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IS THERE A TEMPLATE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM? – A STUDY OF UGANDAN LGBT+ ORGANIZATIONS’ DIGITAL SPACES

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Introduction

Pre-colonial sources suggest that many African societies accepted a range of non-heteronormative sexualities and non-conforming gender expressions, and that Uganda was no exception (Epprecht, 2010; Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Tamale, 2007). Despite the documented existence of sexual pluralism in Uganda prior to the British invasion, independence in 1962 did not result in a de-criminalisation of homosexuality. On the contrary, a 2005 constitutional amendment which explicitly prohibited same-sex marriages was passed on the grounds that local “mores are seriously challenged by growing humanitarian counter-values” (Mujuzi 2009, p. 282). The notion that Ugandan culture, which rests on a patriarchal heterosexist social order (Tamale, 2007) were under attack, resurfaced again in the preamble of the now notorious 2009 Anti-homosexuality Bill (AHB). The AHB was framed as a tool to protect the cherished Ugandan culture from Western imperialism and halt the advances of the “sexual rights agenda”.

The AHB drew intense local and international criticism and the protracted legal battle that followed, irrevocably casted Uganda as a part of a larger trans-national battleground where US-based conservative norm entrepreneurs together with local religious and political elites, challenge the international human rights framework including development partners sexual rights agenda (Kaoma, 2014; Oliver, 2013). Northern development partners, in a desire to support the embattled Ugandan LGBT+ community, even threatened to withdraw aid (Saltnes & Thiel, 2021). Northern development partners’ have undergone major changes in the past decade queering development policy and practices,

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resulting in sexual rights becoming a prominent feature of a human rights based development agenda (Mason, 2018). LGBT+ rights, however, departs from an essentialist understanding of sexual orientation, i.e. a notion that individuals occupy an innate biologically determined and stable subject position (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998).

Aid conditionally, where support is conditioned upon the adoption of prescribed identity and sexual politics or its softer version of homo-developmentalism have been criticized for constituting neo-colonialism (Mason, 2018). Klaper (2018, p. 44) explains homo-developmentalism as the process where “development strategies are shaped and influenced by established modernization frameworks and developmental ways of thinking and are thereby contributing to the formation of a queer/ed version of developmentalism”. It unintentionally may threaten local actors’ agency to explore and navigate the nexus of local socio-historical expression with extraneous input from LGBT+ inclusive development strategies.

Against this backdrop of decades of state-sponsored homophobia, and more recent intensified attention from conservative transnational norm entrepreneurs in partnership with local partners, as well as contemporary LGBT+ inclusive actors’ norms diffusion; this study seeks to explore if and how Ugandan LGBT+ organizations working towards equal rights for individuals with non-conforming sexualities and/or expression of gender identities, take advantages of digital media’s affordances of unrestricted voice-giving. The study thus explores if LGBT+ actors seek to challenge international norm entrepreneurs’ across the spectrum attempts to influence Ugandan social mores.

Methods

To explore Ugandan LGBT+ organizations’ use of self-controlled digital spaces to engage with the multiple waves of international norm entrepreneurs’ influences; the study used a qualitative directed approach to content analysis which entails using existing research to guide the researchers’ exploration and coding of content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Prior research on trans-national and national norm entrepreneurial discursive battles over Ugandan sexual mores over the past century, including homo-developmentalism as well as post-colonial Ugandan identity and sexual politics provided key entry points into the analysis. The analysis particularly looked at the use of self-defining language, ranging from Western LGBT+ labels, to local terms such as *kuchu* for describing queer Ugandans. The term has similar to “gay” and “queer” been appropriated and constructed as a positive and empowering label (Peters, 2014).

The Ugandan LGBT+ community has grown significantly in size over the past ten years and in tandem with growing international funding flowing into the country (Global Philanthropy project reports 2013-2020). As organizational maturity was believed to be an important pre-condition to have developed an understanding and position on past waves of intimate colonialization, only organizations meeting the following criteria were included: a) having existed for more than 10 years, b) be active organizational webpages and Facebook account, i.e. updated in the last month. Six Ugandan LGBT+ organizations met the criteria. The organizations’ Facebook entries 1-31 January 2022 and website pages detailing the organizations’ history and current *raison d’être* was included in the analysis.

Results

With the few exceptions of organizations grounded in feminist traditions, the organizations used a conspicuously uniform language on both digital spaces to present themselves and their *raison d'être*. Ugandan same-sex desires and gender identities are presented by drawing upon a Western LGBT+ rights discourse, as opposed to sexual desires and gender identities as embedded and realized in a unique social context, that at least historically has include significant pluralism and multi-positionality in Uganda. Organizations did not call attention to the multiple waves of international norm entrepreneurs' influences and potential re-colonialization of Ugandan understandings.

The results appear to echo Lind ed (2010) findings that activists from the Global South and East tend strategically adopt the languages of development institutions in order to access material and immaterial support. The level of rhetorical uniformity amongst the Ugandan organizations would suggests the existence of a latent template for LGBT+ activism. Correa et al. (2008), argue that the emergence of an international human rights framework and language has provided an important platform for groups claiming rights and social justice, but that universal human rights at the same time are void of socio-historical contexts, and thus not approached as “relational, evolving and specific to historical and spatial contexts” (Correa et al. 2008, p. 162). Even if future research should approach the lack of engagement with norm entrepreneurial influences in Ugandan LGBT+ community's digital spaces with an open mind; the role of developments partners' funding priorities, appraisal frameworks, and decision making processes, as well as monitoring and evaluations frameworks in contexts where rights struggles has no or limited domestic funding sources, should be considered.

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