

Skimpy Fashion and Sexuality in Sheebah Karungi's Performances

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Myriad factors determine people's choice of dress for any particular occasion, but when the event is a musical performance in a short-lived stage appearance, or in a music video meant to be viewed widely and possibly eternally, what to wear becomes a significant decision. For a musician, dress, or what can be called costume, is a channel through which she, others behind her act, and her audience communicate a desired message about her music and her stage and possibly off-stage identities. The different parties involved may have divergent or complementary wishes about this message. As such, the final outfit chosen for a performance is either the aspiration of the most powerful agent involved, such as the performer, costume designer or producer, or a negotiated compromise that variously serves the competing needs.

This article is concerned with how the costumes of the Ugandan 'Afropop' musician, Sheebah Karungi, often called 'sexy,' involve her in a nexus of self-presentation and sexuality. Born to a Ugandan mother and Rwandese father, Sheebah, as she is commonly known, dropped out of secondary school in Form Two because the Ugandan education system did not offer her many opportunities to dance (Maganja, 2015). Now 29, she began her performance career in a dance group known as the Obsessions at the age of 15, but later switched to a musical career (Rumanzi, 2012). Her maiden hit song, *Ice Cream*, catapulted her to fame amongst Ugandan audiences in 2013, earning her first music award in the Hipipo Awards. In 2016, two of her songs, *Nipe Yote* and *Otubatisa*, were again nominated for these awards under the 'Afropop' category.

'Afropop' is an all-encompassing term for popular African music that combines electric instruments and African melodic sounds and rhythms favorable for popular African dance movements.¹ Whereas most music produced in Uganda could quite easily fall within this classification, the Hipipo

Awards' Afropop category includes songs with relatively fast danceable beats, and with lyrics predominantly written in African languages. Often played in night clubs and night performances, Sheebah's songs are fast and sometimes funky. When performing, the artiste's trademark style of dress includes hot pants, see-through mini dresses, skirts and other suggestive outfits – a style that I term 'skimpy' in this article. Costumes in Sheebah's music videos tend to also be skimpy and sexually provocative, albeit with some measure of consideration for possible younger and conservative viewers.

Given the difficulty of securing an interview with the popular singer, this article is based on a reading of media images of her skimpy costuming during performances,² analysis of excerpts of media interviews with her, and my observation of both the performer and her audience during one of her night-time musical concerts, *Nkwatako*, which took place in Kampala in April 2016. My analysis is premised on Desiree Lewis' (2009) elaboration of the notion of the "gendered spectacle." According to Lewis, public spectacles "play an important part in socially marking bodies, and therefore also in creating political meanings about gendered and other social identities" (2009: 127). Therefore, they can also be mobilised as "powerful signifiers of resistance to oppression" (2009: 127), including in the form that Lewis calls "riotous bodily performance" (136). I argue that performance allows Sheebah to resist social and cultural control of her body, and to exhibit this resistance to her audience. Through her dress and body she negotiates conservative structures and ideologies around female fashion and artistic performance in Uganda, thereby asserting her individuality and sexuality. The article starts with a historical overview of tensions around skimpy dress in Africa, before focusing on Sheebah's particular embodiment of the style in a global culture which is a site of mixed reactions to the effects of globalisation on individual, communal and national identities (Eriksen, 2005).

Skimpy Fashioning in Africa

For the most part, Buganda, the part of Uganda where Sheebah is most popular, has historically controlled women's dress codes, expression, movement into the public sphere and sexuality (Musisi, 2001; Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2005). Women in pre-colonial and colonial Buganda who were known to be publicly free and proud of their sexuality were demonised by not only missionaries, Baganda politicians and colonial administrators, but

also by fellow Baganda women who conformed to the prescribed conservative moral standards for femininity. The so-called ‘free women’ of Kampala city were patrolled and derogatory names were crafted to mark them as different, bad and deviant (Musisi, 2001). Negative labeling of such women was a tool to dissuade others from exploring sexual freedom.

In Africa, control of women’s access to the public sphere, and to freedom of their bodies, is not restricted to Ugandan history. Scholarship on African theatre suggests that, in many African countries, the social status of colonial and early post-colonial female performers was marked by negative perceptions about their career choice and identities as women. Regardless of their dress code, many female performers in these periods were castigated for their mere presence in public spaces, in this case on theatrical stages, and they were often regarded as ‘women of loose morals’ (Article 19 African Programme, 2003; Banham et al., 2002). Women’s dress, in particular skimpy fashion, is still an issue of contention across the continent. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2011) and Brigid Sackey (2003), for instance, cite recent public and government attempts to outlaw the fashion in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Gambia. This is despite the fact that, in itself, flesh-revealing dress is not new on the continent. Many African cultures traditionally permit and normalise the baring of flesh, from the Masai people of Kenya and Tanzania to the Karamajong of Uganda, to the ‘young virgins’ paraded annually before the King of Swaziland to be chosen as brides.

The literature suggests that the introduction of Islam and Arabic culture, as well as European colonialism in Africa, served to encourage conservative and moralising attitudes towards the revealed or barely clothed body, female bodies in particular. For example, Margaret Hay (2004) notes that the once minimally dressed Luo and Luyia people in Kenya were encouraged by colonial administrators and missionaries to cover their bodies: men were to be covered in the coastal Arab-influenced garment called ‘kanzu,’ and women in two-metre length pieces of cloth. In Ghana, the resistance of the Talensi people to replacing their traditional dress style of skin, waist beads and leaves with European-style clothing was broken when the British High Commissioner summoned their earth priest and dressed and paraded him in cloth (Allman, 2004).

Many postcolonial African governances sustained the colonial practice of monitoring and attempting to control the public exposure of female bodies,

and hence skimpy fashion continues to be viewed through moralistic lenses across the continent. Close scrutiny of the moral opinions and agitations over this fashion brings to the fore the deep fear behind them: the fear that skimpy clothes will unleash female sexuality and free the female body from the tight clutches of patriarchy (Machera, 2004; Muhanguzi, 2014; Tamale, 2005). Women's bodies are positioned as sites of a so-called 'African morality' that must be guarded from erosion (Bakare-Yusuf, 2011), a task to which self-appointed male and female patriarchal agents apply themselves (Kiruga, 2014). This policing of women's morality, dress and freedom ignores women's subjectivities, desires and agency (Arnfred, 2004; Bakare-Yusuf, 2011; Musisi, 2001). However, not all women conform to conservative dressing, Sheebah being a clear and visible example.

Despite all the reprimanding of skimpy wear in Uganda, which peaked in the passing of the Anti-Pornography Act in 2014 that rendered it illegal to publicly expose parts of the body deemed sexual or sexually exciting (The Republic of Uganda, 2014; also see Tamale, this issue), Sheebah continues to appear in skimpy clothing. In July 2015, in an interview with the *Observer* newspaper, the artiste was asked if she would give up this fashion when starting a family. Her reaction was candid: "I would still dress up like that, even if I was a *nnalongo*³ of six children. Yes I would, because that is who I am. It has nothing to do with age, nothing to do with whether I have children or not. It is who I am. I feel more comfortable revealing my nice body." A number of nude pictures of Sheebah have also found their way on to social media but rather than expressing shame about this, Sheebah declared that she felt sorry that "twisted minds" exploit innocent female victims by exposing private images of them without their consent (Maganja, 2015).

Constructing a 'Sexy' Identity through Dress and Performance

Sexual freedom is visibly imprinted in most images of Sheebah performing.⁴ It is conveyed by almost all the elements of her embodied appearance, in her outfits, body posture, facial expression, gestures and dance moves. While Sheebah's costumes boldly reveal expanses of her flesh, suggesting an expression of bodily freedom, her postures help to reinforce this signification further. Sheebah's typical postures include: lying down on her back; lying with her torso arched upwards; sitting cross-legged; and standing with her

legs apart and her hands positioned between them or rubbing her groin. Her facial expressions also contribute to the sexy message. For example, in one picture she licks her lips and in another, she strains her face, like a woman about to reach an ecstatic sexual moment. Quite a number of Sheebah's stage images are provocative and portray a woman aware of and confident in her sexuality. On stage, she is a free performer who uses every part of her body in communication. She disregards many of the local traditions well known to her and her audience that seek to control the movement and posture of female bodies lest they expose parts of the body deemed private.

The sexualised meanings of Sheebah's stage image become more apparent when considered together with the content of her music. Sheebah sings about love and sex. *Ice Cream*, for example, is a description of how she feels that she may die if she does not get a 'lick,' a suggestive reference to either a penis or its products. *Twesana* describes her admiration for a handsome man who she alleges resembles her in ways and looks. In this song, Sheebah attempts to initiate a love/sexual relationship with the subject of her admiration. An even clearer signification of Sheebah's romantic and sexual messages appears in her duet, *Go Down Low*. This song suggests that, at intervals, Sheebah and her co-singer, Pallaso, should take up the lower sexual position.

From my observations at the *Nkwatako* concert, Sheebah's music, dress and behaviour on stage seemed neither unfamiliar nor repulsive to the audience. Many of the young women in the crowd wore similar clothes to the artiste and drinking, dancing, and often in romantic company, the audience rowdily cheered Sheebah on. The stage lights provided a favourable ambience in which Sheebah displayed her costumes and body provocatively. Her prominent yet protected position on the lit stage vis-à-vis her audience in the darker auditorium gave Sheebah greater chance to additionally use sexy gestures and dance moves. Such a performance would likely have been more difficult in a more open and well-lit public place.

Expressing Feminine Sexuality in Uganda

While performance gives Sheebah a particular opportunity to appear in skimpy fashion and communicate sexy messages, this form of agency is not limited to the stage. She uses skimpy and figure-hugging clothes as signifiers of her liberated sexuality even when she is not performing, such as when socialising with friends. Her dress code both on and off stage stubbornly

emphasises sexual independence and confidence. Sheebah's rebellion against bodily imprisonment in dress can also be read in some of her public communications. For example, on her Twitter account, the singer once posted the message "am Queen Sheebah the diva, a Uganda-based musician with lots of great music. To me the sky will always be the limit..." The biblical 'Queen of Sheba' is known for travelling a long distance in pursuit of King Solomon's wisdom, before getting caught up in a sexual entanglement with the king (Zeiger, 1996). By likening herself to the Queen of Sheba, Sheebah is laying claim on this figure's fame, search for wisdom and sexuality. To some degree, just like the Queen, Sheebah is successful at establishing her independence from social regulations about women's mobility, expression and search for fame.

On the Ugandan scene, although Sheebah's explicit and carefree public expression of sexuality is notable, open discussion of female sexuality is not altogether alien in the country, albeit restricted to designated sites. For example, Sylvia Tamale notes that through the institution of *Ssenga*, Baganda girls are tutored by their paternal aunts in 'erotic skills' and in the use of 'sexual paraphernalia', and 'aphrodisiacs' in the form of herbal perfumes, sensual oils and 'sexual beads' (2013: 268). Within the same community, the 'dancing the twins' ritual permits free sexual expression. During this ritual, as twins are welcomed into the world, with feasting, singing and dancing throughout the night and sometimes over several days, *naalongo* (their mother) transcends the traditional formalities restraining Baganda women's speech and narrates and sings in graphic detail about what her husband had to do, sexually, to make her pregnant with twins (Lutwama-Rukundo, 2010). Florence Muhanguzi (2014) discloses that low-income Banyankole and Bakiga women of Western Uganda also openly express their sexual needs to their husbands.⁵ Indeed, women's passivity during private sexual encounters is generally frowned upon in a number of Ugandan cultures.

If women's sexual expression is in itself not new in Uganda, why, then, does Sheebah stand out? The answer is to be found in the sites in which she communicates, and the candidness with which she does so. Whilst Sheebah situates her sexual communication in the public setting, the women in Western Uganda cited above restrict theirs to the private and very intimate sphere. Whereas the Buganda *naalongo(s)* also communicate their female sexuality in public, their audience mostly comprises a tight-knit collection of

relatives and friends. By contrast, Sheebah's address is to the general public. The modern commercial *Ssengas* described by Tamale (2005) also speak of sexuality in public, but they use camouflaged and proverbial language. Sheebah's sexual language is thinly veiled, at best. I argue, then, that in her costumes and music, Sheebah is engaging in explicit sexual advocacy, demanding for the right to free sexual expression by Ugandan women.

Global Raunch Culture and the Question of Empowerment

Sheebah's demand that skimpy style, and women's sexual expression, be allowed and respected in Uganda must also be understood as part of a broader culture – a global 'sexy dressing' trend in the music industry. It is situated in what Ariel Levy (2005) calls "raunch culture." Within this culture, Levy argues, women's sexuality and nudity have become publically acceptable and even expected in media. And, indeed, most contemporary African music performance is marked by skimpy fashion and explicit representations of female sexuality, from the lyrics of songs to the wriggling female bodies in bikinis, underwear and hot pants. There are clear similarities between Sheebah's style and that of other African performers like South African Pam Andrews, Ghanaian Mzbel, Ugandan Cindy, Nigerian Seyi Shay and Congolese Tshala Mwana, for instance.

Internationally, women's sexuality and nudity are now profitable commodities, packaged and sold in fashion, music, pornography, movies and a range of other sites. Sheebah explicitly situates herself within this cultural and commodified logic. For instance, she explained to a *New Vision* newspaper reporter: "musically speaking, I dress nude because that is my brand. I only do it for the sake of making my videos attractive...This is just a profession that has its own dynamics and dressing half-naked is one of them."⁶ The blatant commodification of women's bodies provokes a two-sided debate. On the one hand, some argue that it is a form of capitalist exploitation of women, while others see it as a sign of women's emancipation. Donald Mosher and Paula Maclan (1994), and Stephen Prince (1990), for example, suggest that the women involved are trapped in a culture that de-humanises their bodies by turning them into "commercial sexualised commodities." Prince (1990) propounds that the sexualised female figure, and the audience that consumes her, are equally de-humanised by the process. As the female performer is sexually objectified, the viewer increasingly loses his or her ethical human

relations with her and demands more, pushing the objectified woman to shed more and more clothing in order to satisfy her audience. This demand-supply relationship between audience and performer may mean that the performer's dress code gets skimpier and skimpier over time.

On the other hand, not all skimpily dressed or nude women are mere objects. For example, earlier in the article I cited Sheebah stating that she likes to reveal her “nice body” to her audience, and just above that she is knowingly commodifying it. In my research, I did not come across any utterances or indication from the artiste to the effect that she is unhappy about using her body as a means to her success. To the contrary, Sheebah expresses satisfaction with the rewards of her bodily exposure, namely money, fame, success, and greater self-esteem. A correlation has been found between sexual confidence and women's agency such as that exuded by Sheebah. Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall and Kate Hawkins (2013) suggest that women who view their sexuality positively are empowered by the knowledge and practice of pleasurable sex. They cease to see their bodies as mere objects for men's sexual satisfaction, or as requiring concealment and control, but rather as sources of pleasure and empowerment. They value their bodies and expect others to value them, too. Similarly, Dorothy Aken'ova (2013) argues that a woman who is confident sexually is more likely to be confident in other ways, including demanding that her rights – to education, freedom, self-actualisation and so on – are respected. The focus on female pleasure, according to Jolly et al. (2013), helps to deconstruct inequalities between women and men.

Conclusion

While ‘dressing up’ offers the dressed subject an opportunity to conform to, or contest, the social norms of her community, it also provides the community with an opportunity to attempt to redefine, refuse or accept the styles that this subject chooses. In Africa and elsewhere, women have more choices for how they dress to express and ostensibly empower themselves. ‘Raunch culture,’ of which one manifestation is sexually explicit dress, can be perceived as both empowering and disempowering for women. Through her dress, Sheebah is able to contest social norms about women's bodies and expression. In the gender and development context, this is a positive contribution, for it is possible that Sheebah's agentic demand for the respect

of women's free sexual expression and experience can translate into women's increased confidence and a greater demand for women's rights in Uganda, as suggested by Aken'ova (2005).

Endnotes

- 1 Retrieved from <http://www.afropop.org> on 22 December 2015.
- 2 See for example: <http://www.google.com/search?q=images+of+Sheeba+Karungi,> [www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240,](http://www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240) www.howwe.biz/himages/1411559907.html
- 3 *Nnaalongo* is a mother of twins. Twins are exalted in the cultures of Southern Uganda, and a woman who bears twins and earns the title is perceived as special, almost super-human, and her social status in these cultures is elevated. At the same time, stricter measures are applied to her social conduct. She is expected to be the epitome of the traditionally prescribed femininity of Buganda.
- 4 See for example [www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240,](http://www.ugandaonline.net/gallery/sheebakarungi?category=240) www.howwe.biz/himages/1411559907.html.
- 5 On the basis of these women's low income class, it could be assumed ordinarily that they are subjugated and lack voice.
- 6 Retrieved from www.chano8.com/sheeba-karungi-reacts-anti-pornography-law/ on 11 June 2016.

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