Homophobia in Uganda: A briefing paper
David Mills and Richard Vokes

Introduction

In 2009, emboldened by a populist media anti-gay ‘backlash’ and by a highly moralistic Ugandan public culture, a group of young Ugandan MPs tabled a private members’ bill that sought to make some homosexual acts punishable by death.¹ Led by David Bahati, MP for Ndorwa West, this reactionary political gesture challenged the public views of their party’s leader, President Museveni, and the Government’s avowed commitment to social equity. The bill was immediately disowned by several senior Ministers, fearing the withdrawal of international donor support. Bahati and his conspirators used skilful PR and a sympathetic media to build popular support for the draft legislation. Their rabble-rousing may also have been tolerated because it served to distract public attention from growing social and political unrest. Late in 2009, the President finally squashed the proposal by issuing an executive order, citing the fact that it had become a ‘foreign policy issue’ (given the widespread condemnation that it was by then receiving from donors, and from the international human rights community). He also appointing a special parliamentary committee that found '99 per cent' of the draft legislation to be either 'unconstitutional' or 'redundant'.

Despite these, and other, legal rulings, the bill continued its passage through parliament, and both popular radio stations, and the print media continued to put out homophobic content, and to ‘out’ gay and lesbian

¹ The bill proposed increased sentences for all forms of homosexuality, and the death penalty for any act of ‘aggravated homosexuality’ (defined in terms of ‘serial offending’, sex with a minor, sex with a person with disabilities, or sex for an HIV+ individual).
Ugandans. One key forum for this sentiment has become the radio ‘phone-in’ show, in which callers would typically take it in turns to berate either an individual gay man, or gay people in general. The print media – especially the tabloid press – also dedicated a growing number of articles to the subject. This toxic media environment reached its zenith in October 2010, when a tabloid newspaper called Rolling Stone published the photographs, names, and addresses, of 100 allegedly gay individuals – including one Anglican Bishop – alongside a banned headline that read: ‘Hang Them’.

Emboldened by this media response, and by the support that he was receiving from certain sections of the Pentecostal-charismatic (P/c) Christian community, in early 2011, Bahati and others attempted to revive their bill. With dissent growing around Museveni’s twenty-five year incumbency, the timing seemed right. Whether by cynical manipulation or unhappy political coincidence, the timing was in fact potent. In January 2011, just weeks before Museveni’s seventh election win, a prominent gay-rights activist called David Kato – who was one of those named in the Rolling Stone list – was brutally murdered at his home in Kampala. In one particularly shocking aspect of the case, fighting then broke at Kato’s funeral, when the presiding pastor delivered an anti-gay sermon. This time the international furore reached heightened proportions, and led in May to a major campaign putting pressure on the Ugandan parliament. As a result, the Anti-homosexuality Bill’s passagewas once again blocked on technicality. However, it seems likely that Bahati and others will continue their campaign to get it passed during the current sitting of parliament (which returned from its recess in late June). Either way, the wider homophobia remains.

What is one to make of the morality politics that surrounds this legislation, and the responses to it? Is it primarily driven by Uganda’s religiosity, a populist media culture, or a reactionary cultural nationalism? And what are the implications of this for those involved in working and travelling in
Uganda? In what follows, we sketch the historical backdrop, answer some of these questions, and offer some pointers for *All Our Children* and others seeking to work and travel in Uganda.

**How has Uganda’s religious history shaped today’s attitudes?**

There is no doubt that the early Christian missionaries (sometimes in competition with converts to Islam) shaped African social attitudes around sexuality and ‘normality’. When the first missionaries arrived in Buganda, they encountered an impressive royal court, presided over by a King (Kabaka) who held a position of absolute power, often exercised with great cruelty, and reinforced by numerous symbols.

Historians are largely in agreement that the then incumbent Kabaka, Mwanga II, was bi-sexual in orientation. However, emboldened by the missionaries, a growing number of his Christian courtiers and pages refused to accept Mwanga’s sexual advances. His response was to order their deaths. In one now infamous episode, the Kabaka famously burnt 30 young converts at the stake – they were later beatified, and are now known as the ‘Ugandan Martyrs’. Whilst one might question whether these sexual practices were, as many Ugandans allege, the consequence of prior Muslim influence, the symbolism of this history remains potent to this day. The story of 30 young men resisting homosexuality as a display of their Christian faith is a history told and retold in every history textbook and every school in the country, and an episode that has now become, in some senses, the very ‘founding myth’ of modern Ugandan, and a key expression of its fundamental cultural values. The martyrs’ feast day (3rd June) is one of the most important dates in the Christian calendar, and one of Uganda’s most prestigious private universities is named after them.
Is this new morality politics the consequence of US Evangelical influence in East Africa?

Whilst investigative journalists have linked Bahati with a US Protestant charismatic organization called *The Family*, and his Bill is strongly supported by some Ugandan Churches, simply blaming the growing influence of US evangelical churches for religious and cultural conservatism is overly simplistic. Religious fervour, often with an evangelical hue, has a long and energetic tradition across Africa. At moments of social breakdown and crisis, charismatic Christian revival movements emerge and thrive. The destructive Ugandan ‘Lords Resistance Army’ can be traced back to the ‘visions’ of Alice Lakwena in the 1980s, and the Kanungu massacres (Vokes 2008) were the tragic culmination of a ‘Catholic’ millennial movement cult in South West Uganda. It is often accompanied with a ‘literalist’ adherence to the religious texts and their social meanings.

Until relatively recently debates about gay sexuality in Uganda were answered by ‘it doesn’t happen here’. Compared to recent events, this veil of silence was a relatively insipid intolerance – a sort of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy. One could argue that the current Ugandan ‘backlash’ is a response to the growing determination of gay and lesbian Ugandans, empowered by a global LGBT rights activists movement, to voice their opinions and feelings, and marks the next step in the Ugandan debate.

Amongst those seeking to document the influence of these links is the

---

2 One of the Bill’s most vociferous supporters is Pastor Martin Ssempa, of the Makerere Community Church. Sempa is a regular figure at events organized by David Bahati, and in 2009 caused outrage by publically claiming that homosexual acts require gay men to ingest each others’ excrement. Seempa went on to create the National Taskforce Against Homosexuality in Uganda, an umbrella organization for other Ugandan P/c – and other religious – organizations who support the Bahati Bill.
Anglican pastor Kapoma Kaoma (2009). But there are also signs of a growing range of voices within the African Church, including Bishop Sseyonjo in Uganda, who has been expelled from the Anglican Church for his unflinching support for gay rights. The Church of Uganda is increasingly aligned with US evangelical traditions in challenging the Anglican Church’s commitment to LGBT rights and the ordination of women priests. However, this may be best understood as a position borne of political expediency, rather than moral commitment. The Church of Uganda took this stance in the context of the debate at the 1998 Lambeth Conference over the ordination of the openly gay US Bishop Gene Robinson. Most commentators on Anglican politics agree that that debate had as much to do with questions over the relative political influence of African churches within the Anglican Communication (vis-à-vis their Euro-American counterparts), as it did with questions of homosexuality *per se*.

Why is Uganda’s media culture not more tightly regulated?

The current homophobic wave of 'anti-homosexuality' is also a reflection of a highly deregulated media environment in Uganda. Following his ascent to power in 1986, Museveni oversaw a radical ‘opening-up’ of all forms of media in the country – print media, radio, and television – which culminated in the Press and Journalism Statute (1995, and later Act, 2000). At the time, the Statue was widely praised by the international community as a key step towards press freedom in Uganda (itself seen as a vital element of a more democratic political arena). Although the government have continued to clash with sections of the media, the degree of criticism tolerated in the media today is exponentially greater than it was pre-1986. However, the creation of this free market has its drawbacks. In particular, it has resulted in dozens of new publications/radio and TV stations jockeying for space. And as with the British tabloid press, it has resulted in these outlets trying to establish themselves through increasingly
sensational material (for example, it is notable that *Rolling Stone* published its infamous list just one month after the publication had started). In this sense, the current 'wave' of anti-homosexuality is a media-driven 'moral panic'. Government interventions, especially regarding the person lives of leading politicians, have lead to accusations of censorship, and so there is no effective media regulation. There is also a relatively limited tradition of investigative journalism. Bahati, along with other anti-gay campaigners, has regularly made outrageous assertions about the circulation of gay ‘recruitment videos’ aimed at children, for which there has never been any evidence.

What does Ugandan ‘cultural nationalism’ have to do with it.?

Ugandan public attitudes are informed by visions of gendered, social and sexual identity that are strongly conformist. Even before Christian influence, great respect was accorded to social order, the symbolic importance of reproduction, and the role of women as childbearers. Seeking to assert difference in this environment is not easy. Expressing one’s individuality risks facing the accusation of being ‘un-Ugandan’. In our own research into Ugandan gender (Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2002), we found that Ugandan campaigners for women’s rights constantly risked being ridiculed and dismissed as ‘Western feminists’. As in many other African countries, gender issues have been taken up by women activists distancing themselves from ‘Western’ agendas, and positioning themselves as loyal Ugandans. This deployment of national loyalty is a key way of minimizing this difference.

There is a long history in Uganda of this symbolic exclusivity being enacted politically, through the expulsion (literally) of undesirable ‘outside’ influences, in an attempt to ‘purify’ the nation. Indeed, Mwanga’s killing of the Ugandan martyrs can be seen as the original act, in this regard, in that
it was at least partly designed to expel Christians. However, since then, various other leaders have conducted expulsions of their own – most notoriously the former President Idi Amin, who in 1972, expelled all Asians from the country. More recently, the government of President Obote attempted to expel all Rwandans from the country (in 1982). And there are other examples besides. Thus, the current attempt to ‘get rid of’ all gay people (who are perceived as being gay only because of outside influences) also follows a long-established political logic in Uganda.

Others have taken up this argument about normative social values. One commentator on global Christianity has noted that "for many Africans sexual unorthodoxy has implications that are at once un-Christian, anti-national, and oppressive" (Jenkins 2007, see also Jenkins 2002).

Whilst a Manichean ascription of ‘sexual’ immorality to outsiders may be a highly effective political tactic, African societies have long nurtured a range of sexual identities and practices (eg Roscoe and Murray 1997, Epprecht et al 2008). Attempts to rewrite these histories of sexual variation and difference or to refute their existence are inappropriate.

**What can we do? What should we do?**

Despite the moral absolutism that seems to characterise the public views of many Ugandans, we would caution against a simplistic response. Calls for a boycott or disengagement from Uganda play into the hands of the cultural nationalists, and also invoke a questionable moral superiority. We should remember that homosexuality was only decriminalized in the UK in 1967.

There is no doubt that Uganda is a deeply conservative society, with social attitudes about gender normativity strongly shaped by Christian traditions. Understanding this public morality does not mean accepting it, but
understanding has to be part of any engagement with a radically different culture. In Uganda, smoking and kissing in public are strongly frowned upon. Refraining from doing so oneself is not the same as condoning such conservatism. Taking seriously another way of life involves coming to terms with social mores that our own worldview finds questionable. Many societies tolerate and even seem to cultivate reactionary views about gender, ethnic or religious difference that we may find offensive - does this mean that we should never visit them?

The challenge is engaging constructively as well as critically. This involves thinking carefully about when to make an intervention and how it may be received. Making a public statement may well be considered offensive. You may want to cause offence, but that’s a different matter. Discussions in private will be engaged with more seriously. Even if your views strongly differ, the calm clear articulation of the moral indefensibility of homophobia is important, and hopefully will be respected (even if your views are positioned as ‘Western’).

One solution for an LGBT person visiting Uganda is to not disclose their identity. We do this sort of thing all the time - i.e. not mention things that are not appropriate in certain contexts. But given the limited personal risks that visitors face, being open about one’s sexual identity in certain contexts may be a powerful way to change people’s attitudes. There will also be many other things one can do: finding out more about the situation, understanding its history, supporting local advocacy and campaigning organizations, meeting activists etc. Change is hard-worn, but the logic of history favours those who fight for the rights of all humans.

References

Marc Epprecht (2008) Heterosexual Africa?: The History of an Idea from
the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS. Athens OH: Ohio University Press


Links
www.changingattitudes.org.uk/uganda