

# Eroticism, sensuality and "women's secrets" among the Baganda: A critical analysis



Sylvia Tamale<sup>1</sup>

## 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 list is endless. The connection and collision between human sexuality,<sup>2</sup> power and politics provided the major inspiration for this piece of research. Specifically, I wanted to explore the various ways in which the erotic is used both as an oppressive and empowering resource. In her compelling essay sub-titled *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 entailed much more than the sexual act, connecting meaning and form, infusing the body and the psyche. Before Lorde, Michel Foucault (1977; 1990) had demonstrated how the human body is a central component in the operation of power. He theorised the body as "an inscribed surface of invents" from which the prints of history can be read (Rabinow, 1984: 83).

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<sup>3</sup> of Uganda, namely the *Ssenga*.<sup>4</sup> When one speaks of "*ensonga za Ssenga*" (*Ssenga* matters) among the Baganda, this is at once understood to signify an institution that has persisted and endured through centuries as a tradition of sexual initiation. At the helm of this elaborate socio-cultural institution is the paternal aunt (or surrogate versions thereof), whose role is to tutor young girls and women in a wide range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotic instruction and reproduction.

In the heterogeneous metropolitan area of the capital city, Kampala, the phenomenon of "commercial *Ssengas*" has emerged, whereby women avail themselves for hire by young women or their parents to perform the traditional roles of *Ssenga*. In addition, the print, electronic and broadcast media have adopted *Ssenga* columns and call-in programmes.<sup>5</sup> *Ssenga* booklets are also

readily available for sale on the streets of Kampala. The institution is thus being transformed by “modernisation” and urbanisation, as well as capitalist economic practices within the liberalised market economy of Uganda.

The article opens by laying out the conceptual landscape that underlies Baganda women’s sexuality, followed by a brief note on the research process. A short historical evolution of the institution of *Ssenga* is then provided. I move on to explore some of the ways in which the erotic infuses the cultural lives of Baganda women, and discuss the erotic-textual constructions of Baganda women’s bodies before providing some concluding remarks.

### Conceptual framework



Sexuality is a key site through which women’s subordination is maintained and enforced in postcolonial Africa (McFadden, 2003; Pereira, 2003). This study, like others, was conducted against a backdrop of multiple patriarchies and the legacy of colonialism. Across Africa, the colonial era saw a politicisation of African women’s sexuality. In Uganda, the colonialists’ constructions and perceptions of Africans as profligate and hypersexual led to intensified surveillance and repression, of African women’s sexuality in particular. Having constructed the hyper-sexed female body, the case was made for the strict regulation and control of African women’s sexuality (Gilman, 1986; Commons, 1993). To do so, various legal and policy strategies and discourses in the areas of medical health and hygiene were deployed. Traditional customs, which in the first instance were seldom egalitarian, were reconfigured in order to introduce new sexual mores, taboos and stigmas. Women’s sexuality was medicalised and reduced in purpose to reproduction (Vaughan, 1991; Musisi, 2002). One result was the suppression of women’s sexuality, erotic culture and sexual expression. Colonialists worked together with African patriarchs to develop inflexible customary laws that evolved into new structures and forms of domination (Schmidt, 1991; Mama, 1996).

More broadly, the need to control and regulate women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity is crucial in capitalist societies. Marxist feminist theory draws our attention to the fact that such control consolidates male domination through men’s control of resources and their relatively greater economic power. The patriarchal family engenders these economic relations, in which men, as household heads, exercise control over the lives of women and children who effectively become the man’s property (Engels, 1972; Barrett and MacIntosh, 1985; Barrett, 1988). Heteronormativity thus forms one of the essential bases of power for men in the domestic arena.<sup>6</sup> Capitalism required a new form of

patriarchy to that which had existed in pre-colonial Uganda – one that embraced a particular (monogamous, nuclearised, heterosexual) family form (Zaretsky, 1976; Mama, 1997). As this model of patriarchy requires that the man's acquired property and wealth is passed on to his male offspring, it becomes important to control women's sexuality in order to guarantee the paternity and legitimacy of children when bequeathing property. To this end, the monogamy of women is required, without necessarily disturbing or challenging the polygynous sexuality normalised for men.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, capitalist patriarchal societies are characterised by a separation of the “public” sphere from the “private” sphere. The two spheres are highly gendered, with the former inhabited by men and the locus of socially valued activities, such as politics and waged labour, while the latter constitutes the mainly unremunerated and undervalued domestic activities performed by women. This necessitated the domestication of women's bodies and their relegation to the “private” sphere, where women provide the necessities of productive and reproductive social life *gratuitously* (thus subsidising capital)<sup>8</sup> while remaining economically dependent on their male partners (Zaretsky, 1976; Nicholson, 1986). Regulating and controlling women's sexuality, therefore, is central to the survival of patriarchal and capitalist structures and systems. It is an important means of maintaining the domesticity of African women.<sup>9</sup> It works to delineate gender roles and to systematically bar women from gaining access to and control of resources. In Africa, the process of separating the public-private spheres preceded colonisation, but was consolidated and reinforced by colonial policies and practices. Where there had been a blurred distinction between public and private life, colonial structures (legal and religious, for example) and policies (educational, for example) clarified and hardened this distinction, guided by an ideology that perceived men as public actors and women as private performers. Where domestic work had co-existed with commercial work in pre-colonial satellite households, a new form of domesticity, which existed outside production, was constructed. And where land had been communally owned in pre-colonial societies, this was replaced by a tenure system that allowed for absolute and individual (and predominantly male) ownership of land.

Orthodox religions, especially patriarchal forms of Christianity and Islam, stress the impurity and inherent sin of women's bodies (Goodson, 1991). Through proselytising, Africans were encouraged to reject their previous beliefs and values and to adopt the “civilised ways” of the colonial masters. New scripts, reflecting these moralistic and anti-sexual edicts, were inscribed (and



continue to be inscribed) on the bodies of African women, along with elaborate systems of control. (For an exploration of some contemporary systems of control developed in the northern states of Nigeria, see Charmaine Pereira's feature article in this issue of *Feminist Africa*.)

In Uganda, the institution of *Ssenga* has been reconfigured to suit the times (Kisekka, 1973; Sengendo and Sekatawa, 1999). The phenomenon of *Ssenga* represents one of the most powerful cultural inscribers of women's bodies among the Baganda. The institution of *Ssenga* facilitates and reinforces patriarchal power, while at the same time subverting and parodying it.

To help tease out the transgressional features of the *Ssenga* institution, I make use of Judith Butler's theories of subversion and performativity (1990). Butler makes a clear distinction between the concepts of "performativity" and "performance". She describes performance as a "bounded 'act'" that people do to conceal or reject performativity (wearing drag, for example). Performativity, on the other hand, is "a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer" (1993: 234). It is based on the idea that gender construction is a daily, habitual, learned act, based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. In this sense, we performatively produce and reproduce gender and sexuality. Through deconstructing the arrangement of gender and sexuality as constituted by the institution of *Ssenga*, I investigate some of the unexamined constructs of Kiganda femininity and masculinity. How has the evolution of *Ssenga* affected the [re]interpretation of entrenched norms concerning femininity, masculinity and subjectivity? Do we see any performativity, imitation and ambivalence in the institution of *Ssenga*? Are gender representations fluid and ambiguous within the framework of *Ssenga*?

African sexuality<sup>10</sup> is usually mediated through metaphors and symbols. One of the principal tenets of the institution of *Ssenga* is its elaborate use of metaphor. Not only does the institution construct metaphoric models for mapping Kiganda femininity, masculinity and sexuality, but it has also come to symbolise Kiganda sexuality. In this sense, "metaphor" is not used as a narrow linguistic device for figurative embellishment, nor as a form of convoluted communication, but as a fundamental mechanism for encoding knowledge (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Travers, 1996). Hence the use of metaphor by *Ssengas* and the symbolic significance of the institution become useful conceptual tools for analysing sexuality as a broad socio-cultural phenomenon.

To what extent does the institution of *Ssenga* reinforce patriarchal control of women's bodies in postcolonial Uganda? Does it represent any liberating



possibilities for women (that is, does it open up new opportunities for women to subvert patriarchal mechanisms for controlling women's sexuality)? What does an analysis of the *Ssenga* institution imply for the ways in which women live and are oppressed? These are the three main questions explored in this article.

## Methodology

Data collection and analysis were primarily guided by feminist research methodologies, which foreground the sexual experiences of participants, as well as the meanings and interpretations that they attach to those experiences (Reinharz, 1992). Thus, although quantitative methods were employed (for example, in the gathering of demographic data), qualitative research techniques of non-participant observation, informal interviews and focused group discussions dominated the study. Although the study area was limited to urban Kampala, the institution of *Ssenga* is ubiquitous in urban and rural Buganda.

A review of existing literature was conducted to gain insights into conceptual, historical and contemporary issues concerning the topic. Radio and television broadcasts of *Ssenga* programmes were taped and analysed.<sup>11</sup> In-depth interviews were conducted with 35 women and 17 men regarding their direct and/or indirect experiences with the institution of *Ssenga*. At least five commercial female *Ssengas* and one male *Ssenga* were interviewed. I also sat in on six "*Ssenga* sessions" as a non-participant observer.<sup>12</sup>

I focused on the experiences of female sexuality, although the research also tried to solicit the views of some male partners of women that have undergone *Ssenga* tutelage, as well as those that have not been influenced by the institution. A random sample, mainly from tertiary institutions, religious clubs and peri-urban households, was carried out in order to select interviewees. In addition, I interviewed several elders and some leaders of prominent women's NGOs. This enabled me to gain a better insight into the historical and contemporary significance of the institution of *Ssenga*.

Ethical issues in a research study of this nature are extremely poignant. While it is important to explore and understand African sexualities, the researcher must deal with the dilemma, for example, of how much to reveal of the community's "sex secrets". The fact that I myself am a Muganda did nothing to mitigate this ethical dilemma. In fact, my ethnic background and social position gave me considerable advantage and access as I gathered information, some of it extremely intimate. I did not hide my status as a researcher, and in spite of the nature of the topic under investigation, most participants spoke freely and fully.



In writing my report, therefore, I constantly faced the painful predicament of deciding how much to reveal, of balancing the delicate equation of knowledge production with respect for the age-old women's secrets within the *Ssenga* institution of the Baganda. Such "pain" emanated largely from my strong sense of in-group allegiance – especially to the "modern" *Ssengas*, whose confidence I had drawn on throughout the study. This conflicted with my other loyalties: to the African feminist scholarly community of which I am part, and to my principles as a sexual politics activist. I was therefore careful in selecting what information to reveal, the goal being to contribute to existing knowledge about African sexuality through my African feminist epistemic positioning.

## The role of *Ssenga* among the Baganda: Ancient and contemporary



### *A brief historical note on the Baganda people*

The social structure of the Baganda has a strong patriarchal, patrilineal and polygynous base, with a well-entrenched patrilian system of organisation. Every Muganda belongs to one of the 52 recognised totemic clans, and each clan forms a large extended family. Endogamous (intra-clan) marriages and sexual relations are, with a few exceptions, still strictly forbidden.

The traditional kingdom of Buganda has a rich history that dates back to the sixteenth century (Roscoe, 1911; Reid, 2002). With the *kabaka* (king) as the political head, Buganda's monarchical system was based on a hierarchical social structure shaped by gender, people's relationship to the *kabaka*, and the means of production (Kiwanuka, 1972). Social classes included chiefs, officials, sub-chiefs, retainers, peasants and slaves. Women were generally subordinate to men with the exception of the queen mother (*Namasole*) and the *kabaka*'s co-heir (usually his eldest sister) (*Lubuga*), who both wielded considerable political and economic power in the kingdom (Lebeuf, 1963; Schiller, 1990; Musisi, 1991; Jjuuko, 1993).

The kingdom enjoyed relative strength and stability during the pre-colonial era, and was protected by the British colonial administration, only to be abolished by the Republican government in 1966. It was restored in 1993, with the reinstatement of a largely ceremonial *kabaka*. In many ways, this restoration served to galvanise the Baganda into nostalgic attempts to revive their culture and traditions. However, too much socio-political current had flowed under the cultural bridge and things would never be the same again for the Baganda, as can be seen with regard to the transformed *Ssenga* institution.

Sexuality among the Baganda was traditionally defined along gender and class lines, with wifehood and motherhood central in shaping women's sexuality. The control of women's sexuality was demonstrated, for example, by a refusal to tolerate extramarital affairs by women, while at the same time endorsing male promiscuity, adultery and polygyny. Male dominance of women's sexuality was more pronounced within the ruling class.<sup>13</sup> Female virginity (*embeerera*) was highly valued (Kaggwa, 1999; Kimala 1995), although premarital sex did not seem to ruin women's future marriage prospects (Roscoe, 1911).<sup>14</sup>

Many Kiganda rituals, beliefs and taboos were (and to a certain extent still are) directly linked to women's sexuality and reproductive powers. For example, a married woman could not touch or go anywhere near her father-in-law.<sup>15</sup> It was also taboo for a mother to appear before, let alone touch, her son-in-law. Furthermore, it was taboo for men about to depart on hunting or fishing expeditions to come into contact with women, including sexual contact (Sacks, 1979: 212). During the planting season, menstruating women were barred from the fields, as it was believed that menstrual blood would adversely affect the harvests. Similarly, they could not cook food for the family nor touch a drum – a symbol of power. It is important to note, however, that such negative associations with women's menstruation and fertility in Buganda evolved over time. Historical accounts of the early agrarian magic of the Baganda illustrate the honour, fecundity and power associated with the rejuvenative properties of menstrual blood (Jjuuko, 1993: 110).



### *The historical context of Ssenga*

To my knowledge, no scholarly study has systematically analysed the Kiganda institution of *Ssenga*. Most of the historical material presented here is therefore largely based on oral histories, tales told to me by *Ssengas*, and popular beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

The origin of the special status attached to paternal aunts among the Baganda is not entirely clear. Magoba (not dated) suggests that paternal aunts evolved as tutors to young girls and women in ancient Buganda in response to the gender violence and abuse that took place within families. The male patriarch in the home often ruled his wives and children with an iron hand. Physical chastisement and wife abuse were accepted as part of his cultural duties. In order to offset this, *ba jajja* (grandmothers) came up with a plan for survival: paternal aunts were enlisted to tutor young girls in behavioural tactics that would save them from the wrath of their future husbands.

As the sister of the husband/father, the *Ssenga* was perceived as a reliable individual who would have free and unhindered access to her nieces at any



time; mothers' positions were not as secure, as they often fled their homes to escape the violence meted out to them. Moreover, among the patrilineal Baganda, men respected their sisters more than they did their wives. Among the father's sisters, one would be selected (on the basis of her exemplary behaviour) to play the role of *Ssenga*. Her role was to "socialise" her nieces in the art of becoming "good" and subservient wives. Of course, sexual placation was a key strategy in counteracting domestic violence, and it was the *Ssenga's* responsibility to inculcate in her nieces values and behaviour geared to create maximum pleasure for the husband. Nevertheless, married women (with the exception of *kabakas'* and chiefs' wives) had the option of abandoning abusive husbands and returning to their parent's home, a cultural practice known as *okunoba*. Failure to sexually satisfy a wife was another recognised ground for *kunoba*.<sup>17</sup> Separation was usually followed by mediation and conciliation of the marital dispute, facilitated by clan elders, but with the *Ssenga* playing a prominent role.

Over the years, the status and power of the *Ssenga* grew among the Baganda. A man's sister became extremely influential in the selection of his wife (Kimala, 1995). If she did not approve of his choice, he had to abandon the woman in question. Sisters could even cause the dismissal of an existing wife. The *Ssenga* also attracted considerable respect from her nephews, nieces, brothers and sisters-in-law. She was accorded the same respect as one's father-in-law. Use of vulgar speech was generally not permitted among the Baganda. However, the *Ssenga* was exempted from this taboo. As a result, *Ssengas'* advice to their charges abounds in "sex talk", masked in metaphors and symbols.

*Ssenga* also featured among the indigenous religions of the Baganda. Among the 28 "gods" (*balubaale*) venerated by the Baganda was *Nagaddya*, also known as the "*Ssenga* of Buganda".<sup>18</sup> Her main shrine was located at Bbendegere near Nkumba, Entebbe, and she was responsible for both marriage and harvests. No *kabaka* would get married before visiting *Nagaddya's* shrine.<sup>19</sup> The interface between sexuality and the institution of *Ssenga* is evident in this ancient religious tradition, as are the links between human and plant reproduction.

A *Ssenga* could freely come and go in her brother's home under the aegis of instructing the children. She could even take his children to her own home for tutelage. The focus, however, was on the girls (her nieces), from whom she would select her heir. Her responsibility was to ensure that young girls became well-versed in appropriate feminine behaviours and roles; these included the proper ways a good girl should sit, walk, conduct herself, respect elders, prepare food, and so on. The young adolescent would also be instructed in the

ritual of “visiting the bush,” which involved a procedure of stretching or elongating her inner labia.<sup>20</sup> As soon as a girl started menstruating, the *Ssenga* would begin preparing her for marriage.

Under the ancient system, marriages were not pre-arranged, but the *Ssenga* nevertheless played a pivotal role in the courtship and negotiations surrounding her nieces’ marriages. As her primary responsibility was to groom her nieces to become “good” subservient wives or co-wives, a husband who was dissatisfied with his bride’s behaviour, particularly her “bedroom etiquette”, would blame it on the laxity of her *Ssenga*, even returning the bride to the *Ssenga* for “proper” training.

However, this tutelage also included some empowering messages. For instance, a *Ssenga* would encourage her nieces to engage in some home industry or economic ventures (such as weaving or pottery) in order to avoid total dependence on her husband. The *Ssenga* also made it clear that a wife did not have to tolerate an abusive spouse; that she had the right to *kunoba*. Needless to say, sexuality featured prominently in *Ssenga*’s tutorials, which would focus on erotic skills, sexual paraphernalia and aphrodisiacs in the form of herbal perfumes, sensual oils, sexual beads (*obutiti*), and so on.

In their bid to eliminate “harmful cultural practices” and to westernise the sexual morality of the natives, missionaries and the colonial establishment showed 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... Sex became an area that required legislation that would put individuals under colonial surveillance. The medical and socio-political 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 (2002: 101).

A massive “moral purity campaign” was launched by the colonial administration in the early twentieth century, which threatened many of the values of the *Ssenga* institution. Although the *Ssenga* represented an ideal establishment through which the British could spread their Christian sexual ethics 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. Perhaps for this reason, the cultural institution of *Ssenga* remained intact through the colonial era.



As in many other African cultures, marriage and the family (for which, 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, this *Ssenga* institution established (and still influences) patterns of expectation for Baganda men and women, ordering the social processes of everyday life (see Lorber, 1994). Hence, contrary to popular belief, the institution of *Ssenga* is not restricted to erotology, nor is it an “Aphrodite cult” of the kind described by Abdoulaye in his paper on the Lawbe people of Senegal (1999); it extends into every area of Baganda women’s lives.<sup>21</sup> The present study reveals that *Ssenga* as an institution is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities. As we shall see later, along with the main theme of subservience, we find subtexts of defiance, manipulation and control by women.



### *Contemporary influences and the Ssenga institution*

The institution of *Ssenga* has in many ways exhibited resilience and tenacious adaptability in the wake of widespread socio-political and economic changes in Uganda during the last few decades. The hardships that have dogged Uganda since the early 1970s as a result of political instability, economic mismanagement and civil unrest have had a significant impact on the average household. Specifically, the various attempts to adjust the structure of Uganda’s economy through IMF- and World Bank-prescribed policies since the early 1980s have greatly affected women and the ideology of domesticity (Tamale, 2001; UWONET, 1998). The devaluation of the shilling and liberalisation of the economy, for example, led to an increase in commodity prices; with higher food prices, the dietary and nutritional standards of most urban homes fell. As those responsible for the welfare of the home, women bore the brunt of these and other crises. In addition to their traditional reproduction and production roles in the domestic arena, many women were forced to engage in income-generating activities outside their homes (mostly in the informal sector) to make ends meet.

The emergence of commercial *Ssengas* represented just one of the creative ways that women responded to the diminished economic opportunities in urban areas like Kampala. But far from being a simple demand-and-supply response in a highly competitive liberalised economy, the new phenomenon radically transformed this traditional institution. The traditional role of *Ssenga* thus metamorphosed into a new, liberalised form; its discourse shifted from the “private” to the “public” sphere. Today, the phenomenon of commercial

*Ssengas* has overtaken natal aunts. It is not uncommon for young women to hire commercial *Ssengas* for purposes of tutelage in sexual matters, and even to stand in as their *Ssengas* at traditional bridewealth ceremonies.

A historical and unpaid institution that had served the specific role of initiating young girls into 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 by the historical context and the vacuum created by socio-economic and political circumstances. 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 career opportunity, providing a material base for an ongoing socio-cultural institution.<sup>22</sup> The numerous call-in *Ssenga* programmes that have emerged on various vibrant FM radio stations, as well as 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 everyday public discourse.<sup>23</sup>

Men were quick to cash in on this new career opportunity. Within the new discourse of liberalised sexuality, a male *Ssenga* is referred to as *kojja*.<sup>24</sup> In fact, it is not new for men to shift into traditionally female tasks once such activity enters the paid labour market (for example, cooking as chefs and sewing as designers). But because male *Ssengas* are a relatively new development, normative reference to them is rare in the sexuality discourse.

Today's *Ssengas* include both "conservative" elements that refuse to bend from century-old practices and "progressive" ones that move with the times. The age and education of the *Ssenga* seem to be influencing factors here, with younger, more highly-educated *Ssengas* leaning towards more liberal views than their older, less educated counterparts. Other contemporary influences that have changed the traditional institution of *Ssenga* include religion, education, feminism, HIV/AIDS, increased intermarriage and information technology. Some *Ssengas*, for example, have embraced the mobile telephone and the Internet.<sup>25</sup> But, as we shall see in the next section, in the context of "modernity," the institution has continued to shape urban domesticity. The ancient and the modern exist in delicate balance, as is reflected in a common *Ssenga* mantra, "*Ssabasajja awangale*" (long live the king). The institution of *Ssenga* thus remains a vital cog in the socio-political wheel of the Buganda kingdom. This is reflected in the fact that the Minister for Culture and Tradition in the kingdom, Nakibuule Mukasa, is herself a commercial *Ssenga*.



## Exploring the contours of the erotic landscape

The contradictions and dilemmas surrounding Ugandan women's sexuality come into bold relief when the issues of women's eroticism and pleasure are discussed in public. While women's sensuality and eroticism are recognised, there is at the same time a great fear of their sexuality. Heteronormativity is promoted at every turn, and women are largely barred from expressing their sexuality in the public domain. Women's sexuality is thus confined to the hidden realm of "women's secrets", with the *Ssengas* acting as the chief custodians of Baganda women's sexual archive.

The extent and degree of these contradictions were seen in full force in February 2005, when four Ugandan women's groups tried to stage Eve Ensler's play, *The 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 performance, arguing that the title was "offensive to cultural sensibilities" and that the content was "obscene" and "promoted lesbianism in Uganda".<sup>26</sup> Not only did this action on the part of the patriarchal state deny women's basic freedom of expression, it also exposed its fear of women's sexual liberation. The play threatened to disturb the order of gender and sexual politics in Ugandan society.<sup>27</sup> But beneath the surface of such overt political repression lie women's subversive and counter-hegemonic struggles. Before examining the subversive and transformative elements of *Ssenga*, let us consider the use of metaphor in this institution.

### *"Mortar-pestle dialogues" – metaphorically speaking*

The *Ssenga* institution wields remarkable power in constructing knowledge systems. Whenever the *Ssenga* tradition is invoked, it is a metaphor for sexuality and therefore a threat to conservative interests. Ironically, as the *Ssenga* grooms, moulds and regulates young girls to turn them into "good Baganda women", she performatively and discursively reinforces the dominant culture (patriarchal, heterosexual and heteronormative). But parts of the *Ssenga* discourse also destabilise assumptions that underlie the dominant culture, holding potential for gender transgression.

As already noted, 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 for communicating about sexuality, shifting it from the "private" to the "public" realm. Such coded communications



about sexuality are decipherable by women and other adults, but hidden from children and outsiders.

Through sexual metaphors and erotic symbolism, the *Ssenga* institution is able to articulate and define Kiganda sexual identities, which are central to gendered cultural prescriptions. The cultural dimensions of sexuality that shape its practice and the values associated with it can be seen in the language used to describe sexual representations (see Thornton, 2003). Metaphoric concepts are derived from the everyday life of the Baganda people. This means that knowledge about sexuality is facilitated by elements of structured understanding drawn from familiar reality.<sup>28</sup> Below, I focus on two metaphorical themes that are part of Kiganda life – agriculture and the game of *omweso* – to demonstrate this point.

As cultivating crops is the primary economic activity of the Baganda, many sexual metaphors and symbols are couched in language that reflects this. We have already noted the historical-cultural tie between women's and plant reproduction among the Baganda. Related activities – ploughing, sowing, watering, weeding, harvesting and eating – are all freely used for encoding knowledge about the sexual lives of Baganda women and men. 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 experiences 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 into the sexual routine; and a woman who is not adequately lubricated is referred to as *asiriza entamu* (she “burns the cooking pot”). The sexual symbolism of mortar and pestle is universal, with the *omusekuzo* (pestle) signifying an erect phallus and *okumusekula* (pounding) referring to the rhythmic movements of sexual intercourse.

Games are another familiar icon within Kiganda culture, and thus provide another popular theme for speech among the Baganda. Here, I use the example of an ancient Kiganda board game called *omweso* (mancala), which has gained international status. It is of the “count and capture” genre of games, and involves two players moving seeds (*empiki*) along a wooden board.<sup>29</sup> The objective of the game is to capture the opponent's seeds until she or he is no longer able to move. The terms used in *omweso* are sexually suggestive, for example, “sowing” (i.e., moving the seeds), “capture” and “reverse-capture” (taking opponent's seeds). There are various ways that the game may be won,



including *ekutema* (literally, to chop), *akakyala* (literally, feminine) and *Emitwe-Ebiri* (literally, two-headed). Hence, *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’omuddirijano*” (playing back-to-back *mweso* games), all of which have sexual undertones.

Traditional folklore, lullabies and children’s songs also provide useful metaphorical models to mediate sexuality messages among Baganda women. Teaching about sexuality involves many elements for the *Ssenga*, but the most important is the ability to impart conceptual understanding and a sense of intellectual excitement about the topic. The creative use of metaphor is a vital element in this process. At the same time, *Ssenga*’s metaphoric representation of sexuality is a source of power that threatens conservative forces in society.

Such “structuring metaphors” therefore facilitate the construction and consolidation of sexuality by the *Ssenga* institution. They also validate gender power relations among the Baganda, as well as helping to create and sustain the discourse of heteronormativity (as seen in the mortar and pestle metaphor, for instance). Hence, the subordination, dependency and control of women is both maintained and disrupted by the institution of *Ssenga*. We turn now to examine some of the more subversive or disruptive subtexts.

### *Gender/sexuality non-conformity: Ssenga and the reconfiguration of urban domesticity*

As indicated earlier, many *Ssengas* do not necessarily conform to the normative script of gender and sexuality; there are *Ssengas*, for example, who carry emancipatory messages concerning women’s autonomy and economic independence. Some examples are given here.

Live with a man for some time before committing yourself to him in marriage.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

The debate that ensued following this last remark during *Ssenga Najjemba's* call-in radio programme was most interesting, indicating the potential of *Ssengas* 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 radical views expressed by *Ssenga Najjemba* are in fact fairly common among educated commercial *Ssengas*. They are nevertheless generally supportive of Kiganda culture, with *Ssenga Najjemba* herself explaining that she strongly supports those aspects of Kiganda tradition and custom that "hold value".

One commercial *Ssenga* noted that the question most frequently asked by women in her sessions is: "*N'omukazi amala?*" meaning, "Do you mean even a woman can orgasm?" She further revealed that she herself had never experienced an orgasm in fifteen years of marriage, during which she had five children. It was not until she had an extramarital relationship that she discovered *entikko y'omukazi* (a woman's peak). This was reason enough for her to *kunoba*, and she now has a relationship that is sexually fulfilling.

As a result, explicit and daring 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 I attended, that of *Ssenga Katana's* was the most striking for sheer presence, charisma and dynamism – her style resembled that of the charismatic evangelical pastors that are so popular in Uganda today.

Similarly, those being tutored by *Ssengas* are beginning to challenge hegemonic narratives embedded in the *Ssenga* institution and to question their



logic. For example, some of the young women at a private *Ssenga* session that I attended, rejected the part of the *Ssenga*'s core lesson that insisted that they 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?<sup>34</sup>

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. The demand that men also receive training in how to please their female partners sexually is a radical move on the part of young Baganda women. Most importantly, it points to the fact that the Baganda regard sex not primarily for purposes of procreation, but for leisure and pleasure. This relocates sex from the medicalised/reproduction realm to the erotic zone. The erotic thus has the potential to be an empowering resource for Baganda women.

Traditional sexuality has been complemented and enhanced with "modern" and "foreign" sexual practices. For instance, some *Ssengas*' instruction now includes lessons in oral sex, deep kissing, masturbation, women's ejaculation, orgasm, and other forms of sexual self-discovery:

Most of us are shy when it comes to kissing and oral sex.... Try it, you'll love it! ... I myself was truly ignorant about female ejaculation until I met my current lover.... It works best with the Banyankore *kachabali* (outer-course) technique. If your lover knows what he's doing, you'll pour rivers and experience multiple orgasms at the same time.<sup>35</sup>

For a fee, commercial *Ssengas* are ready to provide more intimate one-on-one instruction and advice to individuals and couples on a topic of their choice. Often, a message included in the curriculum is that men can be controlled and manipulated through sex. In other words, they encourage women to use sex to undermine patriarchal power from behind a façade of 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.<sup>36</sup>

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 even subversive. The engagement in explicit and/or subversive sex talk, as well as the commentary that links men’s sexual power to their economic and political dominance reveals not only women’s “embedded struggles”, but also points to a legacy of cultural forms that marginalised groups appropriate in defining and pursuing their own needs and desires.

An analysis of commercial *Ssengas*’ matchmaking services further reveals that Baganda women are beginning to take the initiative in sexual relations. For example, a popular segment of the radio programme, *Muyizi Tasubwa*<sup>37</sup> is given to reading out short resumes of those that seek partners. *Ssengas*’ application forms require the applicant to provide a photograph plus information regarding their age, tribe, clan, religion, marital status, etc., as well as their preferred criteria for a potential partner. Almost half of those that send in requests are 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.

Of course, this sometimes sparks a backlash, as already seen in the government ban on staging *The Vagina Monologues*. Likewise, conservative forces denigrate the presence of *Ssenga* on university campuses and associate the practice with the promotion of promiscuity and immorality. During Makerere University’s orientation week last year, the authorities roundly condemned commercial *Ssengas* who “hawked their advice” to female students. The authorities were particularly concerned by the emphasis that campus *Ssenga* sessions placed on sexual intercourse techniques, how to attract men, and how to extract money from a lover. They felt that these were not matters that “honourable educated girls” should be focusing on.<sup>38</sup> It is clear, however, that much of their discomfort derived from the potential that such *Ssenga* sessions held for young women to take control of their sexuality.

So we see the significance of the *Ssenga* institution in redefining and reframing the ideology of urban domesticity in Kampala over the last two decades, 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. In the next section, we focus on aspects of the body and desire.

## Constructions of bodily text

Women in diverse cultures have always “fixed” or otherwise transformed their bodies (through dieting, plastic surgery, waxing, piercing, tattooing and various forms of grooming) 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. Such “packaging” takes many forms and may be divided into two stages: pre-pubertal and marital.



### *The cultural labia: Pre-pubertal vaginal preparation*

Between the age of nine and twelve, before experiencing menarche (first menstruation), a Muganda girl would be guided by her *Ssenga* to prepare her genitals for future sex. This was done through a procedure that involved elongating the labia minora. Known as *okukyalira ensiko* (visiting the bush), this rite was traditionally performed in a clearing among bushes where the herbs (for example, *mukasa*, *entengotengo*, and *oluwoko*) used for the procedure 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.<sup>39</sup> Worse still, if a man discovered that his bride had not “visited the bush”, he would send her back home for the *Ssenga* to fulfil her duty. According to Sengendo and Sekatawa:

A [Muganda] woman who did not elongate the labia minora is traditionally despised and regarded as having a “pit” (*kiwowongole, kifufunkuli, funkuli muwompogoma*). If a bride was found not to have elongated her labia minora, she would be returned to her parents with disgrace (1999).

Over the years, how has this culturally specific practice been mediated and transfigured? When I began this study, I was under the impression that the practice was dying out. However, the findings revealed not only that 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 urban women have chosen to opt out of

this cultural practice, dismissing it as “useless and primitive”. It may no longer be obligatory for most young urban women, but it certainly remains a well-entrenched tradition, especially among the Baganda aristocracy.

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. Secondly, elongated labia serve as a kind of self-identifier for Baganda women – the stamp of legitimacy for a “true” Muganda woman.<sup>40</sup> The *Ssenga* understands that a Muganda woman without elongated labia is a “half-baked” one. Similarly, many participants in this study were of the view that it was a practice worth preserving (see Sengendo and Sekatawa, 1999). The third function is a purely aesthetic one; several Baganda men interviewed said that they enjoyed looking at and fondling the stretched labia of a woman.

These findings contrast sharply with the definition put forward by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Classifying it and condemning it as type-IV female genital mutilation, the WHO lumps this procedure together with FGM procedures that pose health hazards to women.<sup>41</sup> 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 (such as 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”<sup>42</sup> that the 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 the WHO.

### *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. This is reflected in their



own demeanour: when *Ssengas* are talking about “bedroom matters”, their entire comportment and tone changes. They adopt a sensual, sexy voice to underscore their messages. In fact, a radio *Ssenga* will only be hired if she has a deep, soothing, romantic voice that will charm her listeners.<sup>43</sup>

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 knocked against each other with any slight movement.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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 sex gear and gadgets (including dildos). Key among this sexual equipment is the *nkumbi* (literal translation, hoe), 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; *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”), *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* smouldering in a porcelain clay bowl directly into the vagina is recommended for this purpose. The Baganda prefer “wet sex” to “dry sex”.<sup>46</sup> 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 for women. The crushed and rolled leaves of *kajjampuni* will tighten the vaginal walls if inserted a few hours before sex.<sup>47</sup> Many women routinely grow



these herbs in their backyards and gardens. Love potions recommended by *Ssenga* are numerous, such as the leaves of the *kawulira* plant. When these are mixed into vegetables during cooking and fed to a man, they are supposed to win his favour.

## Concluding remarks

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. The analysis of the socio-cultural institution of *Ssenga* in this study, therefore, aims to bring into sharper focus the politics, contradictions, anomalies, interlocking pieces and locations of Ugandan women’s sexuality. Much of the sexual knowledge and discourse around the *Ssenga* tradition is not very different from that found elsewhere in Uganda, or the rest of the African continent. What makes *Ssenga* unique is the institutionalised form that it takes.<sup>48</sup> The institution was set up to socialise and direct the sexual lives of Baganda women, schooling them in heteronormative gender relations. Colonial and post-colonial 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). In this context of deterioration of public services, the institution of *Ssenga* among the Baganda has persisted. Not only has it endured and survived, but it has also expanded, gaining currency beyond the ethnic and national boundaries within which it was originally located.

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 conventional research paradigms 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 matter. I believe that in the long run, by broadening the scope of our research on sexuality, we can offer fresh perspectives that support more astute strategic interventions on critical areas such as sexual rights, health education, HIV/AIDS



and development. Specifically, we can envisage how practitioners in these fields can work inventively and collaboratively with communities that possess long and complex knowledge traditions of sexuality.

Adopting Lorde's conceptualisation of the erotic as power and Butler's notions of performativity and subversion have been especially useful in showing how the evolution of *Ssenga* practices has allowed Baganda women to negotiate agency, autonomy and self-knowledge about their sexuality. This illuminates the liberatory value of indigenous institutions, and represents a very different perspective to their idyllic or nostalgic portrayals as repositories of "tradition", often seen in mainstream patriarchal Africanist thinking. Indeed, commercialisation, professionalisation, commodification and modernity have invested the institution of *Ssenga* with new scope for challenging subordination and sexual control. While the patriarchal agendas and discourses embedded within *Ssenga* are unmistakable, women's subversive and counter-hegemonic "silent struggles" allow them to negotiate agency, providing a neat example of how African women can inherit and shape traditions of their own that go beyond the discourse of rights imposed from above.



## References

- Abdoulaye, Ly. 1999. "Brief Notes on Eroticism Among the Lawbe, Senegal", *CODESRIA Bulletin* 3 & 4.
- Baleta, Adele. 1998. "Concern Voiced Over 'Dry Sex' Practices in South Africa", *Lancet* 352: 9136.
- Barrett, Michele. 1988. *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. London: Verso.
- Barrett, Michele and MacIntosh, Mary. 1985. "Ethnocentrism and socialist-feminist theory", *Feminist Review* 20.
- Brown, Judith, Ayowa, O. and Brown, R. 1993. "Dry and Tight: Sexual Practices and Potential AIDS Risk in Zaire", *Social Science and Medicine* 37: 8.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge.
- Civic, Diane and Wilson, David. 1996. "Dry Sex in Zimbabwe and Implications for Condom Use", *Social Science and Medicine* 42: 1.

- Engels, Frederick. 1972. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Goodson, Aileen. 1991. *Therapy, Nudity and Joy*. Los Angeles: Elysium Growth Press.
- Helle-Valle, Jo. 2004. "Understanding Sexuality in Africa: Diversity and Contextualised Dividuality" in Signe, A. ed. *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.
- Hennessy, Rosemary and Ingraham, Chrys. eds. 1997. *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference and Women's Lives*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Jjuuko, Frederick. 2005. "To Ban or Not to Ban? A Critique of the Media Council Ruling", *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights* 11: 1.
- Jjuuko, Frederick. 1993. "Matriarchy in Tribal Buganda, Uganda", *Journal of African Religion and Philosophy* 2: 2.
- Kaggwa, Apollo. 1999. *Empisa z'Abaganda*. Kampala: Crane Publishers.
- Kimala, Adam. 1995. *Abaganda Ab'edda*. Makerere: Language Consultancy Bureau.
- Kisekka, M. N. 1973. "Heterosexual Relationships in Uganda." Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Missouri.
- Kun, Karen. 1998. "Vaginal Drying Agents and HIV Transmission", *Family Planning Perspectives* 24: 2.
- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lebeuf, Annie. 1963. "The Role of Women in the Political Organization of African Societies", in Paulme, D. ed. *Women of Tropical Africa*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Lofland, John and Lofland, Lyn. 1984. *Analyzing Social Settings*. 2nd ed. Belmont, California: Wordsworth Publishing Co.
- Lorber, Judith. 1994. *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: The Crossing Press.
- Makubuya, Apollo. 2005. "The 'Vagina Monologues' Saga and Free Expression in Uganda: Exploring the Limits", *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights* 11: 1.
- Mama, Amina. 1996. "Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa during the 1990s", *CODESRIA Working Paper Series* 5/96. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Mama, Amina. 1997. "Shedding the Masks and Tearing the Veils: Cultural Studies for a Post-Colonial Africa", in Imam, A., Mama, A. and Sow, F. eds. *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- McFadden, Patricia. 2003. "Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice", *Feminist Africa* 2.



- Musisi, Nakanyike. 2002. "The Politics of Perception or Perception as Politics? Colonial and Missionary Representations of Baganda Women, 1900–1945", in Allman, J., Geiger, S. and Musisi, N. eds. *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Musisi, Nakanyike. 1991. "Women, 'Elite Polygyny,' and Buganda State Formation", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16.
- Nicholson, Linda. 1986. *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pereira, Charmaine. 2003. "Where Angels Fear to Tread? Some Thoughts on Patricia McFadden's 'Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice'", *Feminist Africa* 2.
- Rabinow, Paul. ed. 1984. "Foucault, Michel, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'", *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Random House.
- Reid, Richard. 2002. *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Reinharz, Shulamit. 1979. *On Becoming a Social Scientist: From Survey Research and Participant Observation to Experiential Analysis*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
- Roscoe, John. 1911. *The Baganda: An Account of Their Native Custom and Beliefs*. London: Macmillan.
- Sacks, Karen. 1970. *Sisters and Wives: The Past and Future of Sexual Equality*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Schiller, Laurence. 1990. "The Royal Women of Buganda", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23: 3.
- Schmidt, Elizabeth. 1991. "Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Colonial State in Zimbabwe", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16: 4.
- Sengendo, James and Sekatawa, Emmanuel. 1999. *A Cultural Approach to HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care*. Issue 1, Special Series of Cultural Policies for Development Unit, Paris: UNESCO.
- Tamale, Sylvia. 2001. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Women's Self-mobilization to Overcome Poverty in Uganda", in Rowbotham, S. and Linkogle, S. eds. *Women Resist Globalization: Mobilizing for Livelihood and Rights*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Thornton, Robert. 2003. "Flows of 'sexual substance' and representation of the body in South Africa", Seminar Series On the Subject of Sex. WISER and the Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand. At <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/sex%20-%20thornton.PDF>.
- Travers, Michael. 1996. "Programming with Agents: New Metaphors for Thinking About Computing." Unpublished PhD dissertation. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Tshikala, Biaya. 1999. "Eroticism and Sexuality in Africa: Directions and Illusions", *CODESRIA Bulletin* 3 & 4.



- Tumbo-Masabo, Zubeida. 1998. "Training by Symbolism and Imagery: The Case of Wagogo and Wayao", in Rwebangira, M. and Liljeström, R. eds. *Haraka, Haraka ... Look Before You Leap: Youth at the Crossroad of Custom and Modernity*. Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute.
- UWONET. 1998. *Structural Adjustment in Uganda*. Kampala: Uganda Women's Network.
- Vaughan, Megan. 1991. *Curing their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Waalabyeki, Magoba. No date. *Ssenga N'O muganda* 1–5. Unpublished mimeos.
- Zaretsky, Eli. 1976. *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*. New York: Harper and Row.

## Footnotes

- 1 I wish to thank the following people who read drafts of this article and made very useful suggestions: Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira, Takiwaa Manuh, Desiree Lewis, the two anonymous *Feminist Africa* reviewers, and the entire team of the "Mapping Sexualities in Africa" research group.
- 2 Human sexuality, as used here, encompasses a wide array of complex elements, including sexual knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours, as well as procreation, sexual orientation, and personal/interpersonal sexual relations. It touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence. It is an all-encompassing phenomenon that involves the human psyche, emotions, physical sensations, communication, creativity and ethics.
- 3 Baganda (the singular form is Muganda) is the name of the largest ethnic group in the Bugada region of Uganda. Their culture is referred to as Kiganda, and their language is Luganda.
- 4 The literal interpretation of the Luganda term *Ssenga* is "paternal aunt".
- 5 Although the circulation figures for newspapers in Uganda are low (approx. 40 000 for the biggest daily), there are a number of ways that news percolates through the populace. For example, non-purchase newspaper "hires" and "newspaper briefs" regularly transmitted on radio stations are popular.
- 6 The concept of "heteronormativity" refers to the ideology that views heterosexuality as the normal and only legitimate socio-sexual arrangement of society (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997).
- 7 Such double standards are clearly reflected in Ugandan law: for example, the crime of adultery applies to women, but not men; and the offence of prostitution penalises only the "sellers" (the majority of whom are women) and not the procurers (who are almost exclusively men).
- 8 By keeping women subordinate, capitalist systems can both justify and profit from paying women who work outside the home lower wages than men.
- 9 The link between women's sexuality and domesticity can be seen in the regulation and censoring of women's reproductive capacity, behaviour, movements, dress, appearance, and so forth.



- 10 Reference to the term “African sexuality” here is not meant to essentialise African women’s sexuality. Rather, I use it in the same way that Helle-Valle does, to refer to those “aspects of sexual practices and ideology that are widely shared among Africans (in contrast to other regions of the world)” (2004: 195).
- 11 The television programme analysed was *Tuula Twogere* on WBS TV, and the FM radio programmes included *Gunno Mulembeki?* (with *Ssengas* Ezeza Najjemba and Sarah Kabenge, plus *kojja Hajj* Musibankutu of Akaboozi Kubbiri FM); *Muyizi Tasubwa* (with *Ssengas* Hajjat Kayongo and Sandra Babirye plus *kojja* Bakulu Asomba of Radio Simba); *Atanayitayita* (with *Ssenga* Nnalongo Madina of Super FM); *Ebbasa* (with *Ssenga* Omumbejja Nvannungi of CBS Radio); and *Abayita Ababiri* (with *Ssenga* Nakibuule Mukasa of Radio Simba).
- 12 Being a Muganda myself, I had previously encountered the institution of *Ssenga* on numerous occasions. Doubtlessly, these earlier experiences also informed my analysis.
- 13 For a discussion of the state sexual control of royal women, see Sacks (1979) and Musisi (1991: 773-776).
- 14 However, women who had premarital pregnancies, could not be married to chiefs (Sacks, 1979: 214).
- 15 In Kiganda culture, there was no difference between one’s father and the brothers of one’s father.
- 16 Some important information was also obtained from the following male historians: Waalabyeki Magoba’s *Ssenga N’Omuganda* (undated pamphlet); Apollo Kagawa’s *Empisa Z’aBaganda* (1999); and Adam Kimala’s *Abaganda Ab’edda* (1995).
- 17 This points to the fact that traditionally among the Baganda, women had the right to sexual satisfaction.
- 18 The Kiganda term *lubaale* was translated as “god” by the early British explorers and missionaries. The official website of the Buganda Kingdom challenges this interpretation, arguing that the closest equivalent of *lubaale* in Western religion would be a saint or guardian. See <http://www.buganda.com/eddiini.htm>.
- 19 Kabaka Mutebi visited Bbendegere when he got married in 1999 (see *Bukedde ku Sande*, 19 December 2004).
- 20 This practice is discussed in more detail below.
- 21 See Tshikala (1999). The institution of *Ssenga* is in fact central to gender relations among the Baganda. However, the scope of this study is mostly restricted to the sexual aspects of the institution.
- 22 Commercial *Ssengas* are self-appointed and do not undergo any formal training or nomination. Most draw their knowledge from their own *Ssengas*, popular literature, mass media and various people knowledgeable in the subject.
- 23 The Luganda daily, *Bukedde*, devotes more than one page on *Ssenga* every day. Two English dailies, *New Vision* and *The Monitor*, also carry *Ssenga* columns at least once a week. The Runyankore weekly *Orumuri*, has adopted a Kinyankore equivalent of *Ssenga* known as *shwenkazi*.



- 24 The Luganda word *kojja* means “maternal uncle”. This mirror image of the *Ssenga* (paternal aunt) portrayed in the male version is interesting. Use of the term for “paternal uncle” was probably not appealing, given that it means the same thing as father (*taata*); it is taboo for a father to discuss sexual matters with his daughter.
- 25 Listeners that call into *Ssenga* radio programmes or read their columns are usually provided with the personal mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses of various *Ssengas* to enable them arrange one-on-one encounters. Similarly, many *Ssengas* today surf the Internet for information on sexuality, and then feed this to their audiences; for example, see *Bukedde Ssenga*, “Weetegereze w’asuza emikono,” 14 September 2004.
- 26 See Media Council ruling: In the Matter of the Press and Journalists Act and In the Matter of the Media Council and In the Matter of a Play, “The Vagina Monologues” (unpublished), 16 February 2005. For an analysis of the ruling, see Makubuya (2005) and Jjuuko (2005). See also A. Wasike and E. Wafula, “Government Opposes ‘Vagina Monologues’”, *New Vision*, 11 February 2005; F. Ahimbisibwe, “Vagina Play Dropped”, *New Vision*, 18 February 2005.
- 27 By the time the performance was banned, tickets worth 20 million Ugandan shillings (US\$11 500) had been sold. 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 against government (see “Women Activists Blame Government for Violence,” *Daily Monitor*, 28 June 2005; “Women Activists Fetch sh20m,” *New Vision*, 28 June 2005).
- 28 Similarly, the study by Zubeida Tumbo-Masabo of the Wayao people of Tanzania also revealed that their sex initiation songs “call not only for knowledge of everyday use of language, but [also make use of] euphemisms, symbolic meanings and imagery...” (1998: 108).
- 29 For detailed instructions on how to play the game, see the website of the *Omwes*o International Society at [www.omwes.org](http://www.omwes.org).
- 30 *Ssenga* Hajjat Mariam Kayoga, *Muyizi Tasubwa*, Radio Simba, 18 September 2004, at 12.40 a.m.
- 31 *Ssenga* Katana, Public Talk, Pride Theatre, 24 November 2004, 6.00 – 9.00 p.m.
- 32 *Ssenga* Nakibuule Mukasa, *Abayita Ababiri*, Radio Simba, 5 December 2004, 5.00 – 7.00 p.m.
- 33 *Ssenga* Ezeza Najjemba, *Guno Mulembe ki?* Akaboozi ku Bbiri FM, 23 November 2004, 5.35 p.m.
- 34 Private session with *Ssenga* Katana, at Wandegeya, 11 November 2004.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Roughly translates as “A Must-Listen for Learners”, and airs on Radio Simba every Friday between 11.00 p.m. and 1.00 a.m.
- 38 See Ultimate Media, “*Ssengas* Invade Makerere,” *Monitor*, 23 July 2004.



- 39 The cultural and aesthetic practice of elongating the inner folds of the labia is fairly common among several Bantu-speaking communities in Eastern and Southern Africa, including the Tutsi (Rwanda), the Basotho (Lesotho), the Shona (Zimbabwe), the Nyakyusa and Karewe (Tanzania), the Khoisan (Southern Africa) and the Tsonga (Mozambique).
- 40 It does not seem to matter that the practice of elongating the labia is practised by several other communities in Uganda and even beyond.
- 41 See WHO definition of type-IV female genital mutilation at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Some of the weekend live call-in *Ssenga* radio programmes are aired as late as 2.00a.m., but fans will nevertheless stay up to listen in.
- 44 Today, the beads used for most *butiti* are synthetic; most *Ssengas* say that they are not as “effective” as those made from clay
- 45 The number of rows around a woman’s waist is supposed to be uneven (for example, 15 or 21). This number signifies that she is one ahead of her rivals!
- 46 Dry sex is practised in parts of Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Women in these communities insert “drying agents” (such as herbs, powders, pharmaceutical products and dry cloths) into their vaginas. The cultural beliefs associated with dry sex vary; among them is the belief that a dry, hot, tight vagina enhances male sexual stimulation and pleasure. Many researchers have documented the health risks posed by dry sex for women (see Baleta, 1998; Kun, 1998; Civic and Wilson, 1996; Brown et al., 1993).
- 47 The fresh, rolled leaves are introduced into the vagina like a tampon and must be removed prior to sex.
- 48 Compare, for example, the sexual initiation roles played by the following *Ssenga* equivalents that have not developed into institutionalised forms: the *Shwenkazi* among the Banyankore of Uganda; the *Tete* among the Shona of Zimbabwe; the *Alangizi* among the Yao of Malawi and the Cheŵa of Zambia; and the *Mayosenge* among the Bemba of Zambia.



### Sylvia Tamale

is an Associate Professor and the Dean of Law at  
Makerere University, Uganda.