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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Help, The Women are Naked: Bodies, Power & Resistance in 'Post-colonial' Uganda

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| ABSTRACT
This paper engages with acts of naked protest in Uganda to explore their effect and affect as a decolonial praxis for both gender and human rights. In this paper, the successes of such rights activism by Ugandan women are made clear. With regard to womanhood, this paper discusses how naked protest questions Western epistemologies of gender in colonized Uganda – troubling an exclusionary and racialized sex/gender dimorphism through its anachronistic performance that relies on bringing a specific pre-colonial power imbued in Ugandan womanhood into a 'post-colonial' present. With human rights, this paper proposes that both human rights and gender are inextricably linked and must be read in tandem to truly actualize the significance of naked protest. Where claims to womanhood are made, inevitably, claims to a denied humanness are too. Decolonizing the human in human rights requires reconceptualization that consequentially returns us to Wynter's question: what does it mean to be human? This paper attempts to offer some preliminary answers by necessarily reading this decolonial movement with an epistemic disobedience and by emphasizing the importance/power of the category 'human' in 'post-colonial' Uganda. Notably so, the 'limitation' of naked protest is also explored, particularly its participation within a colonial framework for the way in which naked protest fails to move beyond established gender boundaries. That said this paper questions whether this circumstance marks an inadequacy or, given that naked protest infuses agentic and political meanings to what it means to be a Black Ugandan woman, a necessary utility. Altogether, this paper is interested in reading the performance of naked protest through a lens that goes beyond the corporeal, or more precisely, that reads this corporeal performance in a metaphysical or macro-societal arena paying particular attention to the ways that it utilities pre-colonial cultural meanings as a source of power to demand rights and lay claim to the categories woman and human.

| KEYWORDS

Resistance, Decolonization, Gender, Human rights, Uganda.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Decolonizing gender and human rights requires identifying the locus of colonial power and working to undermine the ways in which its regulatory control takes shape. In this work, I look at the movement of naked protest by women in Uganda to interrogate the ways in which Western epistemologies of womanhood and humanness are actively combatted. I consider how such a movement moves against coloniality through its use of the body as a site of resistance. While the categories of gender and human are split within this essay, they cannot be read apart. Decolonizing gender here remains entangled with the decolonizing of human rights, where the process of undoing one simultaneously undoes the other. This essay embraces the nuance present in naked protest, applauding its resistance and offering grace to its limitations, understanding how odd it must be to be haunted by something that is still alive.

I advance with the view that in its claim to rights, naked protest speaks through a rebellious and subversive spectacle to say I am a woman, and so, a human too.

2. Discussion

2.1 Decolonizing gender

"The drastic change of stance to the naked or partially-naked body in public throughout tropical Africa coincided with the civilizing mission by Victorian Europe. In Uganda, the colonialists did not waste time in imposing a new dress code: embarrassed by even partial nakedness, European Christian missionaries set out to change that…hence, slowly but surely, where nakedness or half-nakedness had been part of the normal lifestyle of colonized people, they began to completely cover their bodies" Tamale 2016:5). That said, "the modern colonial gender system was not just hierarchical but racially differentiated, and the racial differentiation denied humanity and thus gender to the colonized" (Lugones 2010: 746). Ergo, at the core of the 'civilizing mission' was an establishment of gender that was inherently racialized. As a result of whiteness's necessity to differentiate itself, the exclusionary foundations of gender were formed and so, in the imposition of dress codes what was offered was not necessarily gender to Ugandan women, but rather a racialized sexed self.

Decades later, Stella Nyanzi, a well-known Ugandan activist, "during her incarceration suffered a miscarriage, before, during and after which she was denied proper medical care. In one of her many court appearances, Nyanzi stripped naked and jiggled her breasts while directing a string of obscenities at the justice system. She also stripped naked to protest poor hygiene and unsanitary prison conditions." (Makoni 2021:554).

Through naked protest, Nyanzi engages with and subverts colonial "societal attitudes that often associate nakedness – especially the nakedness of a grown woman – with shame, perversity and taboo" (ibid). In doing so, she engages her female body as a resource and lays claim to the category of woman, a gendered self. Additionally, Nyanzi's naked protest utilises a particularly pre-colonial understanding of bodies to make its claim to womanhood and rights. Nyanzi is not only a mother but a Nnaalongo (a mother to twins), "she wields her body's power to bring multiple lives into the world from a single pregnancy and therefore, has more power to take it away too" (Makoni 2021:555). "Cultural beliefs about stripping mothers of twins signify double trouble, and Nyanzi capitalized on this issue throughout her stunt" (Tamale 2016:7). Therefore, there was a particular cosmological understanding that was drawn upon in this act of public stripping.

"The civilizing transformation justified the colonization of memory, and thus of people's senses of self" (Lugones 2010:745). However, naked protest engages with native knowledge, exercising an active subjectivity that "resists the colonial invasion of self" (The Santa Cruz Feminist of Colour Collective 2014:26). "African women's embodied protests predate colonialism and have been effectively deployed every time women have been pushed to the brink" (Tamale 2016:7). This return to the precolonial is pivotal because it enacts a subjectivity that engages with the minds as well as the bodies of all those caught in this intersubjective space. This is why "men flee when a naked protest takes place, they remain in fear of the curse that could follow from Ugandan women's generative power of symbolic execution" (Tamale 2016:11, Makoni 2021: 555, Abonga et al 2020:205).

Nyanzi moves against coloniality by calling on a precolonial past and bringing it starkly into the present. This anachronistic disengagement with dressing – a colonial imposition – refashions the understanding of what it means to be a woman as it lays claim to the category through ways that undermine its epistemological foundations. It engages a particular "biopolitical, symbolic and cosmological power" (Abonga et al 2020:205) to affirm womanhood. Nyanzi does this both in the courtroom and when she "stripped at Makerere University in 2016 over a dispute in her employment contract" (Ebila, Tripp 2017:39). Acholi women engage "their naked bodies to demonstrate that their people will not be governed by the Ugandan state" (Abonga 2020:213) drawing on the same tripartite power. It is these very native inscriptions to the category of woman that aid in decolonizing gender, re/defining what it means to occupy the category.

To be clear, I am not asserting that gender is exclusively defined by sex. Rather, in 'post-colonial' Uganda, naked protest makes use of this Western mapping of sex onto gender to make its claim to womanhood. It mobilizes the aforementioned tripartite power and emphasizes it as gendered power in the contemporary but through a reliance on sex. Nyanzi wants to be read as a woman because her claims to challenging carceral violence are inherently tied to it – she is aware that the "exposure of women's nakedness in public acts of irreverence has proved quite effective" (Tamale 2016:7), and so uses this form of politics to delegitimize Uganda's carceral repressive regime. Her sexed body is essential in "creating a gendered spectacle to demonstrate her rage" (Tamale 2016:552) and it is therefore a successful non-linguistic form of protest not only to the hegemony of carcerality but also to coloniality as she asserts herself as a Black Ugandan woman and not just a female. Nyanzi's protest is a necessary intervention in decolonial orientation as it upsets the Western epistemology of the category woman by troubling its racialized and exclusionary foundations.

"If woman and black are homogenous, separable categories, then their intersection shows us the absence of black women rather than their presence. So, to see non-white women is to exceed categorial logic" (Lugones 2010:742). Seeing Nyanzi's naked protest is exceeding. Her protest orients us toward a decolonial feminism through its resistance to the "oppressive logic of colonial

modernity that uses hierarchical dichotomies and categorical logic" (ibid). Since both categories, "race and gender, are consequences of a bio-logic of Western culture" (Oyewumi 1997:122), such display combats Western epistemologies through its intersectional, nonhierarchic presentation of Black Ugandan womanhood. It engages a necessary epistemic work that begins to undermine coloniality through its utilization of the sexed body as a site of gendered resistance. Consequentially, it weakens the borders of gender by undermining its necessity for racial differentiation.

Lugones notes that liberatory possibilities that emphasize the light side of the colonial/modern gender system affirm an oppressive organization of life because gender itself is a colonial imposition (Lugones 2007:186) that "does not travel away from colonial modernity" (2010:746). I am inclined to nuance this perspective with Oyewumi's stance that the "challenge of contemporary feminism in the West is to move away from the gender category of woman to the fullness of an unsexed humanity, but for others the notion of an unsexed humanity is not a dream to aspire to" (1997:122). This I believe is of particular importance in the case of naked protest.

There is an implicit privilege in moving beyond gender that is yet to be afforded to women in Uganda because they continue to live with the affective resonances of coloniality – "the body remains an inscriptive surface marked by an acculturation to colonial Western beliefs" (Tamale 2016). Failing to recognize this would be to disregard that for some decolonial efforts to work, they must do so through colonial epistemologies in order to eventually undermine them. Decoloniality is a praxis of constantly undoing but it remains a step-by-step process. Perhaps this is what Lugones is implying when she states that resistance is not the end or goal of political struggle, but rather its beginning, its possibility – a spring of liberation both adaptive and creatively oppositional (Lugones 2010:746). Decoloniality, for now, must operate through a colonial matrix for we can only speak about and for ourselves within existing realities and discourses for there are no terms outside them through which we can bring ourselves into being.

Yes, the assertion of biological dimorphism is relied upon to make claims to womanhood and subsequently rights, but doesn't the incorporation of Black Ugandan women still aid in the deconstruction of gender through its disruption to racialized boundaries? Doesn't its engagement with a precolonial understanding of the body work against colonial epistemologies of womanhood as exclusively Western, modest and monolithic? If "women are construed as the symbolic bearers of the nation" (Tamale 2016:20), a colonial imposition itself, doesn't the affirmation of Black Ugandan womanhood, necesaarily speaking through the same gendered and nationalistic idioms, assert Uganda as a nation?

Just because naked protest doesn't make a claim to a post-gender social organization does not render it obsolete. It engages a resistance politic that communicates that "in our colonized existences, we are other than what the hegemon makes us to be" (Lugones 2010:749), laying the groundwork for a project of decoloniality whose next steps we must believe are coming. "Decoloniality focuses on changing the terms of the conversation" (Mignolo 2018:130), which is what we see here – an epistemic attack on the category of gender, aiming to reconceptualize it by forcing us to ask, what does it mean to be a woman?

2.2 Decolonizing human rights

The decolonizing of human rights cannot be read as distinct from the decolonizing of gender. "Turning the colonized into human beings was not a colonial goal" (Lugones 2010:744) which is why it brought forth sexed bodies as opposed to gendered. Therefore, I suggest that thinking about what it means to decolonize each category through the other, might better illuminate the entanglements present and the nuance of a decolonial practice. Where 'through' implies an orientation that is cognizant of the unidirectional dynamic present in the categories of gender and human rights. Where 'through' also connotes a movement toward something, which I suggest requires us to first marry the two. Because both categories are imbricated with one another; their undoing relies on the undoing of the other constitutive force – it is only the decolonizing of gender that will undo the human in human rights and vice versa. If "racial differentiation denied humanity and thus gender to the colonized" (Lugones 2010: 746) then it follows that claims to gender for the colonized, are also claims to humanity. So, I move to show how naked protest decolonizes the human by making its claim to humanity through its assertion of a particularly Ugandan womanhood.

I work from the foundation that the concept of human(ity) is an imperial one based on white men as defined by Mignolo (2015:122).

Reconceptualization must begin with Sylvia Wynter's question: what does it mean to be human? (ibid), and I align with the perspective that to answer this question, we must seek delinking from Western epistemic thought and move in a different direction. Naked protest provides a contemporary example of this in practice as it implicitly offers a starting point to Wynter's question. "In 2012, women in Amuru District [in Uganda] stripped to protest the potential sale of land to the Madhvani Group; on several occasions in 2014 and 2015, women in Soroti stripped to protest Soroti University's encroachment onto their land" (Abonga et al 2020:205); "in 2016 Nyanzi stripped over an employment contract" (Ebila, Tripp 2017:39) and in 2019 she did so over Uganda's carceral regimes (Makoni 2021:554). Through this range of objectives, naked protest/the naked body becomes symbolic of an orientation toward expansiveness. In this expansiveness, it suggests that what it means to be human is open-ended. In a Western

epistemology that advances a singular definition, the human here is decolonized through openness. In laying claim to womanhood, a category imbued with humanity (Lugones 2010), to achieve various aims, it deconstructs the normative human doubly – first as Black Ugandan women, and second, Black Ugandan women with diverse objectives and thus countering imperialist definition.

Naked protest therefore begins the undoing of systems through which knowledge and power are constituted, engaging in an "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo 2015:110). If the concept of "Being is through the eyes of the imperial Other," (2015:116), then naked protest dares to develop its own eyes by making a claim to humanity that resists imperialist perception. It exercises a "decolonial scientia, where modern subjects detach themselves from imperial knowledge and subjectivity" (Mignolo 2015:116). "Nakedness asserts agency in the shedding of clothes" (Tamale 2016:12) - stressing the power of autonomy that is central to humanness while also contradicting the colonial imposition of "mothercrafting - where female bodies represent the motherland and must remain honorable" (Tamale 2016:20), subsequently categorizing them as exclusively symbolic objects. It begins to reimagine knowledge by responding to coloniality's organization of populations and affirms humanity in Black Ugandan women through this agentic quality that Western epistemic frames have sought to deny.

Lorde writes on how women can reclaim their erotic power, noting that it is a resource, deeply feminine and spiritual that has a role in political life (1978). "When oppressed, to the brink with no more options to protect their self-respect and dignity, women tap into the depth of Lorde's erotic and utilize it even if it means stripping off their clothes" (Tamale 2016:17). This assertion of womanhood then acts doubly by making a claim to rights and humanity. In this somewhat paradoxical circumstance, where gender affirms humanity and humanity affirms gender, this assertion of womanhood combats histories of exclusion in both arenas. In its resistance to coloniality inscribed on the body, nakedness demands the perception of an agentic subject, rather than a sexed object. Coloniality is an epistemic mechanism and so decolonial liberation implies epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2018:115). This disobedience here requires a re/reading of bodies, acknowledging the erotic power, erotic as political, exerted within a colonial matrix in the hopes of eventually undermining it. How then could the use of the body in naked protest to make political claims not be read as resistance to exclusion from humanness? Because if the erotic is a force engaged with by subjective gendered beings, women, then gender confirms the human, and the human, gender.

Lastly, we must consider the value of the category human itself. A popular critique of Arendt is her devaluation of the category, stating that the right to have rights is rooted in citizenship (1950), that "a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man" (Arendt 1950:298). Such logic fails to pay attention to contexts outside Western ontologies. The very claim to rights in naked protest is made through an emphasis of the human body. It is a corporeal performance that relies on its gendered quality to make particular claims to humanness and thus rights: in the case of the Acholi, these are successful where in response, "Daudi Migereko, the Minister of Lands, broke down and was gushing tears in response to the women's naked protest, later announcing that they had suspended the demarcation exercise, leaving the land to the Acholi" (Ebila, Tripp 2017:26).

Arendt makes an ethnocentric judgement, one that fails to see what the 'human' can offer to the claiming of rights. I don't mean to suggest that citizenship is irrelevant in the Ugandan context, part of the success of these protests lies in the fact that these women are Ugandan citizens and they also rely on the connotations of motherhood which are strongly tied to ideas of nation. Citizenship plays a part. That said, it is not the only category that matters. The value of the human differs across geographies and so we decolonize the human here by addressing its capacity as a transformative category. In this embodied act of protest in Uganda, the human/humanity undeniably is an important category in the claim to rights. So, decolonizing what it means to be human requires us to look beyond Arendt's conceptualisations and to challenge her unthinkability of the value that the human holds in rights discourse, combating her particularly racialist judgement and uncovering the steps being taken in this decolonial praxis.

3. Conclusion

Naked protest enacts a specific gendered performance that makes a claim to womanhood and humanity in interesting ways. It is a movement against coloniality through its demands to recognize Ugandan females as women and so, human. Though it doesn't speak to a circumstance beyond gender, thus still within a colonial matrix, it remains radical for the ways it reconceptualizes the category of 'woman' as Black, Ugandan, naked and agentic. Through such assertion, it lays claim to humanity, engaging a decolonial praxis by destabilizing the borders along which 'human' is defined. "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1978:1), and here, this resistance is imbued with its own tripartite authority that engages a necessary and particular subjectivity.

When Nyanzi writes:

Tell your daughters, nieces, sisters, aunts and mother.

Our aim is to capture not to destroy.

At his siren, block the roads and undress.

Our womanly bodies will capture the president's convoy.

The philandering ogre will surrender power.

(Nyanzi 2020:30);

She is reliant on the authority of naked protest to make her call to action for governmental renewal in Uganda through bodily power. Naked protest remains an embodied act that upsets epistemic boundaries by a asserting power inherent in Black Ugandan women and for that we must recognize its transformative potential. While it remains unclear how this decolonial praxis will practically further change the nation, we must appreciate its necessity in orienting us to new political landscapes, ones that will hopefully continue to direct us along telegoies that move away from coloniality.

4. Study Limitations and Future Research

Behaving with an epistemic humility and engaging a decolonial "practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (Alcoff 1991-2:23), I must make clear that I am only providing a partial image of what is uncoverable in acts of naked protest in time and in effect/affect. While this paper explores the radical potential of the naked protest, principally for its primary interlocutors, it does so solely reliant on secondary source material to make its interventions. Further work would do well to explore the same topic but using contemporary primary sources to re/think this practice.

On the topic of contemporary primary sources, future research would do well to explore this practice of naked protest through a historiographic lens, tracing the ways in which meaning may/may not have shifted from the examples mentioned in this paper to more recent engagements, and if so/if not, why? Developing this timeline would be helpful in elucidating what teleogies the act is re/oriented towards.

Another persistent question that I was unable to explore in this paper was what is left to be discovered when we explore naked protest in conjunction with the Ugandan state's carceral response to it. I believe that further research into how this form of protest is resisted by this carceral state power will bear interesting fruit. Some prelimenary questions are as follows: how does coloniality continue to speak through carcerality by punishing Black Ugandan women's protest with erasure/imprisonment? Given that these protests are often, if not always, imbued with significant policital meaning – advocating for anti-corruption measures, improved prison conditions or land rights – in what ways do these carceral responses further advance neo/colonial frameworks in Uganda that are concerned with extracting and exploiting the country's resources and people? Supplementary to the aforementioned questions, were a hauntologial approach to be taken, the interplay between this hegemon of coloniality, violence and inequality in the face of resistance work by these women would reiterate interesting truths about the ghosts, I suspect, are alive in Uganda's contemporary society.

Work that continues to build on this paper would be greatly appreciated for its contribution to an epsitemic canon that is especially decolonial and attentive to the myraid of ways in which resistance work to state power challenges coloniality that persists in contemporary Uganda.

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