

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

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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. Not only homosexuality, but also prostitution and “indecent” dress codes are taken as powerful indicators of the moral degeneration of Ugandan society which is commonly associated with western (“neo-colonial”) influences.

My paper is based on eleven months of fieldwork in Gulu, Northern Uganda, where I have conducted research on perceptions of cultural change and generational conflicts. It looks at discourses on gender and sexuality in Uganda, focusing on perceptions of “traditional” as opposed to “alien” values and pointing out some of the contradictions inherent in these discourses. Claims that gender roles/norms, dating/marriage customs and sexual practices have been “westernized” often come up in discussions of cultural change. “Traditionalists” allege 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, marriage and gender seem to be especially sensitive and contested. Homosexuality and prostitution are two of the most common themes evoked when discussing undesirable “alien” influences on “traditional values”. According to many Ugandans, these practices never existed in “African tradition” and were brought to Uganda by the whites. The second part of the paper raises some critical questions which have to be considered when discussing kinship, gender and sexuality in the context of neo-colonialism. While it is true that colonialism, and more recently human rights discourses and the global media have created somewhat hegemonic norms, the concept of neo-colonialism is hardly sufficient to explain changing practices and perceptions at the local level. One should rather analyze what is perceived as alien, when, where and by whom, and who strategically uses the “neo-colonization argument” for which purpose. Otherwise we fall into the trap of “dualizing” African and European/Western positions, thereby ignoring the blurred, multiple and contradictory ways kinship, gender and sexuality are perceived, *normalized* and practiced on the ground.