

Women's Sexuality as a Site of Control & Resistance: Views on the African Context

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I. Introduction

Recently I was invited to give a talk to the members of one of the Rotary Clubs around Kampala. My talk was announced in their weekly newsletter, describing me as "a sexual activist." I imagine that such a description was on account of my vocal views on sexuality rights. However, by reducing my activism to sexual rights, the Rotarians had missed the forest for the sex trees, losing the big picture for the small. There is a fundamental link between sexual politics and gender oppression, between sexuality and power. Therefore, my activism around sexual politics is part and parcel of my activism against human rights violations generally and for women's rights in particular. In this paper, I try to make clear the interlace between sexuality and gender oppression.

African feminists are keenly aware of the intersection between the human body, gender and politics (see e.g., Collins, 1990; MacFadden, 1992; Awusabo-Asare et al., 1993; Imam, 2000; Machera, 2002; Tamale, 2003; Diallo, 2003). Sexuality holds both positive empowering possibilities but it also represents powerful constraints for women in Africa. In many African contexts the relationship of women to their own bodies is often different from the disembodied, negative relations rooted in the legacy of colonialism. While pre-colonial societies in Africa were not immune to manipulating culture to oppress women the Judaeo-Christian and Arabic cultures, for example, imposed a particular sexuality on African women, i.e. "hyper-developed" and in need of control. This cultural construction facilitated the consolidation of the patriarchal colonial state (McClintock, 1994). In a post-colonial context, the two legacies of these socio-political formations impose a variety of gendered constructs on the African woman.

Patriarchy and capitalism have many tools at their disposal to create and maintain gender roles and relations in our societies. Women's bodies constitute one of the most formidable tools for this purpose. If one imagines the body to be a blank slate at the time of birth, culture then-proceeds to inscribe rules, images, symbols and even hierarchies that give shape and character to that body. Although the texts that culture inscribes on African women's bodies remain invisible to the uncritical eye, it is in fact a crucial medium for effecting social control. The nibs of culture, the law, the media and especially the systems of education are all instrumental in constructing African women's sexuality and desire through the inscriptions they engrave on their bodies. Through the reproductive and sexual control of African women's bodies their subordination and continued exploitation is guaranteed.

But body politics for African women is also possessed of an empowering subtext, reflected through resistance, negotiation, identity, self-desire, pleasure and silence. While silence can work to reinforce oppression, it can also be a tool of resistance and struggle, especially for the marginalized. There is, therefore, a legitimate silence surrounding African women's sexuality, a silence that is safe, unengageable and ambiguous. Here, "silence" is different from the Western feminist approach that normally condemns it and describes it as a total blank while valorising "voice." In many African cultures while speech is necessary and empowering in sexuality, silence can be equally powerful. People should, for instance, have the right to keep secrets about their sexuality; in this case, silence may serve as a powerful tool of rejection of externally

imposed projections of our sexuality as African women (Bennett, 2003).

Human sexuality, as used in this paper, encompasses a wide array of complex elements, including sexual knowledge, beliefs value, attitudes and behaviours, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal/interpersonal sexual relations. It touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence. It is an all-encompassing phenomenon that involves the human psyche, emotions, physical sensations, communication, creativity and ethics.

Any analysis of African women's sexuality must, therefore, bring into sharp focus the politics contradictions, anomalies, the interlocking bits and the locations of African women's sexuality. This paper attempts to map out some of the historical and contextual factors that have shaped and influenced the sexuality of African women, thereby exposing its oppressive and disempowering dimensions, as well as its transformative and empowering potential.

Considering the diversity and pluralism amongst sub-Saharan African women there is no claim in this paper for a universal sexuality among this social group. The differences between and among women on the African continent are based on race, ethnicity religion & spirituality, age, educational level, social class, physical ability, geographical location, and so forth. Indeed, there is a danger in essentializing an "African sexuality" and ignoring the various forces that impinge on particular cultures and societies. However, some shared experiences (e.g., colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and patriarchy) provide a common base from which we can draw some generalizations about African female sexuality (Oloka-Onyango and Tamale, 1995). Hence, the concept of "African sexuality" is used loosely here to acknowledge our common legacies without necessarily obscuring the diversities among and between African women. Case examples are provided from various African countries to illustrate the key issues discussed.

II. Early Influences of African Sexuality

Contemporary constructions of African sexuality have become so deeply etched in our individual and collective consciousness that most of us simply take them for granted. The dominant sexual ideologies that inform our knowledge about men and women's sexuality in most parts of Africa are products of foreign imperial and missionary expansion across our continent. Most significantly, imperialist Christianity and Islam played a major role in erasing our traditional conceptualization of sexuality and sexual symbolism. With these foreign values came new forms of sexuality that either effaced or remodelled indigenous manifestations that had existed on the continent. We have come to believe that rules and norms governing our sexuality have always been the way that we know them today. Nothing can be further from the truth.

Traditional African cultures were full of rich sexual expression, especially by women through dance, dress, song, folklore, poetry, art and other aesthetics. Far from being prudish and coy, African sexuality was relatively liberal and was generally celebrated. Moreover expressions of sexuality were not necessarily confined to the 'private' realm because of the fluidity between the 'public' and 'private' contexts typical of pre-colonial African societies. Men and women enjoyed greater body freedom and body dignity. Female nudity was not necessarily always associated with sexuality. In fact female nakedness was used in many African communities as a form of protest (Ardener, 1975; Mba, 1982; Tamale, 1996). Women were generally in control of their sexuality and possessed an elaborate system of management of their sexual and reproductive health. Most of the knowledge about pre-colonial African sexuality is currently found in the rapidly vanishing oral history and there have been only scant attempts to document it (e.g., Murray and Roscoe, 1998; Berger and White, 1999).

Sexual expression and eroticism was exhibited overtly and subtly through metaphors idioms, signifiers and symbols. It was not uncommon for women to share intimate sexual information amongst themselves in places where they gathered regularly, e.g., at the market place, the communal pounding compounds, the village well, etc. Remnants of these cultures have endured through time and can still be seen in: sexual initiation ceremonies and rituals for young girls (e.g., the *Chinamwali* among the Yao in Malawi, the *Ssenga*

of Uganda's Baganda and the *Alangizi* in Zambia); in sexual tattoo patterns and incisions (e.g., the *Nyora* among the Shona in Zimbabwe); a variety of sexual aids and aphrodisiacs in the form of herbal scents erotic oils sexual beads (e.g., the *butiti* among the Baganda in Uganda); and through sexually expressive rhythmic dances (e.g., the *minoghe*, *chimtali* and *chwoda* in Malawi, the *tarab* dance of the East African coast). Sexuality also featured prominently in many parts of Africa as an expression of reconciliation and peace building (Binsbergen, 1999).

Western imperialist caricatures of African sexuality was part of a wider plot to colonize and exploit the 'black race' from the 'dark continent.' Texts from nineteenth century reports authored by white explorers, missionaries and anthropologists reveal a clear pattern of the ethnocentric and racist construction of African sexuality. Narratives equated black sexuality with primitiveness. African sexuality was depicted as primitive, exotic and bordering on nymphomania. Perceived as immoral, bestial and lascivious, Africans were caricatured as having lustful dispositions. Their sexuality was read directly into their physical attributes; and the attributes were believed to reflect the morality of Africans (Gilman, 1986; Commons 1993).

To the western mind, the ignorant, bestial, hypersexual African woman was symbolized in the body of Sarah Baartman, the Khoekhoe woman (pejoratively referred to as the "Hottentot Venus") whose naked body was forcibly taken to Europe in the early 1900s and paraded on the streets of several European cities like an animal in a zoo. Schiebinger (1993: 169) reports that Sarah Baartman was "exhibited like a wild beast" with focus on her buttocks and genitalia "which, for an extra charge, viewers could poke and prod." She was perceived as the "missing link of evolution." Baartman's story epitomizes the brutal racism and sexist savagery that lay at the heart of colonial imperialism. A racist misreading of African cultures such as polygamy and bride wealth and "widow inheritance" reinforced such stereotypes of African women.

By constructing Africans as bestial, the colonialists could easily justify and legitimise the fundamental objectives of colonialism: it was a 'civilizing mission' to the barbarian and savage natives of the 'dark continent.' The imperialists executed tills mission with force, brutality, paternalism, arrogance, insensitivity and humiliation, with the body being a focal target. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault was the first scholar to demonstrate how the human body is a central component in the operation of power (see Foucault, 197,7, 1990). He theorized the human body as being "an inscribed surface of invents" from which the prints of history can be read (Rabinow, 1984: 83).³ His work has formed the basis for feminist theorizing of the human body and lies at the root of the scholarship of deconstructionists feminists such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Susan Bordo and Julia Kristeva.

The bodies of African women worked to buttress and apologise for the colonial project (Commons, 1993). They were fundamental in the consolidation of the imperialist empire. Juxtaposed against the highly conservative Europe's sexuality, the unique sexuality of Africans, which was largely unrestrained, posed a huge challenge to the Victorian minds of the early explorers. Indeed, Victorian women were not expected to express their sexuality and were required to be sexually frigid (Wolf, 1991). Their dress, behaviour and mores were all geared toward erasing any hint of sexuality. Women who acted otherwise would immediately be branded prostitutes or courtesans (Rees, 1977). So, African women's sexuality was characterized as the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty. Other myths and stereotypes that were constructed to depict African female sexuality as the 'other' included: "that African women could give birth without pain"; "that Negro women menstruated in greater quantity"; "that Negro women had long and pendulous breasts as an inherited physical Trait" (Long, 1774; Curtin, 1964, quoted in Commons, 1993).

² Sarah Baartman died in France in 1816, aged 26 where her remains remained displayed at the Museum of Mankind until the 1970s. In 2002, her remains were finally returned for a dignified burial in South Africa, for a critical re-creation of the racism and sexism at the heart of European imperialism, see the recent novel, *Hottentot Venus*, by Barbara Chase-Reboud (2003, Doubleday).

³ Frantz Fanon (1963) also alludes, albeit unwittingly, to the link between women's sexuality and colonialism and the process of Afro nation-building. Also see Baines (2003).

Clearly, the depictions of African women as insatiable, amoral, barbaric beings by Europeans said more

about their fears, fantasies and preoccupation with sexuality than anything else. Leah Commons (1993:4) says of Western fixation with African women's sexuality:

Rather than being a characteristic of African cultures, sexual obsession was a reflection of the repressed sexuality of the British. By describing the African as a lascivious beast, the Victorians could distance themselves from the 'savage,' while indulging in forbidden fantasies. More importantly, by laying the blame for lust on women alone, colonizers made themselves blameless for their own sexual relations with African women.

Religion, especially Christianity and Islam, stressed the impurity and inherent sin associated with women's bodies (Goodson, 1991). Through religion, Africans were encouraged to reject their previous beliefs and values and to adopt the 'civilized ways' of the whites. This is when the phallo-centric,⁴ man-on-top "missionary style" sex assumed dominance, with the aim of countering other forms of more adventurous and exciting sexual connecting. With these new developments came the emphasis on covering and hiding body parts.⁵ Indeed, one of the most effective methods of controlling African women's sexuality has been through the regulation of women's dress codes. Perhaps the most notorious post-colonial cases on the continent in this regard, were the draconian laws on women's dressing sanctioned by dictators Kamuzu Banda of Malawi and Idi Amin in Uganda. A new script, steeped in the Victorian moralistic, antisexual and body shame edict, was inscribed on the bodies of African women and with it an elaborate system of control. It is to this hegemony and control of African women's bodies that I turn next.

III. Using the Law to Tame the "African Shrew"

Having constructed the hyper sexed, polygynous female body, the colonialists had made a case for the strict regulation and control of African women's sexuality. This was the final stage in politicising African women's sex and sexuality. Laws were imported from the imperial metropolis to repress and police women's sexuality. Traditional customs, which themselves were not very egalitarian in the first place, were reconfigured to introduce new sexual mores, taboos and stigmas, and the total medicalisation of women's reproduction. The result was a more repressed sexuality akin to the Victorian type. Colonialists worked hand in hand with African patriarchs to develop inflexible customary laws that evolved into new structures and forms of domination (Schmidt, 1991; Mama, 1996).

The need to control women's sexuality and fertility is crucial in patriarchal societies at two levels. First, it is for purely capitalist economic reasons. Male domination under patriarchy generally depends on men's control of resources and their relative economic power over women. These economic relations are reflected within the family where the man, as head of the household, exercises control over the lives of women and children whom are virtually treated as his property. It is essential that the man's acquired property and wealth is passed on to his male offspring in order to sustain patriarchy. Hence, it becomes important to control women's sexuality in order to guarantee the legitimacy of children when bequeathing

⁴ From the Greek word, phallus which means penis. The phallus is a symbol of the penis, which supposedly represents the generating force in nature. Phallo-centric culture refers to a culture that is structured to meet the needs of the masculine imperative.

⁵ This can clearly be seen in religious garb such as veils, burkas, jilbabs, wide, ankle-length, full-sleeved loose dresses, etc. property. ⁶ To this end, the monogamy of women is required, without necessarily disturbing men's polygynous sexuality.

At another level, it is important for capitalist patriarchal societies to separate the 'public' sphere from the 'private' realm. The two spheres are highly gendered with the former representing men and the locus of socially valued activities such as politics and waged labour, while the latter is representative of unremunerated domestic activities performed by women. This necessitated the domestication of women's

bodies and their relegation to the 'private' sphere, where they provide the necessities of productive and reproductive social life gratuitously (thus subsidising capital)⁷ and are economically dependent on their male partners. Regulating and controlling women's sexuality, therefore, is essential for the survival of patriarchy and capitalism.⁸ It represents a vital and necessary way of instituting and maintaining the domesticity of African women. It works to delineate gender roles and to systematically disenfranchise women from accessing and controlling resources. Laws are used by patriarchal states as a mechanism of regulation and control. Below, I provide some brief examples of sexual laws from the Ugandan legal regime to demonstrate the political and legislative strictures that undermine women's autonomy through the social control of their bodies and their sexuality.

Penal laws

(a) Criminal Adultery

Under the Ugandan Penal Code, a wife is guilty of criminal adultery if she engages in sexual intercourse with any man. A husband, on the other hand, will only be guilty of the same offence if he has sex with a married woman. Here, we see the law blatantly imposing double standards on sexual norms. It essentially endorses male sexual promiscuity (as long as he is not playing around with the 'property' of another man), while imposing strict controls on women's sexuality. This is further proven by the fact that under the Penal Code a convicted adulterer must pay compensation (for damaged goods?) to the husband of the adulteress. Such a law is clearly in line with the ideology of lineage rights in property that guarantees the legitimacy of a man's children that we discussed earlier.

⁶ In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels (1884) made the important link between women's oppression to property relations, demonstrating how monogamous family arrangements facilitate patriarchal domination.

⁷ Also by keeping women in a subordinate position, capitalism can justify and profit from paying women who work outside the home lower wages and employing them under worse conditions than men.

⁸ In Africa, the process of separating the public-private spheres preceded colonization but was precipitated, consolidated and reinforced by colonial policies and practices. Where there had been a blurred distinction between public and private life, colonial structures (e.g., law, religion) and policies (e.g., educational) focused on delineating a clear distinction guided by an ideology that perceived men as public actors and women as private performers. Where domestic work had co-existed with commercial work in pre-colonial satellite households, a new form of domesticity, existing outside production, took over. Where land had been communally owned in pre-colonial societies, a tenure system that allowed for absolute and individual ownership in land took over. At the same time politics and power were formalised and institutionalised with male public actors. The Western capitalist, political ideology (i.e., liberal democratic theory) that was imposed on the African people focused on the individual, submerging the African tradition that valued the collective.

(b) Prostitution

Last year, the Minister of Health of the Buganda Kingdom announced that he was going to bid for a law that rewards all Baganda brides who are virgins.⁹ This was an attempt to curb prostitution and underage sex among Baganda women. Virginitly and women's chastity provide ready patriarchal tools for male control of women's bodies.

Under Ugandan law, prostitution is illegal and is penalized by the criminal law. Although the law was

amended in 1990 to define a prostitute in gender-neutral terms, womanhood continues to be firmly engrained on the body of a Ugandan prostitute today. The focus of the legislation against prostitution focuses on the "immorality" of women who engage in promiscuous sex. Prostitution endorses polyandry or women taking on multiple sexual partners, something that runs against patriarchal and bourgeois morality. Moreover, it conflicts with the role of domesticity and "mothering" that society has constructed for women. And because it is counter to 'normative' femininity, it represents a threat to patriarchy.

Like rape, prostitution is listed under "Offences Against Morality" in our Penal Code. The important element of prostitution is the indiscriminate character of the intercourse (read, women having greater control of their sexuality). This regime is based on the belief that effective law enforcement and repression can and should reduce prostitution. The fact that the law equates female sexual promiscuity with prostitution is evidence that it is attempting to control female sexuality and maintain male control over women's bodies. Further proof of this is the fact that the Penal Code limits culpability of this offence to the sellers of sex (the majority of whom are women) and not to the clients (mostly men).

The fact is that prostitution is not about sex, neither is it about morality, but a purely economic issue for women. Commercial sex is work and is about economic survival (and therefore emancipatory) for the women who engage in the profession. In Senegal, a country whose population is over 90 percent Muslim, prostitution has been recognized as work since 1966! In that country, a sex worker may ply her trade as long as she is registered, has regular medical check-ups and is discreet in her trade activities. Prostitutes are also required to pay taxes like any other worker, thus boosting the country's economy. Today, Senegal is one of the countries on the continent with the lowest rates of HIV/AIDS infection, thus exploding the common myth that prostitution fuels the spread of the disease.

(c) Abortion

Abortion is prohibited in Uganda (as is the case in over 40 African countries) with the only exception being to save the life of the pregnant woman.¹⁰ Criminalization of abortion signifies the forceful and violent control of women's bodies by the patriarchal state. It represents a deliberate attempt by the state to force women into motherhood without any promise of help with the child. The fact that it is illegal has never stopped women with unwanted pregnancies from seeking abortions as they consciously take the decision to control their bodies and fertility. Unsafe illegal abortions account for millions of maternal deaths in Africa. Criminalizing the practice is nothing less than institutionalized violence against women.

Imposing forced motherhood on women, coercing them into bearing and rearing children, fits perfectly with the gender roles that society has constructed for women (i.e., childcare and homecare). It leaves little time and room for women to pursue goals outside the confines of domesticity. Thus, the status quo of "private/domestic" women and the "public/political" men is safely entrenched in our society.

⁹ See The Monitor, October 14, 2003 at p. 4 where it was reported that Mr. Nelson Kawalya, announced that the Buganda government is in the process of publishing a book on "Virgin Brides."

¹⁰ Such a restrictive legal regime governing abortion pertains in over 40 African countries. Only three countries on the continent, viz., Tunisia, Cape Verde and South Africa, allow for unrestricted abortions.

(d) Homosexuality

The assumptions underlying gender relations in patriarchal societies foreground heteronormativity (i.e., heterosexuality being the norm). The prefix "hetero" (derived from the Greek term meaning 'different' or 'other') means that human sexual relations are 'normatively' expected to take place between members of the opposite sex. Precisely, it assumes a "natural" hierarchy in sexual relations between a dominant male partner and a subordinate female mate (see Butler, 1990). These assumptions are communicated to us through various mediums including religion, culture, education, the law and the media. Women (and men) who resist heterosexuality and subvert dominant culture are subjected to strict punitive laws and discriminatory social discourses.

Compulsory heterosexuality in Africa is legitimised and secured by penal laws that prescribe very strict sanctions against same-sex erotics (usually referred to as "sex against the order of nature"). Homosexuality is criminalized in the majority of African countries through legislation or religious laws such as Sharia. In some countries, like Uganda, the offence carries a maximum life sentence. It is only in South Africa that discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is prohibited. In a phallocratic culture what is considered to be "natural" is penal vaginal intercourse between a male and a female. By portraying homosexuality as "unnatural", the law maintains the hierarchical sexual conditions of a controlling male and a subordinate female.

A persistent argument against homosexuality (from politicians, religious leaders, scholars and the media) is that homosexuality is "un-African." It is further portrayed as a perversion resulting from Western sexual decadence. But the fact is that there is a long history of diverse African peoples engaging in same-sex relations. Anthropological and historical studies point to the presence of homosexuality in a variety of forms in pre-colonial times in at least fifty-five African cultures (Murray and Roscoe, 1998; Amory, 1997). In Uganda, for example, among the Langi of northern Uganda, the mudoko dako "males" were treated as women and they could marry men.¹² Homosexuality was also acknowledged among the Iteso¹³, Bahima,¹⁴ Banyoro,¹⁵ and the Baganda.¹⁶ It was an open secret in Royal Buganda that Kabaka (king) Mwanga was gay.¹⁷ Hence, trends both in the present and the past reveal that it is time for Africans to bury the tired myth that homosexuality is "unAfrican". Ironically, it is the dominant Judeo-Christian and Arabic religions that most African anti-homosexuality proponents rely on, that are foreign imports (Tamale, 2003).

The gendered dimensions of sexuality are very clear when we consider the implicit erasure of lesbian identity in African societies. Somehow, the dominant phallo-centric 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, African women's sexuality is often reduced to their conventional mothering role, and conflated with their reproductive capacities

"The long liberation struggle against apartheid forged a political self-consciousness within the gay and lesbian community in South Africa that resulted in this constitutional victory for them. However, this does not mean that gays and lesbians in South Africa enjoy their full rights similar to heterosexuals. For example, same-sex weddings are not recognised in South Africa.

¹² See Jack Driberg, *The Lango*, (London: Thorner Corydon, 1923). Similar practices were recorded among the Iteso and the Karamajong of north-eastern Uganda.

¹³ Jeremy Laurance, *The Iteso; Fifty years of change in a Nilo-Hamitic tribe of Uganda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1957) ¹⁴ Musa Mushanga, "The Nkole of south-western Uganda," in Angela Molnos (Ed.), *Cultural Source Materials for Population Planning in East Africa: Beliefs and Practices* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973). ¹⁵ Rodney Needham, "Right and Left in Nyoro Symbolic Classification," in *Right and Left: Essays on Dual Classification*, 299-341 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). ¹⁶ Martin Southwold, "The Baganda of Central Uganda," in Angela Molnos (Ed.), *Cultural Source Materials for Population Planning in East Africa: Beliefs and Practices* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973). ¹⁷ John Faupel, *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs*, (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1962). (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 cannot be defined without reference to reproduction. The main factor in the patriarchal equation is missing, that is, power along sex lines, and the preservation of the gender hierarchy.

The mainstream aversion to same-sex relations consequently reflects a larger fear. Homosexuality threatens to undermine male power bases in the African "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 (Tamale, 2003).

Customary Laws

(a) Patrilineality & Patrilocality

The combined traditions of patrilineality¹⁸ and patrilocality¹⁹ in all African communities collectively entrench patriarchy, mediated through the female body. Historical and anthropological studies on African cultures have confirmed Frederick Engel's theory by revealing that many of the present-day patrilineal African societies were once matrilineal (see e.g., Jjuuko, 1993).²⁰ It was through some historical interventions such as, private property, the state and religion, that successive generations reshaped descent practices to meet the needs of patriarchy. With the gradual shift from female line of descent to patrilineality came tighter control of women's sexuality to ensure purity and certainty of paternity.

When matrilineality was overthrown, it was not replaced with bilateral descent but by patrilineality (Engels, 1972). Historical evidence suggests, for instance, that the monarchical Baganda in Uganda used to be a matrilineal society. In fact vestiges of matrilineality can still be found in the fact that the Kabaka (king) belongs to his mother's clan. Indeed, tracing descent through women surely makes a lot of logical sense given their role in reproduction. In fact, patrilineality and patrilocality are essential for patriarchal rule. Suppressing and erasing women's lineage as well as insisting that post-marital residence be with the man's family, both work to assure male dominance. Although women in matrilineal African societies enjoy some relative degree of autonomy, no matriarchal society exists on the continent. Matrilineality exists within an entrenched patriarchal context. This means that for all practical purposes, women are subordinated to men even in matrilineal societies; the only difference being that inheritance and authority passes through women to the male of the line.

(b) The Institution of Bridewealth²¹

The term that Western outsiders attached to the African customary rituals preceding a wedding ceremony is pregnant with tell tale signs of their inherent and misconceived biases.

The term "wealth" had connotations of accumulation and possession, values that were not traditionally associated with this African institution. Indeed, all communities on the continent used a specific term for the marriage gift transaction distinct from that used for the payment of goods (e.g., lobola, bogadi, bohali) (see Burman 1990). A woman was free to (and often did) walk out of an abusive marriage and return to her parents and relatives.

¹⁸ Tracing one's descent exclusively through male relatives.¹⁹ The marriage institution where a married woman moves geographically and across the kinship system from her natal home to that of her husband.

²⁰ In fact, a handful of matrilineal societies still exist in some parts of Africa such as Ghana, Congo, Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Namibia. ²¹The traditional practice in which the bridegroom's family 'pays' dowry to the bride's family. Under customary law, full payment of bride wealth is an essential requirement to the legal recognition of customary marriages.

Within these family/clan arrangements men and women jointly made decisions that governed the norms and ethos wife as "the property of their husbands," on the one hand, and the husband, as "the head of the family" on the other, leaves a lot of latitude for women's oppression within the family of their cultural, political, and juridical lives. Driberg (1932: 413) epitomized the pre-colonial idea behind bride wealth thus: It is one side of a legal contract, providing for the filiations of the children and their lawful inheritance: it supplies a religious and ritual sanction, invoking the benevolent regard and interest of the ancestors, from whom the cattle were inherited: it stands as a security for the good treatment of the wife in the new home and serves as a social and political link between the clans of the contracting parties. (Driberg 1932: 413)

The infamous 1917 East African case of R. V. Amkeyo successfully illuminates the misreading of the values behind bride wealth that was typical during the colonial era. In this case, a British colonial judge referred to bride wealth as "wife-purchasing" in total ignorance of its cultural value. He stated: Women so obtained by a native man commonly spoken of, for want of a more precise term, as 'wives' and as 'married women,' but having regard to the vital difference in the relationship of the parties to a union by native custom from that of the parties to a legal marriage, I do not think it can be said that the native custom approximates in any way the legal idea of marriage."²²

Indeed, in many African countries, colonial law attempted to abolish and later standardize bride wealth

which led to conceptualizing it as a purchase deal, in the process denigrating the institution with the concomitant denigration of women's status. Such degrading commodification of African women's bodies was a far cry from the reality behind the institution of bride wealth. Traditional marriage was not a commercial transaction and the parties involved were largely free partners within the context of societies that emphasized communitarian ideals in contrast to individual autonomy.

Sadly, this reconceptualisation of bride wealth persisted. Over the years, African male patriarchs have themselves embraced it to consolidate their power and control over their wives. As a result, *lobola* has been commercialised and women's bodies commodified with no trace of the traditional values that were associated with it. Whatever values originally existed in the African institution of bride wealth, there is no doubt that today it has evolved into a kind of stamp imprinted on women's bodies to indicate that she is the property of her husband. In a 1995 nationwide study conducted by a Ugandan NGO on "Gender and Inheritance," the link between patrilineality, patrilocality and dowry-payment to women's oppression and disinheritance was brought into bold relief. Study findings showed that infused within inheritance practices was the common notion that wives were part of the inheritable estate. Bride wealth, which today, is construed, as 'payment' by the groom's family to the bride's family was largely responsible for shaping such mentality. The remark of one male respondent in Kumi district was very telling indeed. When asked for his views about women's right to inheritance, his brief retort was: "How can property own property?"²³

Dowry payment has also legitimated domestic violence in our society. The ever-increasing dowry demands have progressively led to the commercialisation of the institution of bride wealth, which in turn has amplified the commodification of women's bodies.

²² See Chief Justice Hamilton's judgment in the case of *R V. Amkeyo* (1917) E.A.P.L.R. 14

²³ *Women and the Law in East Africa (WLEA)*, Report on the study of Inheritance Laws and Practices in Uganda, (Kampala; WLEA, 1996).

(c) Traditional Sexual Initiation Rites: The Case of Ssenga among the Baganda

The phenomenon of Ssenga among the Baganda is one of the most powerful cultural inscribers of women's bodies. It is the role of a paternal aunt (Ssenga) to provide sex education to young Baganda girls. Traditionally, such education was comprehensive, with a wide range of topics, from the fundamentals of male/female anatomy, to sexual etiquette, to tips and tricks of bringing pleasure to oneself and one's partner.

Tutelage begun at puberty just before a girl starts menstruating, when she would "visit the bush" under the tutelage of her Ssenga,²⁴ Visiting the bush involves a procedure of stretching or elongating the labia minor of a woman. Traditionally, among the Baganda, the meaning attached to this cultural practice was a tightly kept secret that was associated with female enhanced arousal in foreplay. The purported and commonly touted meaning of the elongated labia was that they enhanced erotic pleasure of a man who came in sexual contact with them. Of course this practice was viewed through a completely different light by the imperialists who came across it. They perceived it as a barbaric mutilation of the female genitals and, today it has been condemned and classified as "Type IV FGM"!

With the consolidation of patriarchy and entrenchment of a masculinist sexual hegemony in Buganda, the sexual curricula became slanted with the primary emphasis shifting to the teaching of young brides how to bring maximum pleasure to their husbands during sexual intercourse. Significantly, no similar coaching exists for young grooms. Under the recent liberalization of the Ugandan economy, the institution of Ssenga has become commercialised whereby young women can 'hire' the services of an advertised Ssenga. However, today, this cultural institution has generally been reduced to teaching women how to colonize their bodies to their male partners.

IV. Women's Sexuality as a Target of Violence

The sexualised, gendered and domesticated bodies of African women serve as a prime terrain for playing out power and politics. This is achieved through sexual aggression and violence. Such violence is manifested in various ways ranging from rape, to trafficking, to 'nationalist' causes as happened in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. One of the cases that has come to symbolize the barbarism and misogyny associated with sexual

violence in contemporary times is that of Amina Lawal, the 31 year-old woman from Nigeria that was charged with adultery and sentenced to "death by stoning" by a Sharia court in her home state of Katsina.

(a) Rape

The law of rape in Uganda, which is gender-specific, is not only constructed to protect women's chastity, but also men's 'property' in women's sexuality. The fact that the crime of rape is listed under "Offences Against Morality" is indeed telling. By constructing rape within the discourse of morality, the Penal Code places emphasis on a subjective ethical notion while pushing the violent aspects of the crime to the margins.

The insignificance of the assault aspects of the crime of rape can further be seen in the basic legal ingredients that make up the offence: penile-vaginal penetration and lack of consent. The phallocratic culture in which the crime is constructed fails to imagine sexual assaults beyond the narrow confines of the penile-vaginal penetration. To limit the "acts" that constitute rape to (non-consensual) penile-vaginal penetration is to ignore a range of sexual assaults that may even be more traumatic than penile-vaginal penetration (e.g. forced oral sex, anal penetration, penetration with any object, etc.).

²⁴ Today, many urban-based sengas are not fulfilling these duties and in their place has emerged some "commercial sengas" who can be hired for a fee by young women or their parents to perform the function of the traditional senga's

Moreover, the woman's consent becomes irrelevant in marital relationships. Thus, rape is "legal" between husbands and wives. In other words, marital rape is an exception in many African legal systems, including Uganda. Justification for the husbands' exemption from the crime of rape stems from an archaic English Common Law rule, which held that a wife's irrevocable consent was given at marriage.²⁵ However, the simple reality is that patriarchal law considers a wife's body as her husbands' property, which he is at liberty to use as he pleases.

(b) Sexual Harassment

Perhaps the most efficient way of maintaining gender politics in our society is through the mechanism of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is especially rampant at the workplace and in educational institutions. Through sexual harassment, men objectify women's bodies as a means of maintaining their power and control over them. Women's bodies are also assaulted as a way of silencing them and imposing compliance.

Very few African countries (e.g., Tanzania) have a national policy or law on sexual harassment. Here, we see the law, through an omission, enforcing gender norms; by not criminalizing sexual harassment, the law is maintaining that sense of entitlement for men maintaining the illusion that the "public sphere" is exclusively a male domain. By omitting to legislate against sexual harassment, the African states overtly condone the practice.

(c) Female Genital Mutilation

Perhaps the severest form of controlling and manipulating women's bodies and sexuality is through the cultural practice of female genital mutilation (FGM).²⁶ In Africa, various forms of the practice are prevalent in approximately 30 countries. Among the communities that practice FGM, the culture is associated with "women's purity" and its proponents argue that it makes women more virtuous by reducing their sexual desires (Toubia, 1995). Whatever spirited defences have been put up to justify female genital mutilation, the bottom line is that FGM coerces women to accept male authority through patriarchal control of their bodies and sexuality. The mutilation of women's genitals through FGM not only violates their bodily integrity, but also their human rights (e.g., sexual and reproductive rights).

Today, open discussion of sexual matters is taboo in most African traditions. Masturbation is also considered a taboo. Such taboos work to repress and deny women knowledge about their own sexuality. For example, not many African women are aware that they possess a sexual organ (the clitoris) that is nothing but a bundle of nerves and twice as erotic and sensitive as the male penis (Ensler, 2001). Thus, by amputating the clitoris (partially or wholly) through the FGM ritual, women are denied their right to sexual pleasure, not to mention the physical and psychological trauma that they routinely suffer. Thus, women's sexual autonomy is curtailed and their sexuality appended and subjugated to that of their husbands.

(d) The Role of Women's Bodies Nation-Building and Conflict

It is not by accident that countries are metaphorically referred to using feminine pronouns. Recent feminist theories have analyzed the way women's bodies symbolize nations because of their roles in reproduction, motherhood and domesticity (e.g., McClintock, 1995; Mire 2001; Baines, 2003). The mother's nurturing and care taking roles are supposed to lovingly draw them close to their children. The imagery of nation-as-mother (e.g., reference

²⁵ This principle was established by Lord Chief Justice Hale in 1736 when he decided that "The husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract"

the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract.

²⁶ The practice is commonly and euphemistically referred to as "female circumcision." to motherland), therefore, is meant to conjure strong feelings of nationalism and patriotism within citizens. Furthermore, as mothers and wives, women come to embody the continuity and maintenance of the family and the communities. Hence, women are denied their individuality and perceived as passive extensions of their larger communities. Through the lenses of the female sexuality constructed by patriarchy, women are viewed as chaste daughters who represent the honour, virtue and purity of the family and by extension, the clan, tribe

and nation (Hamilton,1999). If the bodies women signify the nation (albeit in a passive fashion), it is not difficult to see how clan, communal, national, regional and international conflicts come to be played out on women's bodies.²⁷ Systematic violence (often sexual) inflicted on women during conflict situations is meant to act as a weapon against the entire family, clan, tribe or nation. It symbolizes the pollution of an entire people, not just the individual female victim. Such brutal abuse, marking and violent use of women's bodies was used during colonialism (Fanon, 1963) and more recently in the myriad post colonial conflicts that have swept across the continent, e.g. Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and so forth.

V Sexuality as a Tool of Resistance & Empowerment

There is a need for more research and theorizing around the issue of African women's Sexuality. It's through a clearer understanding of our bodies and sexuality, that we can launch a concerted struggle to resist patriarchal control and regulation. In pre-colonial times, women used their sexuality to resist male and colonial domination e.g., during the famous Women's War" in Nigeria (Mba, 1982), as well as the 1958/59 women's rebellion in Cameroon known as *Anlu* (see Ardener,1975). Some recent examples of resistance through violating patriarchal sexual codes include women's social protest against big oil companies in the Nigerian oil delta; Kenya's mothers rising against the illegal political imprisonment of their sons; Kenya's 67 years old politician called Wambui Otieno who recently defied custom and married a man, 42 years her junior.

It is very important for us to openly discuss women's sexuality at this time when increased cultural, religious and political fundamentalisms are finding new ways of safeguarding male power and privileges in this country. We must remove the "mystery veil" from the face of sexuality and expose its true agenda. We need to talk about women's sexual rights outside the reproduction-violence-morality framework. A big part of the emancipation of African women shall inevitably involve freeing ourselves of the cultural taboos that prevent us from comfortably discussing our sexuality. As African women we must recognize that issues of our sexuality and eroticism have political implications; power and pleasure are definitely interlinked. Sexual freedom is therefore fundamental to our liberation.

An unexpected source of African women's resistance to sexual repression is to be found in the HIV/AIDS pandemic that has ravaged our continent. The pandemic has many ways flung open the doors shut on sexuality. In particular, it has forced into the open the patriarchal myths and secrets in relationships and identities that are often silenced or taken for granted. For women's rights activists, "the personal" had never confronted and intersected with "the political" in so explicit and bold a fashions 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.

²⁷ Of course male-dominated discourses of public life deliberately exclude women's agency in Africa politics.

For example, women's role in liberation struggles are often downplayed or ignored by historical scholars and

by the male combatants in post conflict periods (Urdang, 1992; Mire, 2001)

VI. In Conclusion

I have attempted to uncover the ways that female sexuality in Africa serves as both a site of oppression and subjection and a potentially crucial site for resistance and emancipation. As African women we must recognise that issues of our sexuality and eroticism have political implications; power and pleasure are definitely interlinked. Sexual freedom is therefore fundamental to our liberation.

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