

Infiltrating “African values”? Homosexuality, Prostitution and Mini-Skirts as Images of “the Foreign Evil” in Discourses on Gender, Kinship and Sexuality in Uganda

Recently, a Member of the Ugandan Parliament proposed a legislation bill which would impose the death penalty on certain acts of homosexuality. In Uganda, homosexuality is widely perceived as a foreign threat which needs to be controlled so that it does not “infiltrate” society. In public discourse, the attempts of human rights actors and western¹ states to pressure Uganda into taking a more liberal stance on homosexuality are often interpreted as forms of “neocolonialism”².

In this paper, I will analyze how western influences – via media, humanitarian/ development organizations, expatriates etc. - are generally perceived by Ugandans, and whether the concept of neocolonialism is adequate to describe these perceptions. Hereby, I seize the suggestion of the panel organizers to “disentangle neocolonial thinking” and focus specifically on discourses on gender, kinship and sexuality. My findings are based on eleven months of fieldwork in Gulu, Northern Uganda, where I have conducted research on perceptions of cultural change and generational conflicts among the Acholi people³. Claims that gender roles/norms, dating/marriage customs and sexual practices have been westernized often come up in discussions of cultural change. Many of my informants alleged that the younger generation of Ugandans has lost their culture and is now engaging in a lifestyle which is copied from the West. While this debate is related to a great variety of issues, sexuality, gender and kinship are particularly sensitive and contested. Change in these matters seems to evoke a (latent or manifest) fear; namely, that the increasing adoption of western concepts poses three fundamental threats to Ugandan society: a threat to family and kinship systems, a threat to the integrity of the society, and a threat to established gender orders. Westernization, however, is by no means viewed only negatively. In many ways it is seen as a form of modernization, which is highly desired. In order to become “modern”, western concepts are actively adopted and appropriated by local actors (especially the youth).

Throughout this paper, I concentrate on the *discursive level*. I scrutinize *representations* and *perceptions* of social change (especially in the field of gender relations and sexuality) and discuss the positive and negative implications Ugandans *attribute* to externally induced changes by analyzing quotations from interviews and conversation as well as statements in the

¹ Throughout this paper, I use terms like “western”, “the West”, and “westernization” in the way they are commonly applied in Uganda. “The West” usually refers to (Northern) America and (Western/ Central) Europe. It is often perceived as a homogenous and unitary force. Few distinctions are made between western actors and their policies. More important than the spatial references are the ideological implications of the terms. “Western” is often (but not always!) used analogous to modern, progressive and even prosperous, and as antonym to “traditional”. “Westernization” is a very common (and very unspecific) term to describe changes which are seen as being inspired by the desire to imitate or become like the society in the West. It can have both, negative and positive, implications.

² In this sense, neocolonialism is an emic category used to describe undesirable foreign influences in Uganda. As an analytical concept, “neocolonialism” was originally applied by African politicians and scholars in the immediate post-independence phase (e.g. Nkrumah, 1974) and in Marxist approaches to explain global inequalities (e.g. Amin, 1973). Nowadays, references to “neocolonialism” are also found in writings related to the post-colonial framework (cf. Ashcroft et.al, 1995).

³ My empirical examples are drawn from research I conducted in the Acholi sub-region (mainly Gulu Municipality) where one can currently witness a strong discourse on loss of “traditional culture” and foreign-induced social change. This is related to the 20 year insurgency (especially the forced displacement of the majority of the population to refugee camps) and the subsequent humanitarian intervention by international aid agencies (cf. Dolan, 2009). Although my findings are most pertinent to the Acholi sub-region, most of the discourses on gender, sexuality and social change, which are presented in this article, are representative for discourses in the Ugandan society as a whole.

media. I do not discuss to what extent these perceptions of social changes brought about by foreign influences are in fact “real”. Neither do I “deconstruct” highly problematic terms such as modernity, tradition, local and global. These are common emic categories applied by Ugandans in discussions of cultural change. I am aware that several “academic battles” have been fought about each of these terms which I, however, cannot recapitulate within the scope of this paper. Unless stated otherwise, these terms are thus to be understood in the “emic sense”.

Ambiguous Discourses on Westernization and Modernity in the Ugandan Context

Over the past decades, Uganda has experienced massive changes – in the political, economic, cultural and social sphere. Ever since President Museveni came to power in 1986, these changes have been accompanied (if not heavily influenced) by western state and development actors. Uganda is commonly known as “donor’s darling” due to the government’s willingness to succumb to foreign policy interventions (“aid conditionality”) in order to receive international development aid (Ndikumana/ Nannyonjo, 2007). Development partners finance a large percentage (at least 25 percent) of the Ugandan national budget (Tabaire/ Okao, 2010: 6). In order to obtain international funds and to be accepted as a “good state” on an international level, Uganda has also been very eager to take on the global rights discourse, especially regarding women’s and children’s rights (cf. Cheney, 2007).

Rapid processes of social change have created feelings of uncertainty among the population⁴. There are frequent discussions whether the rate of change is too fast, and whether it is actually for the better or the worse (especially since it is only a small minority which seems to profit). Elderly people, in particular, fear that their “traditional culture” is getting lost in the “modernization process”, and that the young generation is confused and destabilized by the lures of “western modernity”⁵.

However, not all values and products which are perceived as western/ foreign, are also perceived as negative; on the contrary, some are very much desired. Neither can the debates about positive and negative impacts of (externally induced) change be framed purely in generational terms. Social change is a very complex phenomenon and positions regarding its desirability and extent depend on a number of factors: age, gender, educational background, economic status, setting (urban or rural) as well as changing circumstances and even situations⁶.

On the one hand, Ugandans feel a desire and/ or a need for change – they believe that the adoption of foreign values and concepts can help Uganda to become modern and progressive. Especially the younger generation feels unsatisfied with their current situation. Despite some progress over the past years, the majority of the population is still suffering from poverty, high unemployment rates and limited access to quality education. The daily realities contrast starkly with images of a “modern life” presented in the media – of wealth, prosperity, consumer culture and individual freedoms. Many people, especially the younger ones, still believe in the promises of “modernization theory”, namely that one day they will reach the same level of development as the countries in the West (cf. Ferguson, 2005). However, in order to overcome “backwardness” and the narrow confines of “traditional society” – two expressions commonly referred to – they feel that they *need* to follow the western model. The following quotation represents a typical statement:

⁴ See, for instance, advice/ counseling sections on issues such as relationships, health, lifestyle etc. in the Ugandan daily newspapers Daily Monitor and New Vision.

⁵ This discourse was particularly strong in Northern Uganda due to its historical marginalization in the Ugandan development process (Shaw/ Mbabazi, 2008). My Acholi informants often emphasized that in Buganda (one of the more developed regions of Uganda with a very powerful monarchy and a strong cultural identity) modernization and economic development was possible without a loss/ rejection of “traditional culture” – something they felt was not possible for Acholi youth.

⁶ In this paper, however, I cannot analyze these factors in more detail.

“If I can compare the now and the then generation, I can see there is some change we are getting, when I (compare it) to old stone age there... At least you can see some modern roads here, some machinery, you know those kind of things. In those days you couldn’t see these things, they were backward, they didn’t even know what education is. (...) In some few generations to come we are at the same level with those white people. (...) What I can say in Africa, more especially in cities, towns and centers, the Westerners, they are taking over, they are bringing their culture. (...) The culture of Africa (...) - it is going to get lost. (...) Nowadays they say the world is just growing, and for you you are still backward. Nobody wants to be called local, so people move away from their culture. And even when you know how to do something in this culture, you don’t do it, you just run away to the western life, so that is it...” (male, 26)

The quotation reveals the ambiguity of change, i.e. the feeling of being forced to give up one’s own culture in order to be able to participate in “modernity”. What is interesting, however, is that the informant does not really blame the West for enforcing its concepts. Rather, he describes the decision to move away from the local culture as a conscious choice and therefore – implicitly – also as an expression of agency. Whereas the above quotation connects westernization to economic development and prosperity, the following one points to another set of benefits commonly linked to westernization; namely, independence, individual freedom and civic rights, and therefore the possibility of overcoming patriarchal and gerontocratic structures:

“There are three categories: first, the children of the rich, those ones, they are so westernized and that is so fine - for me I don’t see a problem there. Then, the middle ones, the ghetto dwellers, those who live in the ghetto [urban neighborhoods, slums]: those ones have both the local culture and the western culture, and yeah – they are transforming and that is good. Then there is the other – the ones in the remote areas, the young people who are in the village. For them, they still have the culture thing in them, you can see them, the ladies are getting circumcised and they are not complaining; there are so many things happening to them, they are getting married young and they are not complaining. It is because their mind is still narrow, their thinking is still narrow, they are still focused on that thing... like ‘I want to be like my grandfather, he had 12 wives...’” (male, 20).

Here, the informant seems to wholly embrace westernization among Ugandan youth. For him, tradition and “culture” are strongly related to the idea of being controlled, restricted and not being able to make independent decisions. He refers to young girls in the villages who are being circumcised or married off at a young age, probably against their will. He also refers to ideas which for him seem outdated, e.g. that a man has twelve wives which was common in the past.

However, despite the hopes of economic development and a liberalization of society the Ugandan youth, in particular, connects with the idea of western modernization, there are also doubts and fears of the potentially destructive effects of westernization. In many ways, the high pressure to change (which many people feel is a pressure to change according to western ideals) also causes confusion and uncertainty among all members of society, and not everyone is ready to accept changes according to a western model. People who are skeptical of some peoples’ desperate attempts to copy western modernity, often point to the destructive elements which they see as inherent in the western culture: moral degeneration, individualization, materialism and a break-down of social ties. While the majority of Ugandans would probably agree that the western model is highly desirable *in economic terms* (a common view is that people in the West are rich and live “easy lives” without the daily struggles for survival due to their technical and economic advancement), people are in fact very critical of adopting the western model *in social terms*. Many Ugandans I talked to and interacted with in Gulu seemed to believe that western society is too materialistic, individualistic and “immoral” (which in some ways was inspired by the behavior of some of the expats and foreign students in Gulu). Elderly people, especially, often expressed a feeling of despair at the social changes which – according to them - were happening as a consequence of modernization and the adoption of western culture. They were more skeptical of the promises of modernization (which had remained largely unfulfilled for their generation, cf. Ferguson, 2005), and

therefore saw the only solution to contemporary problems in going back to their (often idealized) “traditional culture”. This is also an expression of generational conflicts and a fear by elders to lose the control they originally had in their society, as the following quotes show:

“Youths today are very lazy, idle and disorderly. They are confused, they don’t know what to do, they don’t know what is the right way anymore, they are so full of confusion. Maybe that is also because they don’t know how to combine human rights with their culture. Today, many children don’t listen to parents anymore; when they are given some advice, they say ‘I have my own rights, leave me alone’. That is making youths to be so unstable today because they don’t have proper guidance” (male elder).

“Respect is the biggest problem. The young people today are following the western culture, whereby boys are wearing earrings and pulling their pants down. When the elders talk to them, they say ‘ah, for you, you are local” (male elder).

But also young people shared the idealized view of the past and were desperate for more structure and elderly guidance in their lives:

“This generation, I can see many young people floating..., they are not going to school... [even] when they find good things they just turn their life to the worst, they don’t see that they should reach some point... Mostly they turn out drinking, even you find some who come from a very good family, you find them floating on the street drinking. (...) For theirs [parent’s and grandparent’s generation] it was good, it was better, in those times. Our parents always listened a lot to our grandparents, and when they [the grandparents] are teaching a lesson you find them sitting together...” (male, 24).

Interestingly, while both groups - those who embrace western modernity and those who reject it - feel somewhat determined by the current processes of modernization and experience confusion as a result of rapid social change, few actually *blame* the West for *exporting* their concepts. Rather, Ugandans themselves are blamed for trying too hard to imitate the western lifestyle and values, which are not considered bad as such, but rather as not (yet) suitable for the Ugandan context. When discussing the impact of humanitarian NGOs in Gulu, for example, people often emphasized that the NGOs brought new concepts (like human rights) which in principle were very good. But then they went on to say, that because Ugandan people did not know how to use them properly, these new concepts were causing more harm than good, which is also expressed in the above quotation (“Maybe that is also because they don’t know how to combine human rights with their culture”). Westernization in this regard, does therefore not necessarily mean a process which is initiated from the outside (as the term would suggest) but rather something which is actively enacted by Ugandans. This is also evident in the following quote:

“There are some people that are too modern, they are too westernized. You know, we here just try to imitate the western culture, but we could [can] not really do it (...). We call it half-baked: sometimes you pretend to be western, but it will not fit you well.” (male youth).

Hence, Ugandans did not generally blame their former colonialists and other western states for the current processes of change (as the concept of neocolonialism would suggest) but rather thought that many foreign models did not fit their society and that therefore Ugandans should not try so hard to imitate something which was not their culture. Naturally, they were also critical of the West and its past and current role in Africa, but this feeling was not as all-encompassing as the concept of neocolonialism would suggest. I will come back to this point in the last chapter. In the following, I will first discuss some of the general points outlined above with regard to Ugandan discourses on gender, kinship and sexuality.

Discourses about Gender, Kinship and Sexuality in Uganda – Western models as fundamental threats?

The complex and blurred ways in which foreign concepts and models are reflected among Ugandans are particularly relevant and visible in the field of gender relations, kinship and sexuality. When discussing this issue with my informants in Gulu, they often claimed that gender roles and norms, dating/ marriage customs and sexual practices had been westernized. They related this to a variety of causes, most prominently media influences, the promotion of women rights, and, in Northern Uganda, also to the insurgency (cf. Dolan, 2002). Again, as discussed above, it was evident that these changes were seen as having both positive and negative implications.

The positive aspects mentioned usually included more equality between the sexes and more chances for women (e.g. regarding access to education/ jobs and therefore greater economic and financial independence); the decline of “harmful cultural practices” (such as wife inheritance, which was most commonly mentioned, but also the reduction of polygamy, early or forced marriages etc.); a more liberal understanding of gender roles; and more personal freedoms in relationships (e.g. to choose a partner, to have more sexual liberties, to pursue the ideal of “romantic love”). The positive aspects of changing *gender roles* are mentioned in the following quote:

“Culturally it [gender differences regarding jobs] used to exist, but we are trying to change that. For example in the fabrication section with all those difficult technical aspects, (...) traditionally those jobs were for men. But now, when they come [for career guidance], a lady might choose to go for tailoring. Then we counsel them, we say: ‘How many tailors do we need in Uganda? What will be the benefit? You are like a man, you are an ordinary human being, you can do what a man does’. So after talking to them, we saw a lot of the women diverting to other sections like building, welding and fabrication. At the moment there are about three welding workshops being run by ladies.” – Question: “*and is there opposition by the community?*” – “No, they have not been opposing that. They used to think that it is not good, but poverty is streamlining people. When you don’t allow a girl to do that, you deny a lot of opportunity. A situation might come that you don’t have a boy, you may have only ladies, so if you don’t allow them to do those jobs you will remain in a desperate situation. (...) That’s why there are ladies going for driving, going for engineering... So equality and the gender thing is already being practiced to the maximum. (...) I believe they [the community] have understood the value of gender equality” (male youth).

In this quote, we find that gender equality is connected to the idea of economic development and the idea of being somehow progressive. Again, the idea of modernity is linked to fulfilling ideals which have been promoted by the West, but – as in the examples above – the West is not explicitly blamed for enforcing its concepts. Rather, “economic arguments”, i.e. gender equality is good for economic progress (which in actual fact is also an argument promoted by the World Bank, cf. Ellis et al., 2006), seem to have convinced the Ugandan population of the need to change according to western principles. The informant states that “poverty is streamlining people”, implying that changes in gender roles have become a necessity, but were originally not desired (“they used to think that it is not good”). This implies a skepticism towards changes in gender norms and relations which is very common.

Generally, more often than being completely accepted and supported, developments related to women’s emancipation and changes in gender roles are viewed quite ambiguously. The following is an extract of an interview with a woman who was working in a project aimed at reducing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the Acholi sub-region. The project was supported by the Acholi cultural institution “Ker Kwaro Acholi” and specifically focused on the idea “to modify or update some of the cultural practices that do not promote women’s human rights in Acholi land” (Ker Kwaro Acholi, 2010: 2). In the interview, she explains the ambiguous effects of changing gender relations in Northern Uganda, which she attributes to “the conflict and western culture”:

“In this generation now, there is gender equality, women can make their own decisions, things have generally changed. Formerly, there were “cultural-based-practices” which were discriminating against girls and which are slowly changing today. But not all cultural-based-practices were bad; some were also good which have been destroyed.” (...) – *Question*: “*And are there more divorces today?*” – “There are a lot more divorces. This is also linked to women’s empowerment. Some women are abusing emancipation and do not respect their husbands anymore.” – *Question*: “*So in terms of gender issues, do you think there are some good and some bad things being imported from the West?*” – “There are definitely both – good and bad things. On the positive side: women’s empowerment, valuing of women, equal rights for the girl child, and education. On the negative side: violence – in the movies, also the vulgar language which is taken up by some people (and it is worse if it is taken up by women); defilement; and also emancipation because it has gone out of proportion and has led to a loss of respect, especially in marriages, and thus also causes violence. The changes have come too fast and people couldn’t adapt properly.”

The sentiments expressed in this quotation are very typical: changes in gender norms are not necessarily negative, but have “come too fast” and have “gone out of proportion”. In general, the most common negative aspects of importing concepts such as gender equality and women’s rights mentioned during my research were increased conflicts (and violence) between men and women, a rise of immoral/ inappropriate behavior and a decline of social courtesy, and resultant from both, instability in the communities and the society as a whole.

Gender, kinship and sexuality matters are extremely sensitive because they are crucial for social reproduction and, in the long run, societal survival. Therefore, discussions about changing established practices and norms (for whatever reasons) are often extremely emotional and sometimes unreasonable measures are taken to protect the status quo (as in the Ugandan homosexuality case). According to my findings, most of the concerns voiced about changes in gender, kinship and sexuality matters, can actually be related to three fundamental threats which are – implicitly or explicitly – feared: a threat to the family and kinship system, a threat to the integrity of the society, and a threat to established gender orders. All three “threats” are closely interlinked and by no means specific to the Ugandan case but have also been perceived by other societies in transition to modernity (cf. Giddens, 1991). In discussions about these threatening aspects of westernization and modernity, my interlocutors often contrasted Acholi/ Ugandan/ African⁷ values with a western social system that does not fit their society, as I will show in the following.

The threat to the family and kinship model prevalent in most African societies: When discussing African family and kinship models, my informants usually emphasized 1) that these are fundamentally different to western family and kinship models, and 2) that they are rapidly changing. According to this narrative (which largely coincides with the academic literature, cf. Baerends, 1998), marriages formerly served to create bonds between different clans or lineages (and were not primarily seen as a relationship between two individuals); nuclear families were incorporated, supported and controlled by a huge network of relatives. Extended families usually co-resided and/ or collaborated to guarantee subsistence. Relationships between proximate generations were reciprocal, i.e. children took care of their parents in old age. Descent was clearly regulated by patrilineality⁸. In contrast, “modern” families no longer fit into this system of social relations and my informants often gave examples to illustrate this and the ways it was influenced by the West: Young people in Uganda today find their marriage/ sexual partners without consulting their parents and kin. Young families (especially the wealthier and more educated) move away from the villages and try to distance themselves from the large kinship network and the obligations that come attached to it. Divorces, which were formerly very rare or not possible at all, are increasing while marriages are decreasing. Early, extra-marital and/ or multiple relationships are

⁷ Interestingly, in these debates similarities between Africans were often emphasized and related to an “African” identity in addition to ethnic and national identities.

⁸ Matrilineality is not practiced among any tribe in Uganda.

becoming more common, thus intensifying the risk of contracting HIV/ AIDS, or the need for abortions. There were further, more implicit, aspects which hinted at: for instance that children who are born out of wedlock (where - as in some cases - the father is not known), pose a threat to social reproduction along patrilineal lines; or that homosexuality, the biggest fear of all, is not only “immoral” but actually threatens – in a very fundamental way – social reproduction. Many of these concerns are taken up in recent literature on generational change in Africa (cf. Whyte et al., 2008).

While these changes (both real and imagined) are extremely complex and related to a variety of processes (urbanization, poverty, the AIDS pandemic, and modernity in general), they are often reflected in the context of modernization and especially westernization – in a very negative sense. My informants often contrasted “traditional” African society which they saw as based on solidarity and mutual support, with western societies which – according to them - are characterized by materialism, individualization and “moral degeneration”. Many complained that these values were now also being introduced in Africa through the younger generation. Frequent arguments were that due to *materialism* and desire for consumer goods, transactional sex (cf. Mills/ Ssewakiryanga, 2004; Cole, 2004; Hunter, 2002) was on the increase or that the brideprice had changed from being a sign of appreciation to a source of income. Due to *individualization*, people were no longer committed to their marriages and families, and just left to do their own things as soon as problems came up. All in all, many people feared that a moral degeneration of society was taking place which I will discuss in the next section.

The threat to the integrity of the society with its established norms and codes of conduct:

The majority of my informants believed that moral correctness and integrity were particular “cultural strengths” of African societies. Despite all its progress (which is generally admired), they seemed to infer that the West is paying a price for its economic success, namely “moral degeneration”. A typical image of such moral degeneration is the “mini-skirt”, as reflected in this quotation⁹:

“You see someone putting on a miniskirt in the village there and so disgrace our culture. Honestly, we have lost our conduct, our cultural behavior has really been lost. (...) When we leave this town and go to the village there, we shall really be so much discriminated, because we differ so much from those people in the village. They will say these people now, they have attained some kind of, they will begin comparing us to people who come from outside,(...) because of the way we conduct ourselves”(male youth).

During my research, I often discussed norms and codes of conduct with my informants, which are regulating social relations – both in the public and the private sphere. My informants alternatively referred to these norms as typically Acholi, Ugandan or African, and often contrasted them to what they thought were western norms and codes of conduct. Generally, respect (particularly of age and gender based hierarchies) was seen as the single most important principle regulating every aspect of social life. Other important rules concern proper conduct in public life, for example decent dressing, or no showing of (sexual) affections. Many informants perceived the recent changes in gender and sexuality matters, which they largely attribute to western movies and popular culture, as threats to these principles. Older and to a lesser extent younger men and women complained about “indecent” and “moral decay” which they witnessed in their everyday life. They often mentioned the following typical examples as “indications” of this degeneration: children and

⁹ The quote is from a public debate at Gulu University where students from the debate club as well as speakers from the audience discussed the motion “This House resolves that Culture is being lost among the Youth”. Although the positions taken by the teams in the debate and the statements given by the speakers do not necessarily correspond to their personal opinions on the matter discussed and are often exaggerated, the statements nevertheless reflect popular discourses and common opinions.

youth have lost respect of their elders – they are rude, do not listen to advice anymore, do not help their parents and grandparents at home, and are too much money-minded; women have lost respect of their husbands (and male relatives) – they refuse to fulfill their roles in the household, quarrel all the time, do not obey their husbands, and are too much money-minded; women no longer know how to dress decently - they are now wearing pants and even short skirts (“mini-skirts”); boys are wearing their pants low (“baggy style”) and are trying to look like American “gangsta rappers”; young couples kiss in public etc.. The list goes on and on. Although the descriptions of such “misbehavior” are often exaggerated, they nevertheless reveal that what is at stake is more than just a generational conflict about “style” – especially the older people fear that “fundamental social values” are jeopardized which “formerly served to create stability in the society”. The sexuality of women seems to be a key issue here. Prostitution is a very strong image, which stands for the loss of control (of the society) over women’s sexuality and which is evoked in many contexts, past and present, in Uganda and other African countries. Promiscuous sexual relationships of women pose a great threat to patrilineal descent systems and societies that are closely interconnected through affinal ties. In present day Uganda, prostitution and similar phenomena such as transactional sex (cf. Hunter, 2002) pose threats which are even more concrete and whose impacts are painfully experienced on a day to day basis: HIV/ AIDS, abortions, and family break-ups.

In many narratives about women’s sexuality the image of the caring, loving and respectful “African mother” is contrasted either with white women (who in terms of moral integrity generally have quite a bad reputation), or with the young generation of Ugandan girls which does no longer stick to “traditional” norms, dress codes and behaviors expected of women. Similarly, the typical image of the strong, brave African man, who is head and economic provider of his family, is contrasted either with the “irresponsible” young generation of Ugandan boys/ men, who have multiple sexual relationship and father many children without actually being able to properly marry the women and provide for their families (cf. Silberschmidt, 2001), or – in some cases – also with homosexual men (see below).

These on-going debates about the disparities between African and western gender images and norms are hardly new. The famous Acholi poet and writer Okot P’Bitek already used very similar images as those mentioned above in his poem “Song of Lawino”, which he wrote in the 1960s, shortly after Ugandan independence. In the poem, Lawino accuses her husband Ocol and her new co-wife Clementine of trying too hard to copy the white man’s/ woman’s lifestyle and defends Acholi customs by contrasting them sharply to the western culture. The contempt she expresses and the immorality she sees in copying the western style becomes clear in the following quotation:

“You kiss her on the cheek
As white people do,
You kiss her open sore lips
As white people do,
You suck slimy saliva
From each other’s mouths
As white people do“
(English translation, first published in 1972: 47)

Indecent dancing and dressing, abortions, and loss of masculinity (“My husband has become a woman”, p. 119) are other issues Lawino criticizes as results of westernization in Acholiland. Thus, in both new and older discourses, there is a strong distinction between African and western characteristic traits. This not only concerns the behavioral level, but also the way in which it is judged. Although the behavior of white women – in common Ugandan discourse – is not seen as appropriate in many contexts (e.g. if they are not married to their sexual partners, dress and behave inappropriately in public etc.), the same behavior among African women is much worse. This is also evident from Okot p’Bitek’s poem, where Lawino does

not in fact criticize the Europeans/ Whites, but only the Africans who are trying so hard to imitate them:

“She [Lawino] thinks the customs of white people probably suit white people. She doesn’t mind them following their own ways. (...). But those Africans who insist on following the ways of white people are foolish, because they misunderstand their own ways and do not know themselves” (Heron, 1989: 19f.).

In all these debates, gender identity is linked strongly to a “cultural” identity (African vs. western) which again is tied to historical and current living circumstances and a status quo which is not to be questioned. The concerns about loss of moral integrity and values outlined in this section are very closely related to the “threat to established gender orders”.

The threat to established gender orders: As pointed out above, there are specific normative expectations of how both men and women should behave and many of these “ideals” still persist today. In reality, however, a growing number of men and women can no longer live up to expected gender norms and images. There are a number of complex reasons for this that are in some ways linked to modernization/ westernization processes, and related factors such as poverty and unemployment. The break-down of dominant/ hegemonic models of masculinity (and femininity) poses a great threat to established social orders, and therefore to social stability (cf. Dolan, 2002; Silberschmidt, 2001). Hereby, the failure of men to live up to social expectations seems to be perceived as more serious (by men themselves but also by society) than that of women. Women seem more flexible to choose/ adapt to new “gendered identities”, which are – for many - connected with more hardships (vulnerability to economic/ financial difficulties, violence etc.), but potentially also offer new possibilities of being independent and having greater freedoms. The rise of women in the labor force, the success of women in the education sector, but also the increase of women-headed households are all fairly recent phenomena connected to this trend. Men, on the other hand, struggle to define/ accept alternative models of masculinity. Those who are affected by unemployment and poverty are denied many opportunities which are needed in many African societies to achieve the status of an adult man, such as the ability to marry, to provide for a family, and to be the representative/ head of the family in public life. An increasing number of researchers have turned to analyze this phenomenon in the African context (e.g. Ouzgabe/ Morrell, 2005; Lindsay/ Miescher, 2003).

The fear of the break-down of gendered orders was often expressed by my informants. They related this to the promotion of women’s rights, women’s education and the desire of women to be “modern” and have access to consumer goods, but also mentioned men’s declining ability to fulfill their roles as providers and responsible husbands. The following quotations are typical examples:

“The behavior of women has changed these days and it is not easy to teach them anymore. They have started wearing trousers and always talk about women’s rights. They don’t respect and listen to their elders anymore, because of all these modern influences they are always rioting and referring to their rights and refuse to fulfill their traditional roles” (male elder).

“You know these women of nowadays - you find the one who is educated enough: she is now doing her own job. You find that she will not mind of you, because (...) she only has her job, everything is in her hand: her salary, monthly... So what are you? What does she want?” (male, 20).

“To a rural person, a woman remains a woman and she has to do all the domestic chores, and a man remains the head of the family and the breadwinner. And yet they are not now breadwinners, it is women who now struggle there at night to get something to eat for their children” (female, 24).

The quotations express that the change/ break-down of gender (and gerontocratic) orders causes uncertainty and instability. Men no longer feel valued, respected and needed, women

experience that men can no longer live up to the role as main provider, which in turn forces them to look for alternative sources of income and/ or take over the man's role themselves. The informants clearly express their concern about the detrimental effects some of these developments are having on the society as a whole.

In the preceding pages, I have outlined the complex and contradictory ways in which western influences and social changes are reflected in Uganda. I showed that the concept of neocolonialism offers an inadequate explanation in many of these cases, and that although people often make strong distinctions between African/ Ugandan and western values and concepts, they do not perceive the West as forcing them to comply with the western way of life. There seems to be one exception, however, which has caused much commotion in Uganda and at the international level: the recent debate on homosexuality. Here, claims of neocolonialism and western interference are much more explicit. In the following, I will make some brief comments and relate the current debate on homosexuality to some of the points mentioned above as well as the concept of neocolonialism which I will discuss below.

Homosexuality as Neocolonialism

Ever since David Bahati, Member of the Ugandan Parliament, proposed a legislation bill in October, 2009, which would impose the death penalty on certain acts of homosexuality, Uganda has been in the international headlines and on the agenda of human rights activists around the world. The proposed law actually corresponds to the view of many (if not most) Ugandans, who believe that homosexuality is something unnatural and fundamentally un-African, which is being introduced in Ugandan by Westerners, and poses a threat which needs to be contained. What is interesting in this debate is the way homosexuality is framed as something which is “enforced” by outsiders¹⁰. A common claim is that young people are being corrupted into becoming homosexuals and will then “set upon” other Ugandans. The fact that people are agents who can make choices is strongly de-emphasized in this discourse. Homosexuality is seen as “structural force” which “automatically” turns people into homosexuals if it is not stopped at once. In contrast to other concepts (e.g. gender equality etc.) discussed above, which are perceived as western and are viewed with some skepticism, but are nevertheless tolerated and appropriated at the local level, homosexuality is rejected completely. One reason could be that western concepts regarding relations between men and women, women's rights, gender equality etc. are discursively linked to the prospect of modernization, which homosexuality is definitely not.

During my field stay in Uganda, I rarely encountered people talk about “neocolonialism”; much more common was the term westernization, which – as I discussed above – was mostly used to describe (young) people's efforts to imitate the West and not something which was enforced from the outside. With regard to homosexuality, however, references to neocolonialism were quite frequent. In one of the two major daily newspapers in Uganda, New Vision, I found an article entitled “Neo-colonialism fuels homosexuality in Africa” by Margaret Muhanga who was woman Member of Parliament for Kabarole District at the time of writing. She writes:

“The dependency syndrome has increased to the extent that the elite who should direct the affairs of the country have betrayed the cause of our fore fathers and become spokespersons of western ways. October 23 was one of the worst days of my life when I woke up to read, with disbelief a one-and-a-half page press release in The New Vision titled; ‘Anti-homosexuality or anti-human rights Bill’ by a coalition of civil society organisations on human rights and constitutional law. *What a tragedy for Africans who depend on others for a livelihood*. The elite, including the women organisations, that sent this press release and paid handsomely for its publication, *are*

¹⁰ It is even more interesting that the current debate *against* homosexuality seems to have been fueled (if not initiated) by radical American evangelical Christians and US conservatives. This “outside influence”, however, is usually not mentioned when Ugandans relate homosexuality to neocolonialism (cf. Kapyra Kaoma, 2010).

slaves living under neo-colonialism. This is not their opinion or belief, it is their 'sponsors' who direct them what to do or say. What a disappointment we are to our society" (Muhanga, 2009, my emphasis).

The claim that Uganda is forced to accept homosexuality due to its aid dependency on the West is apparent in this statement. A further claim is that Ugandan elites are being co-opted by the West and have no choice but to concur. Again one can ask: What makes homosexuality such a contentious and emotional issue? After all, there has been opposition against women's rights, children's rights, prohibition of "harmful cultural practices" and other civic rights discourses initiated by the West. But nowhere has resistance by the Ugandan state and population been as homogenous and fierce as in the case of homosexuality. One explanation could be that homosexuality – in a very specific and fundamental way - poses a threat to the three areas outlined above: a threat to family and kinship models, to gender orders, but most importantly to the constructed notions of social integrity and "African identity". This can also be inferred from the article quoted above. The author provocatively asks:

"If all of us were to become gay, where would the next generation come from? (...) Remember these homosexuals cannot reproduce. They must recruit, and they want our children. (...) Ugandans must rise up and fight all sources of evil no matter how much money the West sends. Human dignity must be protected" (Muhanga, 2009).

Here, homosexuality is actually perceived as a threat to the continuation of society as well as something immoral and against human dignity. The idea that homosexuality is something utterly foreign and un-African is reflected in the following quotations from a public debate in Gulu¹¹:

"Homosexuality, do you want to tell me that in African traditions, in African nations we had homosexuality? No, homosexuality is just being brought..." (male youth)

"The youth have lost their traditional culture and they have tried to adopt cultures of the western countries. (...) The youths have lost (...) the values that we have. We should consider it within this context of morality: now when you talk of adopting homosexuality, my dear, you know it is quite wrong for a man to climb on the back of another man. In our tradition - that is wrong!" (male youth)

The extreme fear and rejection of homosexuality and the attention it draws is quite striking when considering that on the ground hardly anyone has ever been confronted with someone openly being homosexual. Therefore, I believe that the recent debates must also be seen in the current political context where the Ugandan government is increasingly trying to demonstrate that it is not "donor's darling" and just a puppet of the West. Despite Ugandans continuing dependency on western support, President Museveni has increasingly resorted to "anti-western" rhetoric in his speeches and tries to express that Uganda is no longer willing to let western nations dictate its foreign policy. He has used the "neocolonialism allegation" as a populist argument and portrayed his firm stance against western intervention with regard to election issues¹², but also against the proposed homosexuality law, as a sign of his strength and autonomy as president. However, unless Uganda can massively profit from the recently discovered oil in the country (which will still take some years), it will remain heavily dependent on foreign aid and will therefore have to carefully balance its anti-western rhetoric. Even in the homosexuality debate, President Museveni and other leading politicians have expressed some wariness towards the bill, and it will probably not pass in its current form (Sarutu Abiola, 2010).

¹¹ See footnote 7

¹² Elections took place in February 2011. Some western states had complained about irregularities and a biased electoral commission in the pre election phase.

Deconstructing the Neo-colonization Argument – Some Final Reflections

In the preceding chapters I have demonstrated that receptions and perceptions of foreign/ western values by Ugandans are by no means straightforward. The debates on what is local/ traditional and western/ modern, on what is desirable and/ or necessary and what should be rejected, and on the ways western concepts are introduced in Uganda (through Ugandans themselves or through external enforcement) are highly blurred and complex. As a concept, neocolonialism is much too simple to adequately explain and incorporate all of these ongoing debates and processes. I have pointed out that there are both, positive/ desired and negative/ undesired, aspects of modernization and westernization, and only in some situations and by some individuals is change experienced as being enforced. The often populist use of the “neocolonialism argument” by African politicians and elites (and also by critical scholars), not only serves to obscure their own failures as leaders; it also conceals the agency and intentionality of local actors, who in many situations choose and appropriate foreign concepts to fit their local circumstances. Naturally, outside influences affect and effectuate change on “local” cultures and traditions – but this is not peculiar to post-colonial societies, nor is it a very recent phenomenon.

There are many reasons why neocolonialism is attractive and potentially adequate as an analytical concept, for instance in the debates on aid-conditionality and structural adjustment. And there are historical “imbalances” and unequal power structures at the global level, which have enabled and still enable western powers to enforce their ideologies on less powerful actors and states. Nevertheless, I would argue that in a changing world, with (slowly) changing power hierarchies and many uncontrolled “globalized dynamics”, neocolonialism is too trivial as an adequate explanatory model for social change. Actors in their specific local settings adopt and adapt western/ foreign concepts (cf. Adogame et al., 2008; Appadurai, 1996; Loimeier et al., 2005) - for a number of reasons and purposes. The primary focus on *western* concepts and ideologies has historical reasons, but can probably be more adequately explained with reference to a Gramscian conception of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) rather than through the concept of neocolonialism.

The discourses about changes currently taking place in the fields of gender, kinship and sexuality in Uganda (and elsewhere) constitute powerful examples of the blurred, multiple and contradictory ways western concepts are rejected *and* embraced, enforced *and* enacted on the ground. We should acknowledge these paradoxes and contradictions when trying to disentangle neocolonialism - both in analytical and quotidian thinking.

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