Article

Bequeathed Legacies: Colonialism and State-led Homophobia in Uganda.

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Abstract

British colonial involvement in Uganda, and continued western political, economic, and religious influence over the affairs of formerly colonized territories, warrants critical examination if proper context of the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill is to be understood. In response to the question, how did colonial legacy contribute to state-led gendered violence against sexual minorities in Uganda? I advance the argument that authoritarianism and surveillance are both constitutive of colonial and imperial identity and practice, and that the violent attitudes towards gendered and sexual minorities in Uganda are a colonial inheritance. Using critical historiography, I argue that gendered violence, and homophobic attitudes in Uganda cannot be divorced from the seams of Western patriarchy and masculinisms cultivated through the export of legal and religious values. By arguing that surveillance historically was and continues to be a tool for imperial authority to superimpose itself upon formerly colonized territories, I hope to contribute to scholarship in surveillance studies that underscores the utility of history to critiques of the present day divide between western nations and third world former colonial territories.

What, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law.

Aimé Césaire

Introduction

Without the proper context of history, the link between the recent wave of homophobia, external religious influence, and the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (AHB) in Uganda may not be fully appreciated. British colonial involvement in Uganda, and continued Western religious, political and economic influence over the affairs of formerly colonized territories, warrants critical examination if proper context of the Bill is to be understood. Ideologically, authoritarianism and surveillance as tools of the state, share close affinities. Underlying their interrelation is their convergence at the seams of power for which all intents and purposes, superimposes on a subordinated “other” as a mechanism of having some control over that “other.” Both are co-constitutive of each other in that one reinforces the other. In the classic Orwellian sense, authoritarianism as a state-craft is maintained through surveillant strategies to ensure that the object of the gaze remains a subject of asymmetrical power relations.

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I explore the relationship between colonial and neo-colonial superstructures controlling the moral debate that dominates the issue of sexual minorities in Uganda. In response to the question, “how did colonial legacy contribute to state-led gendered violence against sexual minorities in Uganda?” I advance the argument that authoritarianism and surveillance are both constitutive of colonial and imperial identity and practice, and that the violent attitudes towards gendered and sexual minorities in Uganda are a colonial inheritance. Using critical post-colonial historiography, I argue that gendered violence, and homophobic attitudes in Uganda cannot be divorced from the seams of Western patriarchy and masculinisms cultivated through the export of legal and religious values. Without condoning the violence, and strongly stating my opposition to it, I seek to explore the underlying inheritance of gendered authoritarianisms bequeathed to formerly colonized territories and sustained through legal-religious surveillant practices that seek to promote gender binaries produced, constructed, and maintained in a Western image. By arguing that surveillance historically was and continues to be a tool for imperial authority to superimpose itself upon formerly colonized territories, I hope to contribute to the conversations in Surveillance Studies that underscore the utility of post-colonial history to critiques of the present day divide between Western nations and former colonial territories. This article proceeds in four parts; a background to the problematic of a history of sexuality in the Buganda Kingdom prior to contact with the West, the exigence to the sudden rise of virulent state-led homophobia, the role of colonialism and mechanisms of territorial control and management, and finally an exploration of the Uganda Martyrs whose history implicates Western religion in fostering homophobia in Uganda today. I conclude by suggesting that reinvestigating colonial histories of former colonial territories can expose the continued asymmetry of the colonial gaze, and can inform postcolonial efforts to investigate modern authoritarianisms and surveillant practices both in the global north and south.

Background

The idea of a generalized perspective of Ugandan, let alone African sexualities, cannot be backed by objective evidence. Besides the obvious in essentializing Africa as a singular homogenous cultural experience, the unwritten history of all of the customary sexual practices of the tribes in Uganda would make such a task intellectually hard to support. According to Sylvia Tamale (2011), the idea of African sexualities did not have any documented attention until colonialism in its various forms was visited upon Africa. Specifically, of the Buganda Kingdom, the earliest written history (by Christian missionaries) shows that homosexuality was brought to the Buganda Kingdom by the Arabs who earlier had established trade relations with the locals prior to the arrival of the Europeans (Faupel 1984). It has been argued that part of the White Man’s burden was to civilize the region based on such savage and immoral practices (Kipling 1997). Consequently, Christianity as a ‘civilizing’ practice and British sodomy laws were inherited into Uganda’s overall body of laws, and cultural way of life.

Although the Anti-Homosexual Bill received international attention in 2014, the legislative effort that saw the introduction of the Bill to Parliament was initiated back in October 2009 as a private member’s Bill by Ugandan Parliamentarian David Bahati (Englander 2008). Situated in its international context, such legislation had failed passage in America, and radical evangelical foot soldiers through Bahati penetrated one of Uganda’s arms of government to promote their agenda. As Richard Downie (2014) notes in a report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), more than half of the countries in Africa already had some type of Sodomy laws on their books that both prohibited and criminally sanctioned homosexuality with a penalty of up to 14 years in prison (see also Müller 2014; Sadgrove et al. 2012; Hollander 2009; Schmitt 2003; Botha and Cameron 1997). All these authors have acknowledged that sodomy laws were exported into Uganda’s penal system by the British. As early as the 1920s these laws were part of the Ugandan penal code. However, as Cecilia Strand (2013) notes, what raised international eyebrows was the nature of extremism proposed by the new bill, calling for life imprisonment if convicted of the offense of homosexuality, and the introduction of the category of aggravated homosexuality for which the death penalty would be applied. The question of interest is, what prompted the introduction of a private member’s bill on the question of homosexuality which was not in any way a legislative priority?

The Exigence

Several authors have zeroed in on a three-day religious conference that immediately preceded Bahati's introduction of the bill to parliament (Sander 2010; Strand 2013; Sharlet 2010; Kaoma 2009). What all of these authors point to is that agents like pastor Rick Warren took the homophobia weaved into American cultural wars and imported it into Uganda (Sharlet 2010).

According to Waymon Hudson (2010) in a statement issued in Makerere, a suburb of Uganda's capital city Kampala, American evangelical pastor Lou Engle said: "NGOs, the U.N., Unicef, they are all coming in here and promoting an agenda. Today, America is losing its religious freedom. We are trying to restrain an agenda that is sweeping through the education system. Uganda has become ground zero." Many more writers have condemned the role of US evangelical activists in stirring up homophobia in Uganda (Ohlheiser 2013; Baptiste 2014; Blake 2014; Walker 2014). Pastor Scott Lively has been widely documented as one of the primary instigators. According to Blake (2014), Lively visited Uganda as early as 2002, setting up the groundwork of cultivating an atmosphere for the eventual introduction and passage of the Bill. In his CSIS report, Downie (2014) also singles out the role of Pastor Scott Lively and evangelical preachers in the export of American bigotry in the reports assessment of what accounted for the rise of homophobia in Uganda. Clearly, by the time the Bill was brought before parliament in 2014, the Western world was up in arms about its authoritarian nature and its total disregard for human rights. Needless to say, the Bill ended up dying in Parliament, but the lessons learned from this international saga have scholarly implications for the way we talk about surveillance in transnational terms, and what authoritarianism means. Following, I argue that Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill exemplifies the continuum of Western domination of the formerly colonized nations through a long standing tradition of colonial and neocolonial authoritarian practice monitored through, as in this case, legal and religious structures that privilege a particular version of western conservative legal and cultural orientation.

Colonialism, Authoritarianism and Cultivation of the Imperial Gaze

And I say that between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value.

Aimé Césaire (2000)

Notably in the work of Elia Zureik (2013), surveillance is grounded in colonial and imperial practice. Largely, Zureik belabors the point, (as David Edgerton (2011) makes in his book, *The Shock of the Old*) that surveillance techniques and practices were born out of old colonial and imperial strategies of conquest and management. Zureik notes that the famous metaphor of the authorial gaze, the panopticon, has its roots in British colonial oversight in India where Jeremy Bentham served as advisor to the British Empire. He notes that "Bentham's project was motivated not by moral concerns for the welfare of prisoners and their rehabilitation, but rather by a utilitarian desire to reap economic returns from the inmates' unfree labor" (2013). As Césaire (2000) states, colonial self-interest motivated colonial practice whereby brutal authoritarian techniques were used to subdue and interpellate colonial subjects. Ashcroft et al. (2003) make the point that one of the most powerful strategies of imperial dominance is that of surveillance, or observation, because it provides the viewer with an elevated vantage point; it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies and interpellates the colonized subject in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor.

The inherited legal and religious foundations that instilled the idea of western patriarchy in an admittedly already patriarchal society helped in fermenting arguably non-existent homophobic attitudes in Uganda. The existence of sodomy laws and the religious impulse that motivates hatred for sexual minorities comes

directly from colonial contact. Zureik (2013) further cites the work of Mary Louise Pratt (2007) who advances the notion of a ‘contact zone’ as a spatial consideration whereby the colonizer and the colonized, “geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” Patrick Ireland (2013) argues that colonialism more than any other factor is responsible for African state-led homophobia, and it is my contention that the homophobic attitudes that made headlines in Uganda are illustrations of the bequeathed legacy of British penal laws and Western religion (Christianity) deployed as tools to manage initial Western contact with the people of Buganda Kingdom from which the name Uganda was later derived.

Unpacking the Legacy—Uganda Martyrs; Homosexuals or Political Dissidents?

Homosexual practice in Buganda, as documented by missionaries, dates back to the period of King Mwanga’s reign and the purported relationship with his royal pages (*bagalagala*) whom he allegedly executed because of a denial of homosexual advances. These pages were later canonized as martyrs in the Roman Catholic Church. During the period of stirred up rage against homosexuals in Uganda, the history of the Uganda Martyrs was utilized both by the State, and by religious and circular society alike to justify the historical prohibitive nature of homosexual practice in Uganda. Every June 3rd, following Pope Paul VI’s canonization of 22 Buganda Kingdom royal pages, Catholics, particularly from Africa and increasingly around the world, journey to Namugongo, a site that historically housed an execution shrine for the Buganda Kingdom (Faupel 1984; Thoonen 1941; and Yves Tourigny 1979). All three Christian missionaries provided the most authoritative written accounts of the narrative of the circumstances that led to the glorification of Kabaka (King) Mwanga’s order to execute his pages. All three accounts suggest that homosexuality was introduced by the Arabs to the King’s court, and that Kabaka Mwanga was a homosexual who had sex with his pages. The authors above note that with the intervention of the Christian Missionaries’ teachings, the pages defied Mwanga’s homosexual advances, angering the Kabaka, who subsequently had them killed. In 1964 when Pope Paul VI canonized them as saints, he echoed sentiments bearing the White Man’s burden in remarks that bear quoting in detail:

The infamous crime by which these young men were put to death was so unspeakable and so expressive of the times. It shows us clearly that a new people needs a moral foundation, needs new spiritual customs firmly planted, to be handed down to posterity. Symbolically, this crime also reveals that a simple and rough way of life—enriched by many fine human qualities yet enslaved by its own weaknesses and corruption—must give way to a more civilized life wherein the higher expressions of the mind and better social conditions prevail. (Guma 2016)

The pontiff’s sentiments echo events as earlier recorded and (re)-presented by Christian missionaries in their writings that supplied the ‘civilizing’ imperative for the white man against uncivilized Africans. And as was the case with the recent penetration of the Ugandan parliament by American evangelical preachers to influence extreme legislation against homosexuality, oral accounts abound, arguing that missionaries used the guise of religion to spy on the king’s courts, making his royal pages informants. Missionaries, not welcome to the court, used these pages as human spyware to surveil the king. As such, the written record by missionaries stating that King Mwanga ordered the execution of his pages (many of whom were much older than he was) because they were instructed by Christian missionaries on the sinful nature of sodomy, needs to be held in suspicion. Taylor (2014), Blevins (2011), Guma (2016), and Lunyiigo (2011) all note that the missionary account may not be an inaccurate representation. Particularly of Guma (2016) and Lunyiigo’s (2011) accounts, the authors argue that Mwanga was installed as Kabaka at the age of 16 and only two years later, he ordered the execution of the royal pages. In their account Mwanga, unlike his father, viewed missionaries as a threat to the sovereignty of the kingdom and of his royal pages eventually as collaborators. Lunyiigo notes that at some point during the 1970s with Idi Amin as president, Mwanga was

even hailed as a patriotic hero who fought against British occupation. The authors and several unprivileged oral accounts (unsanctioned by the church in Uganda) have argued that missionaries used the pages for surveillance, relaying messages to missionaries who were front men of empire. Blevins (2011) also does not find conclusive evidence that the pages were executed as a result of denying the King's sexual advances although he leaves room for the account to be plausible.

Conclusion

In the end, to understand Uganda's state-led homophobia, one has to look beyond its immediate antecedents in the globalization of America's cultural wars, and critically examine the forced bequeathal of legal and religious infrastructure as colonial legacies manipulated to control local debates responsible for cultivating homophobic attitudes in Uganda. To appreciate how the Uganda Parliament was targeted by American evangelical preachers to manipulate cultural sentiments on homosexuality, one needed to look back in history to of how early missionaries planted human spyware to surveil the King's court, gathering information which missionaries fed to the British government about the King's plans. Like other formerly colonized bodies, Buganda's history was largely misrepresented in the West in ways that justified Western intervention and colonial subjugation. What is compelling about critical post-colonial historiography, is that it offers insights into the workings of power based on historical evidence to reclaim false narratives about the formerly colonized as well as inform resistance efforts in the West of the exploits of empire, because when empire and its imperial superstructure returns home, the gaze is on you.

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