and imagery, the bills and ensuing campaigns produce a legally grounded physical abhorrence of homosexuals. That is to say, in Ugandan authoritative-legislative discourse, homosexuals have become unnatural and illegal bodies that should be made placeless in the projected ideal image of a Christian nation. A particularly poignant area of tension exists between the coercive formal-institutional scale at which homosexuality is banned in its entirety and the scale of the practices of everyday life. In Uganda today, homosexuals' insecure coping strategies are aimed at not disclosing their 'deviant' sexual orientation for obvious reasons. Their deeply hidden lives are in coexistence with the far-reaching anti-homosexuality legislation that, in its attempt to purify and thus to 'deporn' and 'dehomosexualize' society, claims the absolute right to forcefully enter the domestic sphere, including the bedroom. A striking example of such privatization of homosexuality is that parents – at the risk of prosecution – are called on to report their children if they display any typical 'homosexual behaviour'.

We discern a visual turn in Ugandan counter-homosexual discourse. The activities of Ssempe and his followers have increasingly put homosexuals on display, involving an ongoing and widespread excessive visualized outrage against them, which can be conceptualized as 'media porn'. A notorious example of this is the '200 top homosexuals' list, accompanied by portraits of key figures and chanting slogans. Ugandan newspaper *The Red Pepper*

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published this list immediately after the introduction of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, conveying that homosexuals are uninvited beings in the gaze of the Christian nation. The existence of homosexuals might be religiously, legally and perhaps naively denied in Uganda, but it does not change their de facto presence in everyday life. Ssempe's pornographic visualizations of the alleged evil of homosexuality produce repulsive moral geographies thereof. These impose serious restrictions on sexual citizenship defined as the embodied interplay of sexual rights, duties, values and norms. These are critically negotiated and responsabilized in politics, economy and culture in multi-temporal as well as multi-scalar contexts, ranging from the level of the body and the home space to local communities, regions, states and the global society (Zebracki 2014). The Ugandan anti-homosexual crackdown profoundly affects homosexuals (both Ugandan citizens and visitors from abroad) in regard to social and physical mobility, psychological well-being, health care and citizenship education at various temporal and spatial scales of quotidian encounters; for example, in streets, schools, hospitals, government buildings and venues for leisure activities.

Window on the world

The scandalous Ugandan case of homosexuality is not an isolated one considering the position of homosexuals in states throughout Africa and the wider world. Russia enacted an anti-LGBT law in mid-2013 (Zebracki 2014) and Saudi Arabia and Iran are regimes where homosexuality is a capital offence. Tolerance and acceptance of sexual 'dissidents' – including LGBT people – seem to perceptibly deteriorate at the intersections of politics and religion across societies in the world and beyond the western/non-western

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divide. The distinctive feature about the Ugandan anti-homosexual campaign is the appropriation of pornography to make out a case for its credibility, and this deserves critical follow-on research. We would find the use of porn in the setting of anti-homosexual activism incited by Ssempe and the kind of Christianity he and his adherents represent deeply comic, if it was not so tragic because of its overpowering impact on the precarious human rights and lives of homosexuals and other sexual minority and non-conforming groups. The modern witch-hunt for homosexuals in Uganda urges us to think about the deep-seated socio-political dynamics in Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity and in the broader transnational context. As such, the Ugandan case serves as a critical window onto the fundamental challenges to the sexual citizenship of LGBT people in the world today.

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Notes

1 On 1 August 2014, the Ugandan High Court ruled that the Bill had been passed through Parliament without the requisite quorum and was therefore invalid. It is yet to be seen whether a new Bill will be tabled and adopted by Parliament.

2 YouTube. 2010. 'Eat da poo-poo [Africa do [sic] not want this sickness].' Posted by KratosCSS, July 15. Accessed August 31, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjnrLt3VuSM>.

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