

Disordering and reordering African Sexualities¹ through the Power of Language and Naming

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Abstract

Among the aspects that make complex the understanding of sexualities in Africa is that of linguistic and interpretation. As a power, language has through descriptions and naming, been used to mediate, disorder, and reorder sexualities in African societies. This process is often gendered and can be recognised through words, phrases and expressions that communicate certain dynamics of power. As a tool of power language has been utilized by colonialism, Christian missions, cultural traditionalists, popular culture protagonists, and international bodies to lodge colonialists' linguistics while dislodging many African traditional languages and practices. Practices such as *Female genital circumcision (FGC)* have persisted partly due to linguistic limitations. Whether *FGC* is understood as a 'mutilation' or 'other', nevertheless language plays a central role in obscuring efforts to address health complications associated with the practice. The paper uses an African feminist approach. First, it argues that linguistic aspects that embed the contemporary understanding of African sexualities have colonialist and Christian missions' roots, and that the dislodging of local languages has facilitated continued violence against women. Second, by taking the case of female genital circumcision as still practiced by some communities among the *Sabiny* people of Uganda the paper argues that the internationally recognised term of 'mutilation' may not necessarily be 'communicating' to the practicing communities, instead may be interpreted and resisted as imperialistic.

Keywords: *Disordering, Reordering, African sexualities, Sabiny, female genital mutilation, power, language, Naming.*

Whether we call it discourse, rhetoric or semantics, the use of certain kind of language matters. Language is learned, in part, by observing, assessing, and naming not only things in material world or the intellectual universe but also by classifying people's behaviour. Linguistic statements (or words, phrases) often imply judgements about the social identity of a particular human being or a group of people (Gouda, 1999:163).

Sexuality one of the discourses that calls people's immediate attention yet at the same time approached and expressed in a coded metaphorical language may not be understood without paying attention to the aspect of linguistics. Seemingly 'Hidden' yet 'pokes' through our day today expressions and behavior, sexuality has been disordered, reordered, gendered, and exposed to the measure of hierarchies. Forces such as colonialism, Christian missions, cultural traditions, popular cultures, globalization, as well as international bodies such as World Health Organization (WHO) have in their particular times succeeded in either or both disordering and reordering the understanding of sexuality in Africa. The use of language and semiotics has been effectively used in this agenda.

¹ The term African sexualities is used to "highlight those aspects of cultural ideology...widely shared among the vast majority of people within the geographical entity baptized 'Africa' by colonial map makers. It is used politically to call attention to some of the commonalities and shared historical legacies inscribed in cultures and sexualities within the region by forces such as colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, globalization and fundamentalism" (Tamale, 2014:151).

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As Gouda (1999) has observed colonialists and Christian missions used words, expressions, phrases to describe what they thought was the perfect description of African sexualities. Words such as pervert, hypersexual, primitive, innocent, excess, uncontrolled, uncultured, sexual immorality (Kamau 2013; Vaughan 2007, Tamale 2005) described to the western world what was the ideal description of African sexualities before the modern global world of the time. It was a combined effort that colonialists, missionaries and explorers employed in order to devise means of bringing the Dark Continent to 'order'. As rightly urged by Vaughan (1991: 129) "for some including many missionaries", the state of African sexuality "represented the darkness and dangers of the continent...for others [it]was reassuringly 'innocent'; the danger lay rather in the degeneration of this sexuality which was seen to have come about through the social and economic changes of colonialism"

While colonialists, western philosophers, and explorers often used phrases such as 'primitive behaviors dangerous to the progress of human race and causing the spread of diseases, missionaries used phrases such as 'immoral practices contrary to the teachings of the Bible' (Kamau 2013:196; Njambi 2004:297). African feminist scholarship on post colonialism and sexuality has recognized that mostly at the center of these linguistic expressions was women's sexuality. Given that male sexuality was to some extent safeguarded by patriarchy, and demonstrated certain degree of superiority even before colonialism, female sexuality which occupied an inferior position became the most suitable target (Vaughan 1991:131). At the supposed outbreak of syphilis in Uganda, it was argued by colonial administrators that women behavior which had been let loose by the European civilization contributed to its spread. In other words, the patriarchal order that recognized various forms of marriage and women control had been broken down by the Christian 'civilized – moral' advocacy of one man - one woman campaign. As an implication many women were thought to be left uncontrolled by the system. For Lambkin a British colonial administer this was a serious problem. In one of his address he retorted:

The freedom enjoyed by women in civilized countries has gradually been won by them as one of the results of centuries of civilization, during which they have been educated...Women whose female ancestors had been kept under surveillance were not fit to be treated in a similar manner. They were, in effect, merely female animals with strong passions, to whom unrestricted opportunities for gratifying these passions were suddenly afforded (as quoted by Vaughan 1991:133).

It is important to analyze the implication of Lambkin's standpoint and his words such as 'freedom', 'civilization, education' surveillance, passion, opportunities' as used in reference to an African women's sexuality. First Lambkin enjoyed the privilege of a modern, superior, civilized human before his African audience that constituted the thought-to-be 'primitive', 'savage', 'uninformed', 'traditional' men. Together with his fellow colonialists were therefore points of reference in terms of knowledge, and civilization. For African men to be recognized as *modern* and *civilized* meant to assimilate Lambkin's epistemologies. Rightly Vaughan (1991) would state the Buganda men welcomed Lambkin's suggestion of associating women's sexuality with the outbreak of syphilis and the need to revisit patriarchal control mechanisms. According to Vaughan, "Not only had they listened with great interest and attention, but they had also delivered their own speeches showing the most complete and intelligent grasp of the subject under discussion..." (1991:135). It is imperative however, to note, that sexual surveillance of women's sexuality existed prior colonialism. For instance the Sabinu people among which some communities still practice female genital circumcision³ hold a legend that denotes this aspect:

The Sabinu people were pastoralists so they had to move from place to place looking for water and pasture for the animals. This meant leaving their wives and families behind for long periods of time. The women resorted to finding other men because their husbands were not coming back. Therefore in order to control their sexual desires, circumcision was started and it developed into a traditional practice to date (Namulondo 2009:33).

If sexual surveillance did exist then what difference did the colonialists' appeal make? It could be argued that although sexual surveillance did exist at certain levels in precolonial Africa, upon being emphasized by a powerful colonialist it gained superior legitimacy. By legitimizing unevenly certain behaviors and perception of sexuality among genders, future forms of violence and objectification of female bodies gradually became popular experiences that are still vivid in today's contemporary society (Mazrui 2009). This can be seen as an effort designed by colonialism and Christian missions to dislodge Africans experiences by exposing them to foreign linguistic interpretation.

³ Cf Kisitu (2015) The Politics of Knowledge on African Sexualities and its effect on Women's Health....

Dislodging African linguistics, and its gender implications

Linguistic or semiotic choices of the colonial legacy are up to now felt in contemporary Africa as live “colonial projects of conquest and control” (Mazrui 2009:361). The linguistic project laid a systematic legacy in which language became a tool to categorize the educated from the uneducated, by establishing reading, writing and speaking of colonial languages as the appropriate measure. While the literate individuals became those who could speak, read and write most especially the colonial language, locals who only spoke local languages remained categorized as illiterate. Language as a measure of knowledge classified the literate Africans as subjects of power, and the illiterate as objects of power (Joseph Errington 2008:3). To be subjects of power other than objects of power also meant being able to use the colonial grammar books and dictionaries following the guidelines as written down by the colonial and mission schools’ masters.

The effort to assimilate and follow the colonial guidelines of education gradually paved its way into the post independent Africa. As colonialism introduced what was described as formal education, traditional education slowly lost advocacy in many African societies since it lacked emphasis to skills such as reading and writing. For instance, traditional practices that attempted to educate and initiate the young into the responsible adulthood were at times described by the formal education instructors as primitive, unprogressive, abusive to human rights, and immoral. This was usually done without much contextual study of various practices. Cole (cited in Njambi 2004:297) gives one of the Christian missionaries’ perceptions of initiation rites among the Kikuyu people:

The most important rite among the Kikuyu was (and still is) that of initiation. The sign of initiation for both sexes is circumcision....The physical operation is the same in all areas although the rites vary quite considerably from place to place. In every case, however, the ceremonies are accompanied by dancing and immorality. After the ceremony the initiates are allowed to wander around the countryside for several months singing and dancing. During this time they are given instruction in matters relating to the tribe, to fighting, and to sex. As we shall see later the church was compelled to denounce the immoral practice [*ngw-ĩkēo*], which accompanied initiation together with female circumcision as injurious to the body and degrading to the soul.

The effect of such linguistic descriptions can be seen in the growing reluctance of communities to instruct their young through traditional institutions and equipping them with knowledge for instance of sexual education, responsibility, and respect. Among the Baganda of Uganda for instance, Martínez Pe´rez et al 2013: 1201) state that that the traditional institution of *Ssenga* in partnership with that of the *Kojja*, which used to instruct both the young men and women on matters of sexual reproduction health has drastically declined with its role being taken over by the government and Non-governmental organizations⁴. Current research on ways to eradicate violence against women suggests traditional institutions as some of the key avenues that demand positive attention in securing freedom for women and girls who are mostly vulnerable to various forms of violence⁵ in patriarchal societies (Nwabunike, et al 2015; Mujuzi 2014).

It could be important to raise a doubt as to how effective are the colonial languages (which in many postcolonial societies are raised in rank as the official languages) in disseminating knowledge for instance of sexual violence, gender, human rights, sexual education to all especially to the uneducated local women? Or, to what extent does such languages equip the ordinary woman with power to challenge her violator in courts of law given that many of the violated women can hardly express their experiences in the official languages unless aided by an interpreter. Recently, a group of four friends of mine from four different African countries here at the university to Kwazulu Natal confirmed what I had thought to be one of the major problems faced by an African ordinary woman as she attempts to rise against violence.

⁴This study further indicates that this institution currently been commercialized whereby traditional education is now offered in exchange for money. The government and NGO’s instituted forms of education especially those done in schools do not efficiently “answer young people’s questions about other sexual issues, including Libia Minora Elongation” (Martinez Pe´rez et al 2013: 120).

⁵ Violence against women is defined as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (World Health Organization, 2014).

When I gave each a task to write for me words such as 'sexual freedom, 'gender discrimination' 'sexual violence' in their respective local vernacular I was perplexed by each one's approach to the task. I was particularly concerned by the non-verbal expressions as one read the terms, and the time taken to write down the meanings. Although all were students at the university, and claimed to understand the meanings of these terms quite clearly in the colonial languages of their respective countries they nevertheless confirmed difficulties in expressing such terms in vernacular. This not only gave an indication of how linguistics are part of the problem facing the African societies in communicating contemporary challenges but also in seeking safe spaces to enhance dialogue. The spaces that would be safe to facilitate health dialogue to evade violence often use strange languages only communicative to survivors of violence through interpreters. Could such approaches to secure justice contribute more harm? To what extent can attempts to communicate to survivors of violence through interpreters avoid being characterized as systems of "power that discriminate, exclude and violate"? (Jenny Parkes 2015:20).

In critiquing the gender inequality perpetuated by colonial languages within postcolonial societies it may be important to consider that many girls and women unlike boys and men have limited access to education through which they can master colonial languages and use it as a tool to enhance their agency. A 2014 Southern Africa Development Community Gender Protocol Barometer indicated that although the gender gap has been narrowed, many countries do not provide equal access to education for girls. Girls accounted for 53% of the 61 million children of primary school age not enrolled in school in 2010. In 2013, they accounted for 49% of the 57 million children out of school...completion of primary school is a particular problem for girls in sub-Saharan Africa..." (Naidoo 2013:10)

It can be argued therefore that insofar as colonial languages continue to dislodge local languages yet many Africans are not literate in terms of formal education systems, women and girls who cannot read, speak, or write in colonial languages can hardly argue against injustices of violence even in courts of law, which in most cases conduct their affairs in colonial languages. In effort to sensitize societies on practices such as FGC/M that has been argued in international forums as a 'violent' act against women, it is the colonial linguistic terms that are often appealed to sometimes paradoxically before the practicing communities.

A case of Female circumcision: 'Mutilation' or 'Other'?

Surgical operations on female genitalia for cultural, other than medical reasons, have been a point of debate when it comes to naming. FGC is currently described collectively as FGM even though studies reveal that FGC/M differs from one community to another. This has been a point of contention not only among scholars, but also in those communities that do not share the WHO category of naming. Referring to FGC as FGM also creates ethical difficulties especially when circumcised women with related health complications seek medical help. As such, understanding FGC as a mutilation "has been criticized as stigmatizing women who do not think of themselves as mutilated or their families as mutilators" (Ahern-Flynn 2013:85). But what is in the name itself and how is the naming done?

Naming does things. It states. To state, it must both conjoin and disjoin, identify as distinct and identify as connected...Naming selects discriminates, identifies, locates, orders, arranges, systematizes (Dewey and Bentley cited in Caterina La Barbera 2009:487). Three important questions arise: Why is the fact of naming becoming an ethical issue with regard to female circumcision? What phenomenon does the term 'mutilation' give meaning to? What kind of reality does the traditional namings give meaning to? Naming as a linguistic expression orders phenomena by conferring meaning. Our environment is known to us insofar as it is named. This means, as we may argue, that what is not named remains meaningless. Given that naming confers order it carries a certain power through which our social constructs are communicated as meaningful in their diverse realities. Naming and communication are thus related in our understanding of female circumcision.

It is noteworthy to recognize that descriptions like FGC and FGM refers to a similar object of study, (i.e., the cutting of the female genitalia) central to female's sexuality. Therefore, by deciding to subscribe to diverse descriptions cutting female's genitalia during initiations individuals seem to be communicating their particular understanding of sexuality. It therefore becomes imperative as Oloruntoba-Oju (2011:3) argues, to understand that "language and communication are central to human sexuality in all its ramifications." It may not be adequate to construct a certain language if it does not intend to communicate. To communicate is to empower someone to use the communication for the good. As long as the term 'mutilation' is intended to be understood within universal categories, its object of study as understood within a particular communication appears to be hindered.

The universal usage of the term seems to take for granted that “different ethnicities, societies and social groups may have different ways of coding” and understanding the same object of study (Oloruntoba-Oju 2011:3). Comparatively, a critical analysis can be done on the meaning of the term using the Sabiny understanding of female circumcision vis-a-vis how it is understood in most anti-FGC inner circles:

The Sabiny word for circumcision is *wonsho*, meaning the act of chasing away. *Won* is to chase away. Therefore, the culmination of the activities that take place before and after circumcision, is the expulsion of boys and girls from their parental homes so that they can start their own homes. The Ceremonies and the rites prepare them for this eventuality....Circumcision or the cutting of the flesh gives symbolic expression to the decisiveness of the step that has been taken by the individual, an affirmation that there is no coming back. You are now in a very different world, a world of hostile elements, the cutting of flesh and shedding of blood are indications of the nature of that world (Matyichingony 2012).

The meaning carried by the term *Wonsho* is derived from the Sabiny people's worldview. According to this worldview, the world of adults needs preparation, bravery, and symbolic responses from whoever seeks to be initiated. Circumcision is thus a symbolic act within a deeply hidden experiential meaning. As with all communities, Sabiny children grow up with a sense that one day they will have to establish their own homes and raise their own families. The ‘sending away’ of the child means moving from the controlled world of their parents into an independent and otherwise tricky world. Circumcision is an important preparation to engage the already experienced world of adults. It is a moment of equipping young females with the technicalities of survival as individuals but also as members of a community. It can be argued that for the Sabiny, the understanding of FGC is drawn from their lived experience expressed in language. It can also be argued that the Sabiny understand and define circumcision from ‘what is behind the cut’ rather than the actual act of cutting, including the inflicted wound.

As has been stated above, the WHO describes FGC as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This concept is commonly used in all anti-FGM campaigns and by “women's rights and health advocates who wish to emphasize the damage caused by the procedure” (*Population Reference Bureau*, 2010:2). It is described in universal terms (*cf. Shell-Duncan and Hernlund* (2000:4) to reference “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons” (WHO 2008:4). The meaning of the term suggests a descriptive framework. In other words, it describes the act of cutting the flesh rather than what lies behind the cut. Furthermore, the definition embraces physical experience of pain which it describes as ‘injury.’ In its totality, it takes consideration of the cut, the tools used, the surgeon, the disposition of the girl being cut, the environment, the wound itself and the possible health risks.

Unlike the Sabiny's understanding of FGC, the WHO category of knowledge around FGC/M is developed from looking at the object of study from above, rather than from below. The knowledge developed from above tends to create distance from the knowledge of experience. It also promotes knowledge of forms⁶ rather than knowledge developed from lived experience. Dutta, Ban and Pal (2012:4) suggest that such an approach is limited when it comes to the search of knowledge within a cultural context. Among its limitations is the tendency to encourage the silence of culturally conceived knowledge rather than engaging with it. Dutta, Ban and Pal (2012:7-8) rightly realise that within the mainstream levels of knowledge there is little or no participation of those on the ground. I agree with his argument when they argue that “representation for the subaltern voice within mainstream discursive spaces” is imperative for social transformation. Moreover, since culture “is always shifting as it continually interact with structure,” this could facilitate more intentions of dialogue (Dutta, Ban and Pal 2012:5).

The above analysis reveals that the language spoken by the Sabiny people concerning FGC is not correctly understood by the WHO and most anti-FGC advocates. In spite of this, most FGC debates with respect to knowledge gained from the public domain condemn as barbaric its continued practice.

⁶ Knowledge of ‘forms’ is a concept attributed to the ancient philosopher, Plato. Plato argued that the world of experience is not reliable. Instead, true knowledge of reality is beyond experience. In other words, “true and reliable knowledge rests only with those who can comprehend the true reality behind the world of everyday experience. In order to perceive the world of the forms, individuals must undergo a difficult education.” Plato is therefore considered to have viewed reality upside down.(Macintosh 2012:6).

The question which remains however is: to what extent does the knowledge from the public domain communicate with the knowledge from the private domain? Bennett's (2011) work, *Subversion and Resistance: Activists Initiatives* seems to affirm that these two domains hardly communicate. Bennett (77-100) raises her concern with international bodies such as the WHO that describe some African traditional practices as harmful and at the same time describes Africans as being reluctant in pursuing issues of women's rights.

This supposed reluctance around the issue of FGC and its impact on women rights in Africa can be argued as an issue of language and communication. Wittgenstein observed that language is critical in the construction of knowledge and that its limits necessarily suggest the limitation of our observed world (Wittgenstein cited in Martland 1975:19). In other words, we communicate to the world, a world of our own observation through the vocabulary we judge best as a medium. Additionally, as Jones has argued: Our vocabulary either limits or unlocks our ability to describe what we see ... If we reflect on how we think about, evaluate, and come to understand virtually anything, we realise that the running voice of our conscious thoughts sets practical boundaries (2011).

Language and communication as an issue in FGC discourses is affirmed by the approaches taken by some African feminists in reacting to the anti-FGC discourses. Hence, African women scholars such as Nnaemeka, (2005) and Obiora (2005) have critiqued the tools that Western discourses use to understand FGC and how they pass on their messages. In an effort to explain the meaning of FGM and to qualify why this name is understood as torture has been used to symbolise its violent nature. But what could have influenced the description of FGC as violent and inhuman? One of the answers to this question has been provided by Obiora (2005:37-39), where she maintains that most anti-FGC literature and campaigns have taken it for granted to reflect on FGC related questions such as:

Why was circumcision done and, more important, why is it still done...Why is it done in certain African countries and not in others? Why is done in one community and not in another within the same country (Obiora 2005:38). Obiora's argument explains why there has been a slippery slope in describing the diversity of FGC practices in a homogenous manner. What seems to bother the resisting voices—especially African feminists—is how an experience of a particular circumcision, 'A' is used to predict and confer meaning to the outcome of another particular circumcision, 'B' in another cultural context even though both may have no similarity in meaning or mode of operation. Describing FGC as a universal control mechanism employed by African men over their daughters and women seems therefore to be disputable in line using Obiora's argument. For example, among the Masaai of Kenya, FGC is historically related to sexual desire and control (Equality Now 2011:13), where "among the Jola, sexual control is not mentioned as a reasons for women to be excised." It is important to note that what has been taken for granted has the power to generate resistance, bias and imperialistic tendencies, without necessarily addressing the issue at hand (Obiora 2005:188).

Conclusion

It could loosely be doubted that the elite Africans who assimilated colonialists languages became influential to other African men; that due to the favour of modernity and royalty, which they received from both colonialists and missionaries they became exemplar figures and commanders of authority before other Africans. The dislodging of African local languages became a participated forum not only by the colonialists and the missionaries but also by the early African elite. This worked most favourable for the patriarchal system. I would argue therefore that it is not surprising that those who were not favoured by the structures of patriarchy even before colonialism such as women and other sexual minorities continued to be pushed to the peripheral. In agreement with Mazrui (2009) it is important to recognise that colonialists, missionaries and explorers who attempted to emerge the unknown African world to the known western audience established a legacy that rewarded patriarchy with more superiority. This legacy has continued to legitimize ways by which the contemporary African societies still understand sexuality based on linguistic or semiotic interpretations. As this paper has shown the continued practice of female genital circumcision and its advocacy by the traditionalists offers an analysis on how this continues to play in our contemporary society. However, the question that may still be needed to be revisited is to what extent can colonialists linguistics be life-giving in postcolonial societies especially in contexts where a girl's education over that of her brothers is still regarded a secondary choice?

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