

Eroticism, Sensuality and ‘Women’s Secrets’ Among the Baganda

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1 Introduction

Sexuality is intricately linked to practically every aspect of our lives: to pleasure, power, politics and procreation, but also to disease, violence, war, language, social roles, religion, kinship structures, identity, creativity ... The connection and collision between human sexuality, power and politics provide the inspiration for this article, which explores the various ways the erotic facility is used, as both an oppressive and empowering resource. In her compelling essay, subtitled *The Erotic as Power*, Audre Lorde (1984) argues for the construction of the erotic as the basis of women’s resistance against oppression. For her, the concept entails much more than the sexual act, connecting meaning and form, infusing the body and the psyche. Before Lorde, Michel Foucault (1977, 1990) demonstrated how the human body is a central component in the operation of power.

In a bid to gain a better understanding of African women’s sexuality, this article focuses on one particular cultural/sexual initiation institution among the Baganda people of Uganda, the *Ssenga*. Talk of ‘*ensonga za Ssenga*’ (*Ssenga* matters) signifies an institution that has endured through centuries as a tradition of sexual initiation. At the helm is the paternal aunt (or surrogate versions thereof), whose role is to tutor young women in a range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche (i.e. before first menstruation) practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotics and reproduction. In Uganda’s capital, Kampala, the phenomenon of commercial *Ssenga* services has emerged. Print and electronic media have adopted *Ssenga* columns and call-in programmes. *Ssenga* booklets are also for sale on Kampala’s streets. The institution is being transformed by ‘modernisation’ and urbanisation, as well as capitalist economic practices within the liberalised market economy.

Sexuality is a key site on which women’s subordination is maintained and enforced in Africa

(McFadden 2003; Pereira 2003). This study of *Ssenga* is set against the backdrop of the institution of patriarchy and the legacy of colonialism. In Uganda, colonialist constructions of Africans as profligate and hypersexual led to the intensified repression and surveillance of African women’s sexuality in particular. Colonialists worked hand in hand with African patriarchs to develop inflexible customary laws that evolved into new structures and forms of domination (Schmidt 1991; Mama 1996) and deployed various legal and policy strategies and discourses in the areas of medical health and hygiene. Traditional customs were reconfigured to introduce new sexual mores, taboos and stigmas. Women’s sexuality was medicalised and reduced to reproduction (Vaughan 1991; Musisi 2002). Through adopting Christianity, Africans were encouraged to reject their previous beliefs and values and to adopt the ‘civilised ways’ of the whites. A new script, steeped in the Victorian moralistic, antisexual and body shame edict, was inscribed on the bodies of African women and with it, an elaborate system of control.

Through all this and into the present, the boundaries of the institution of *Ssenga* have been redrawn to suit the times (Kisekka 1973; Sengendo and Sekatawa 1999). Yet, as I go on to argue, while *Ssenga* facilitates and reinforces patriarchal power, at the same time it subverts and parodies patriarchy. Judith Butler’s (1990) theories of subversion and performativity help tease out the transgressional features of the *Ssenga* institution. Butler’s observation that gender is a daily, habitual, learned act – a performance – based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity draws attention to the ways in which we performatively produce and reproduce gender and sexuality. Through a deconstruction of the arrangement of gender and sexuality as constituted by the institution of *Ssenga*, this article investigates constructs of Kiganda sexuality, and of femininity and masculinity within

them. How has the evolution of *Ssenga* affected the (re)interpretation of entrenched norms concerning femininity, masculinity and subjectivity? And does it in any way represent any liberating possibilities for women?

2 *Ssenga* past and present

To my knowledge, no scholarly study has systematically analysed the Kiganda institution of *Ssenga*, therefore most of the historical material in this subsection is largely based on oral history; tales told to me by *Ssengas* and popular belief.

Among the father's many sisters one would be selected (based on exemplary behaviour) to play the role of *Ssenga*. Her role was to 'socialise' her nieces in the art of becoming 'good' wives who were subservient and ensured their husband's sexual pleasure. Accorded the same respect as one's father-in-law and widely respected within the family, over the years, status, power and respect for *Ssenga* grew among the Baganda. *Ssenga* could freely come and go in her brother's home under the responsibility of instructing the children. She could even take the children to her own home for tutelage. She made sure that young girls became well versed with the appropriate feminine behaviours and roles – details included proper ways a good girl should sit, walk, conduct herself, respect elders, cook, etc. The young adolescent received her lessons of 'visiting the bush', which as I go on to discuss, involved a procedure of stretching or elongating her labia minora before she experienced menarche. As soon as she started menstruating, the *Ssenga* would begin preparing the young girl for marriage.

Under the ancient system, marriages were not prearranged but the *Ssenga* played a pivotal role in negotiating her nieces' marriages. The *Ssenga* fulfilled her primary responsibility of grooming her nieces to become 'good' subservient wives or co-wives. A husband who was dissatisfied with his bride's behaviour, particularly 'bedroom etiquette', would blame it on the laxity of her *Ssenga* and return the bride to the *Ssenga* for 'proper' training. However, *Ssenga's* tutelage also included some empowering messages to the young girl. For instance, *Ssenga* encouraged her niece to engage in some home cottage economic ventures (e.g. weaving, pottery) in order to avoid total dependence on her husband. *Ssenga* also made it clear that a wife did not have to tolerate an abusive spouse; that she had the right to

kunoba (separation) when her husband treated her with excessive cruelty, including denying her sexual pleasure. Needless to say, sexuality featured prominently in *Ssenga's* tutorials focusing on eroticism, sexual paraphernalia and aids, as well as aphrodisiacs in the form of herbal scents, erotic oils, sexual beads (*obutiti*), etc.

In their bid to eliminate 'harmful cultural practices' and to Westernise the sexual morality of the natives, missionaries and the colonial establishment had a special interest in Baganda women. Nakanyike Musisi observes:

Through their pedagogy and medicine, missionaries like Cook managed to make sexuality, particularly women's, not only a religious concern but a secular one as well, one that needed to be regulated by the colonial state. To be more explicit, sex became an area that required legislation that would put individuals under colonial surveillance. The medical and sociopolitical project of managing births, children, and mothers' lives required that sexual morality itself be controlled by the state rather than by clan and kinship groups. (Musisi 2002: 101)

A massive moral purity campaign was launched by the colonial administration in the early twentieth century, threatening many of the values within the *Ssenga* institution. Although *Ssenga* represented an 'ideal' establishment through which the British could spread their Christian ethic of sexuality among the Baganda, there is no evidence to show that this was ever tried. This is probably due to the fact that colonialists dealt mostly with the elite male Baganda chiefs, largely excluding women from governance. All in all, the cultural institution of *Ssenga* remained intact through the colonial era.

As in many other African cultures, marriage and the family (read procreation) were (and in many ways still are) viewed as the basis of society. In this sense, given the crucial role that *Ssenga* played in this sphere, she ceased to be an individual; her role and practice became an institution in and of itself within Kiganda culture. In many ways *Ssenga* as an entity established (and still influences) patterns of expectation for Baganda men and women, ordering the social processes of everyday life (cf. Lorber 1994). Hence, contrary to popular belief, the institution of *Ssenga* is not restricted to erotology, nor is it an

aphrodite cult of genre elaborated by Abdoulaye (1999); it extends into every area of Baganda women's lives (cf. Tshikala 1999). *Ssenga* as an institution is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities: amid her main theme of subservience, are subtexts of defiance, manipulation and control by women.

The institution of *Ssenga* has in many ways exhibited resilience and tenacious adaptability in the wake of widespread sociopolitical and economic changes in Uganda. The economic and political hardships that dogged Uganda from the early 1970s had a significant impact on the household, and on the ideology of domesticity (Tamale 2001; UWONET 1998). For the average Ugandan, the Structural Adjustment process meant desperately fighting for basic survival; in real terms, it is women who paid the highest price. In addition to traditional reproduction and production roles in the domestic arena, many women were forced to engage in income-generating activities outside their homes to make ends meet. Poor urban families were the hardest hit.

The emergence of commercial *Ssengas* was one of the creative ways that women responded to diminished economic opportunities in urban areas. Far from being a simple demand-and-supply response, the traditional role of *Ssenga* metamorphosed into a new, liberalised form; its discourse shifted from the 'private' to the 'public' sphere. A historical institution that served a specific role of initiating young girls for marriage and domesticity suddenly held great potential as a moneymaking venture. The urban setting appears to have provided a ready and willing market, tailor-made from historical realities and the vacuum created by socioeconomic and political circumstances pertaining in the country. The withdrawal of public health and educational services, for example, facilitated *Ssenga* as an income-generating activity in an era of income-generating promotion. Thus, *Ssenga* presented an informal source of career opportunity, providing a material base of an ongoing sociocultural institution. The numerous call-in *Ssenga* programmes that have emerged on the vibrant FM radio stations plus the various *Ssenga* newspaper columns have not only expanded employment opportunities in this area, but have also transferred Kiganda sexuality from the private realm of the home to become part of everyday discourse in a very public way.

Today, the *Ssenga* institution is made up of both 'conservative' elements that will not bend from century-old practices and 'progressive' ones that go with the times. Age and education seem to be influencing factors here, with younger, more educated *Ssengas* leaning towards more liberal views than their older uneducated counterparts. Among other contemporary influences are forces such as religion, feminism, HIV/AIDS, increased intermarriage and information technology. The institution has itself redefined urban domesticity, even as 'modernity' infringes on it. The ancient and the 'modern' exist in delicate coexistence and this is well captured in a common *Ssenga* mantra, '*Ssabasajja awangale*' (long live the King). As expected, the institution of *Ssenga* is a vital cog in the sociopolitical wheel of the Baganda kingdom. Not surprisingly, the minister for culture and tradition in the kingdom is a commercial *Ssenga* herself.

While women's sensuality and eroticism are recognised in Uganda, their sexuality is greatly feared. While heteronormativity is promoted at every turn, women are largely silenced from expressing their sexuality in the public domain. These contradictions and dilemmas surrounding Ugandan women's sexuality come into bold relief when women's eroticism and pleasure are discussed in public. This was exhibited in full force in February 2005, when four Ugandan women's groups organised to stage Eve Ensler's play, *Vagina Monologues*, in Kampala. Designed to celebrate female sexuality as well as spotlight sexual violence against women, the play promised to break every sexual taboo in Ugandan society. The government, through the Media Council, was quick to slap a ban on the play, arguing that the title was 'offensive to cultural sensibilities' and that the content was 'too obscene' and 'promoted lesbianism in Uganda'.¹ Through this, the patriarchal state exposed its undemocratic denial of women's basic freedom of expression, and its fear of women's sexual liberation. The play threatened to disturb the order of gender and sexual politics in Ugandan society.²

Beneath the surface of the kind of overt political repression that was evident in this case are women's subversive and counter-hegemonic 'silent struggles'. Behind the public silence about women's sexuality and eroticism is the realm of 'women's secrets'. Only females are privy to such secrets, with the

Ssengas being the chief custodians of Baganda women's sex secrets archives. In the following sections, I explore the part played by the *Ssengas* in sharing these sex secrets and abetting these 'silent struggles', through the use of metaphor, by creating opportunities for women to talk about sexuality and eroticism and by tutoring their charges in the arts of pleasure.

3 'Mortar/pestle dialogues'

As *Ssenga* grooms, moulds and regulates young girls to turn into 'good Baganda women', she performatively and discursively reinforces the dominant culture (patriarchy, heterosexuality, heteronormativity). But parts of the *Ssenga* discourse also destabilise assumptions that underlie the dominant culture, holding potential for gender transgression. Metaphors and symbols play a central role in the *Ssenga* discourse. Referred to as '*okwambaza ebigambo*' (dressing words), metaphors and symbols provide an acceptable medium of accessing the secret world of unverballed sexuality, shifting it from the 'private' to the 'public' realm. It also allows for coded communication about sexuality, decipherable by women and other adults but hidden from children. Through sexual metaphors, erotic symbolism and nuanced interpretations of culturally significant ambiguities, *Ssenga* maps Kiganda gender identity.

As cultivating is the primary economic activity of the Baganda, many of the sexual metaphors and symbols in *Ssenga* are couched around this theme. Hence a man who is impotent is described as 'no longer able to cultivate his farm' (*takyalima nnimiro*); one who is lousy in bed is a 'bad farmer' (*ennima embi*); one who gets premature ejaculations is referred to as 'unable to complete his *lubimbi* (piece of arable land apportioned for the day)'; to 'eat one's dinner' (*okulya eky'ekiro*) or 'digging one's *lubimbi*' both refer to having sex; 'food must be eaten with *ebirungo* (spices)' means to introduce variety in sexual activity. A woman is referred to as *asiriza entamu* (burns the pot) if she is not adequately lubricated. The sexual symbol of mortar and pestle is universal: thus *omusekuzo* (pestle) is an erect phallus and *okumusekula* (pounding) refers to its motion in sexual intercourse.

Games provide another popular theme. A famous ancient Kiganda board game called *omweso* (*mancala*), of the 'count and capture' genre of games that involves two players moving seeds (*empiki*) along

a wooden board with the objective of capturing the opponent's seeds, provides an example. The terms used in *omweso* are sexually suggestive. *Ssengas* will use suggestive phrases such as '*okutebuka, nosinzira empiki n'ozizako emmabega*' (to hesitate during the game and move the seeds backwards), '*okutambuza empiki z'omweso*' (to move the seeds along the board) and '*omweso gw'omuddirinn'ano*' (playing back-to-back *omweso* games), all of which exude sexual undertones.

Traditional folklore, lullabies and children's songs also provide metaphorical models to mediate sexuality messages among women. Teaching about sexuality involves many elements for the *Ssenga*, most importantly the ability to impart conceptual understanding and a sense of intellectual excitement about the topic. The creative use of metaphor is vital in that process, facilitating in the construction and consolidation of sexuality by the *Ssenga* institution. Furthermore, it validates gender/power relations among the Baganda as well as helping to create and sustain the discourse of heteronormativity (e.g. the mortar and pestle metaphor). Hence, through sexuality the subordination, dependency and control of women is guaranteed. Yet, as is the case with all hegemonic ideologies, deviancy discourses exist within the institution of *Ssenga*.

4 Gender/sexuality non-conformity: poking holes in patriarchy

Although the ideological basis for *Ssenga* is primarily cultural, this is coloured by age, religion, class, and so forth. Many *Ssengas* do not conform to the script of normative gender and sexuality models; and there are *Ssengas* who carry emancipatory messages of women's economic independence and autonomy.

'Live with a man for sometime before committing yourself to him in marriage.'¹³

'Why can't men stomach their wife's extramarital affairs when women endure it all the time? Men need to understand that their wives get similar feelings of betrayal, shame, hurt when they cheat on them.'¹⁴

'It's extremely important for every woman to get some kind of income, however small ... Never depend on a man for all your financial needs. I myself learned the hard way raising two children on my own.'¹⁵

'Home hygiene is the responsibility of everyone in the home, including the father. It should not be left exclusively to the wife/mother. Men must share in domestic chores ...' 'Forget about old practices because culture evolves.'⁶

The debate that ensued following this last remark from *Ssenga* Najjemba may be an indicator of *Ssengas'* potential to rock the cultural boat:

1st caller (male): 'God placed the responsibility of home hygiene squarely on women; it's natural.'

2nd caller (male): 'Culture is not static and indeed we men should participate. In olden days women used to work exclusively in the home. Today, they work outside the home and we must share responsibilities at home.'

Ssenga Najjemba: 'Men should wash their own underwear, for example.'

3rd caller (female): 'Men should understand that we don't get married to become their slaves or maids.'

4th caller (female): 'No, no, no it's our role as women to take care of our homes, including washing our husband's underwear.'

5th caller (male): 'What is this rubbish, if my woman (*mukazi wange*)...'

Ssenga Najjemba: 'Correction, please refer to her as "my wife" (*mukyala wange*).'

The liberal views expressed by *Ssenga* Najjemba in fact are quite common among educated commercial *Ssengas*. Such *Ssengas* are by no means 'anti-culture'. In another programme, *Ssenga* Najjemba explains that she strongly supports those aspects of Kiganda tradition and custom that 'hold value'.

One commercial *Ssenga* shared the point that the most frequently asked question by women in her sessions is: '*N'omukazi amala?*' meaning, 'Do you mean even a woman can orgasm?' She revealed that she herself had been in a 15-year marriage with five children but had never experienced an orgasm. It was not until she got involved in an extramarital relationship that she discovered *entikko y'omukazi* (a woman's peak). That was reason enough for her to

leave and now she lives in a happy sexual relationship. Hence, radical topics such as female ejaculation and clitoral orgasm are part of this particular *Ssenga's* repertoire of tutoring techniques. Of all the public *Ssenga* sessions that I attended, that of this particular *Ssenga* was the most striking for her sheer presence, charisma and dynamism – not much different from the breed of modern charismatic evangelical pastors that are so popular in today's Uganda. It would be interesting to investigate whether such lessons translate into liberatory politics for the women that benefit from it.

Similarly, there were many voices among *Ssenga* trainees that challenged hegemonic narratives embedded in the *Ssenga* institution, and questioned basic patriarchal assumptions embedded in the mainstream *Ssenga* discourse and in male/female sexual norms and practices. Some young women attending a private *Ssenga* session that I went to, for example, rejected the part of *Ssenga's* core lesson that implored them to prioritise their mothering role, taking their husbands as their 'first-born child'. Below is a sample of some of their responses, which caused gasps and mutters:

Do you mean we should remain docile even when he wrongs us? Should we remain quiet even where it is obvious that he's mistreating and abusing us?

Wait a minute; all we've heard this evening is how to please a man? How we must wait on him and our children all the time, what we must do to please him in bed, blah, blah, blah ... Can you tell me what a man can do to please *me*?

Obviously, these women reject the ideology that privileges men over women. They also defy the imposition of motherhood as the paradigmatic self-identity of Baganda women. Demands for men to also receive training in how to sexually please their female partners is a radical move on the part of young Baganda women. Most importantly, it points to the apparent fact that they regard sex not primarily for procreation but for leisure and pleasure, relocating sex from the medicalised/reproduction plane to the erotic zone. The erotic as a resource thus acts as an empowering tool for Baganda women.

Traditional sexuality has been complemented and enhanced with 'modern' and 'foreign' sexual

practices. For instance, today, some *Ssenga's* instruction includes lessons in oral sex, deep kissing, masturbation and other forms of self-discovery. Included in the curriculum of many *Ssengas* is the message of controlling and manipulating men through sex. In other words, they encourage women, through sex, to undermine patriarchal power from behind a façade of total subservience.

Men are like children ... Let him believe that he's in control while you take charge. Spoil him, pamper him, treat him like a king and you'll have him under your wing on a tether; he'll never leave you. He may get other women, but he'll always return to you.

The best time to ask your man for anything is during sex. Men's brains are weak when it comes to sex ... this is the time to manipulate them.

Such messages resonate with the old Chinese proverb: 'Man is the head of the family, woman the neck that turns the head!' Using sexuality as a manipulative tool can be empowering and when stripped of any moral anchoring, can be subversive.

An analysis of commercial *Ssengas'* matchmaking services reveals that Baganda women are beginning to take the initiative in sexual relations. A popular segment of the weekly late night Radio Simba programme, *Muyizi Tasubwa* – which translates as 'a must listen for learners' – is apportioned to reading out the basic resumés of those that seek partners. *Ssenga's* application forms require the applicant to provide a photograph plus information regarding their age, tribe, clan, religion, marital status, etc., as well as their preferences in a potential partner. Almost half of the requests are sent in from women. It is worth noting that most female applicants indicate that interested partners must be ready to test for HIV. It is relatively new for Baganda women to take control of their sexuality and exercise power quite so emphatically and explicitly.

Hence we see the significance of the *Ssenga* institution in redefining and reframing the ideology of urban domesticity in Kampala, through reinforcing and actualising hierarchies of gender and sexuality. The sexual boundaries that the *Ssenga* tradition draws and redraws within the domestic arena speak to multiple issues of class, gender and religion, as

well as to notions of conformity and transgression. The cultural connotations of sexuality as reflected in the evolving institution of *Ssenga* thus go beyond heterosexual intercourse and erotics.

5 The cultural labia

Women in diverse cultures have always 'fixed' or otherwise transformed their bodies in order to fit their cultural norms. One of the ways that Baganda women 'fix' their bodies is through an elaborate routine of 'packaging the vagina' for men's maximum pleasure.

Between the age of 9 and 12 years old, before experiencing menarche, a Muganda girl would be guided by her *Ssenga* to prepare her genitals for future sex. This was done by elongating the labia minora. Known as *okukyalira ensiko* (visiting the bush), this rite was traditionally performed in a clearing among bushes where the herbs used for the procedure (e.g. *mukasa*, *entengotengo*, *oluwoko*) were found. Pubescent girls would 'visit the bush' for a few hours every day over a period of about two weeks. The *Ssenga* would persuade them to comply by advising them that if they did not, no man would ever ask for their hand in marriage.⁷ Indeed, when a man discovered that his bride had not 'visited the bush' he would send her back to her parents for the *Ssenga* to fulfil her duty. Sengendo and Sekatawa (1999) explain:

A [Muganda] woman who did not elongate the labia minora is traditionally despised and regarded as having a pit (*kiwuwongole*, *kifufunkuli*, *funkuli muwompogoma*). If a bride was found not to have elongated her labia minora, she would be returned to her parents with disgrace.

Over the years, how has this culturally specific practice been mediated and transfigured? When I began this study, I was under the impression that it was dying out. Findings revealed that not only it is alive and thriving in the urban and peri-urban areas around Kampala, but that it has also spread to many non-Baganda women (including some of European descent) who seek the services of commercial *Ssengas* to elongate their labia. Nevertheless, a great many younger women have chosen to opt out of this cultural practice, dismissing it as 'useless and primitive'. It may no longer be obligatory, but it remains a well-entrenched tradition even among the Baganda elite.

The findings show that the practice of elongating the labia minora seems to serve three main purposes. The first one is functional in that the extended labia enhance the erotic experience of both the male and the female. When touched and manipulated in the correct manner during foreplay or mutual masturbation, they may be the source of immense pleasure to the couple. Second, elongated labia serve as a kind of self-identifier for Baganda women – the stamp of legitimacy for a ‘true’ Muganda woman. The third function is a purely aesthetic one; several Baganda men interviewed said that they just love looking at and fondling the stretched labia of a woman. Some women also stated that they enjoy it when their elongated labia are touched as it transmits sensation to their clitoris.

These findings contrast sharply with the definition put forward by the World Health Organization (WHO). Classifying it and condemning it as type IV female genital mutilation (FGM), WHO lumps this procedure together with FGM procedures that pose health hazards to women.⁸ It completely disregards the ways in which this practice, encoded within the *Ssenga* institution, has enhanced sexual pleasure for women, and expanded their perceptions of themselves as active sexual beings. Interestingly, harmful cosmetic procedures (e.g. clitoral piercing) sometimes performed in Western countries are not listed under type IV FGM. Through such discourse, this global health body writes this African practice of sexual enhancement into the broad negative rubric of harmful cultural practices that violate the rights of women and children. Far from suffering feelings of ‘incompleteness, anxiety and depression’⁹ that WHO associates with this practice, most of those interviewed in this study spoke positively of this cultural practice. This ‘lived experience’ of Baganda women contradicts the negative blanket characterisation of the cultural practice of labia elongation offered by WHO.

6 Eroticism and sexual etiquette in the marital chamber

The basic *Ssenga* message to married women is: ‘be a nice, humble wife but turn into a *malaya* (prostitute) in your bedroom!’ As a sure recipe for healthy sexual relations, women are constantly advised by *Ssengas* to throw shyness, coyness and embarrassment out the bedroom window. When *Ssengas* are talking about ‘bedroom matters’, their whole demeanour and comportment changes. They adopt a sensual,

sexy voice to underscore their messages. In fact, a radio *Ssenga* will only be hired if she is endowed with a deep, soothing, romantic voice that will charm her listeners.

Among the erotic paraphernalia associated with Kiganda sexuality are the stringed colourful waist beads called *obutiti*. Traditionally, the *butiti* were made out of tiny, delicate clay beads that would make a tinkling or rattling sound as they knock against each other with any slight movement. The sight of a woman adorned with rows of *butiti* around her waist strutting around the bedroom, excites her male partner. Similarly when a man twirls the *butiti* around or rubs them against the woman’s body, they function as a stimulant or aphrodisiac. Special herbs are often injected or otherwise soaked into the beads to add to their potency.

Usually, during a private *Ssenga* session, observers will be taught how to enhance their lovemaking techniques through a guided performance. Two *Ssengas* may lie on a bed and take the couple or group through a blow-by-blow display of ‘how it is supposed to be done’. They come prepared with all the sex gear and gadgets. Key among this sexual equipment is the *nkumbi*, a large, soft, absorbent white cloth used for hygienic purposes during and after sex. The practices and beliefs associated with *enkumbi* constitute a ritual enterprise that in itself is very important to the Baganda people. *Ssengas* even teach various ‘lovemaking noises’, for example *okukona ennyindo* (nasal), *okusiiya* (hiss) and *okusika omukka* (breath/gasp). Watching two half-naked women in bed did not seem to suggest lesbianism to the absorbed tutees.

After the demonstration, the *Ssengas* display the different paraphernalia for sale, including *enkumbi*, *obutiti* and various sex herbs. A variety of herbs are prescribed for different effects. Among the aphrodisiacs recommended are *ekibwankulata* (the local viagra) and *mulondo* or *olukindukindu*, both of which are said to be potent in bestowing ‘power to the bull’. Several herbs are suggested for tightening the vagina and maintaining its warmth – the smoke of *ekkozi* smouldered in a porcelain clay bowl directly into the vagina is recommended for this purpose. The Baganda prefer ‘wet sex’ to ‘dry sex’. To this end, the leaves of *ekibwankulata* and the bark of *kiffabakazi* are either smoked into the vagina or boiled and taken orally to enhance vaginal lubrication.

The crushed and rolled leaves of *kajjampuni* will tighten the vaginal walls if inserted a few hours before sex. Many women routinely grow these herbs in their backyards and gardens. Love potions recommended by *Ssengas* are numerous, such as the leaves of *kawulira* plant: when these are mixed into vegetables during cooking and fed to a man, they are supposed to win his favour.

7 Conclusion

The article has explored the dynamism and complexity of sexual culture as illustrated by the institution of *Ssenga*. Sexuality is a site for the production of hegemonic gender discourse, presenting both constraints and opportunities for empowerment. In many African contexts, the relationship of women to their own bodies is often different from the disembodied, negative relations rooted in the legacy of colonialism.

'Body politics' for African women also hold an empowering subtext, reflected through resistance, negotiation, identity, self-desire, pleasure and silence. Whereas colonial and postcolonial forces attempted

to exercise hegemony over learning processes around sexuality via the state and its 'modern' public health and welfare institutions (which have not been maintained), the institution of *Ssenga* among the Baganda continues to dominate in this arena. Not only has it endured and survived but it has also expanded to correspond to the changes in the political economy of the country and the entire African region.

This study widens academic research on and theorisations of sexuality as a zone of pleasure in Uganda specifically, and the African continent generally. One important lesson that I learned from this research experience was that when we go beyond the traditional studies on African sexuality (which primarily focus on reproduction, violence and disease) to explore the area of desire and pleasure, we gain deeper insights into this complex subject. Broadening the scope of our research on sexuality in this way offers a fresh perspective on strategic interventions for critical areas such as sexual rights, HIV/AIDS and development.

Notes

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- 1 See the Media Council ruling: 'In the Matter of the Press & Journalists Act' and 'In the Matter of the Media Council' and 'In the Matter of a Play, *The Vagina Monologues*' (unpublished), 16 February 2005. See A. Wasike and E. Wafula, 'Government Opposes *Vagina Monologues*', *New Vision* 11 February 2005; F. Ahimbisibwe, 'Vagina Play Dropped', *New Vision*, 18 February 2005.
 - 2 By the time the play was banned, pre-sale tickets worth Ushs. 20 million (US\$11,500) had been collected. After the ban, only 20 people collected their ticket refunds. This was an important endorsement of people's solidarity with the cause and a protest to government (see 'Women

- 3 *Activists Blame Government for Violence*', *Daily Monitor* 28 June 2005: 4; 'Women Activists Fetch sh20m', *New Vision* 28 June 2005: 4).
- 4 *Ssenga* Hajjat Mariam Kayoga, *Muyizi Tasubwa*, Radio Simba, 18 September 2004 at 12.40 a.m.
- 4 *Ssenga* Katana, Public Talk, Pride Theatre, 24 November 2004, 6.00–9.00 p.m.
- 5 *Ssenga* Nakibuule Mukasa, *Abayita Ababiri*, Radio Simba, 5 December 2004, 5.00–7.00 p.m.
- 6 *Ssenga* Eseza Najjemba, *Guno Mulembe ki? Akaboozi ku Bbiri FM*, 23 November 2004, 5.35 p.m.
- 7 The cultural aesthetic practice of elongating the inner folds of the labia minora is quite common among several Bantu speaking communities of Eastern and Southern Africa, e.g. the Tutsi (Rwanda), the Basotho (Lesotho), the Shona (Zimbabwe), the Nyakyusa and Karewe (Tanzania), the Khoisan (Southern Africa) and the Tsonga (Mozambique).
- 8 See WHO definition of type IV FGM at www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/
- 9 *Ibid.*

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