

Queering a Postcolonial Call for Sovereignty: Case Ugandan Anti-Gay Bill

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In late 2009 the Ugandan case of legislation on homosexual acts became a news item all over the world, even in such Western mainstream media that seldom reports on African politics. The Ugandan bill is not an isolated case of anti-homosexual sentiment, similar arguments have been used by several political leaders, including Jacob Zuma, Robert Mugabe and Morgan Zwangirai. These incidents have a tendency of becoming one of those short, absurd, baffling news that quickly circulate in media in the West, but the Ugandan bill also gained serious interest among governments and human rights and LGBTI activists. For example the Swedish government threatened to cut development funding, which added a larger political and economic dimension to the local debates about culture, decency, sex and gender.

The debate that the bill spurred is partly an illustration of the demonizing, mystifying and “othering” tendency of news representations of Africa in the West, yet it also highlights existing considerable tensions and actual difficulties in human rights struggles and international feminist and gay movements’ involvement in local battles over definitions of rights, “tradition” and “culture”. This paper examines different arguments used by different parties involved in the heated debates about the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda. I will seek constructive ways of navigating in the debate with help of Drucilla Cornell’s concept imaginary domain. What are the different discursive constructs of “Africa”, “Africanness”, rights and culture that are exploited in these rhetorics? How are gender, citizenship and sovereignty defined? How to theorize a reading that would help us beyond dichotomous thinking? Advocacy statements, media documents and international campaigns will be examined. The paper will focus on the theme of sexualities, but also meanings of modernity, sovereignty, freedom and democracy.