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TALKING QUEER

Archive, Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 1 - QUEER AFRICAN FRICTIONS: a conversation with Rahul Rao

In today's episode, I'm talking to Rahul Rao. Rahul is a senior lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, in the UK. Today, we'll speak about his new book, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Post-Coloniality,* which was published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

Rahul, welcome to the podcast.

Thanks, Caio.

I'm looking forward to our chat, especially because I loved reading the book. It's such a compelling study. But before we get into the details, I'd like to hear more about how you got to the project. You know, in your previous book, you had already written a bit about the global politics around LGBTQI rights, but not really focused on the African continent. So I'm curious to know, why did you decide to write about Uganda? What brought you to this case?

I think there was an element of accident in this, in that I finished writing the previous book, *Third World Protests Between Home and the World* in 2009, and the last chapter of that book, as you know, looks at queer struggles mostly in the Global South, but as you say, non- African contexts. And it was around that time that the Uganda anti-homosexuality bill [transcriber added- The Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2014?] was first introduced in the Ugandan parliament. And this attracted worldwide attention almost immediately. First, because some of the provisions of that Bill was so draconian. As you know, the first draft of the Bill proposed the death penalty for certain categories of offenses. And secondly, because of the involvement of US-based transnationally-organised evangelical Christian activists, who had been pushing for the drafting and promulgation of such bills in sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world. So these two reasons brought the Bill to global attention almost immediately. It seemed like a really interesting international relations story for me, as an IR scholar, precisely because of this globality, and I also assumed that because right-wing, Christian, anti-gay activists from the United States were so involved in the drafting of this Bill, that this would be a situation that would not be amenable to framing in homo-nationalist rhetorics. Homo-nationalism, as your viewers probably know, is Jasbir Puar's way of describing a phenomenon in which the advancement of LGBT rights is considered a standard of civilisation and is

utilised or deployed as a new way of marking what is really a quite old divide between the civilised and the savage. And of course, in these discourses, the US is always positioned in the vanguard of progress. So I thought that seeing US activists involved in the promulgation of political homophobia would challenge this discourse that we had become so accustomed to by that point. I was wrong, of course, because this crisis was also amenable to homo-nationalist framings. But I suppose these were the things that first attracted me to Uganda and to this particular crisis situation.

Okay, so in a way you were responding to a rather contemporary issue. At the same time, the book has quite a distinctively historical sensibility to it. You say, for instance, that one of the things you are trying to do is to interrogate the kinds of queer politics that becomes possible in the aftermath of colonialism. So there is this movement of interrogating colonial pasts, colonial histories. Now, we all know that doing historical research on queer issues can be challenging, especially for scholars based in the Global South. So I wonder what kinds of challenges you faced when carrying out this project?

Part of why I became interested in this question of historicity and the past is because when I started studying the Ugandan situation, almost immediately, I encountered this very common queerphobic narrative that homosexuality is alien to Uganda, to sub-Saharan Africa, to the Global South more generally, that it's a Western affect or form of identification, and that it had been imported by Western activists or Western-influenced activists into places like Uganda. This was very familiar to me from India, where I had been following the struggle against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code for many years. So I was interested in the kinds of strategies that activists and academics were using to counter this sort of discourse. Now, in India, one very common tendency has been to reach for the pre-colonial past, as a space-time in which to think about, to investigate, to recover practices of same-sex desire as a way of countering the claim that these forms of desire are culturally inauthentic. So there are better and worse ways I think, of doing this kind of work of investigating same-sex desire in the pre-colonial past. I was very influenced by the work of Anjali Arondekar, who in an incredibly important book called *For the Record*, has problematised this tendency to reach into the past, to instrumentalise the archives as a kind of repository of solutions to the political problems of the present. And she alerts us to a range of problems with this tendency, that we not only instrumentalised the archive, we assume that it contains the secret to unlocking, in a sense, the problems of the present. There is a tendency to ventriloquise the non-speaking subaltern in the archive, and I guess, Arondekar is also alerting us to the ways in which the archive is not some neutral treasure chest of stories, it's also producing subjectivities. What's interesting about the archive is not just what it has, passively. It is not simply a passive repository of narratives, but also what it does, it's actively producing, categorising, creating new ways of thinking about social and political reality that we need to be alert to when we use it. So these I would say, are the some of the challenges of doing any kind of work that is looking to the past in ways that might speak to the present.

Right, and I think you really touch on a very crucial question, and I'd like us to elaborate a bit on it. On the one hand, we have this problem of mobilising the past in service of a political project in the present, which obviously can be problematic. But on the other hand, I kind of feel that politics is unavoidable. If you're doing queer histories in the Global South, you'll always have to navigate the line between scholarship and activism. And perhaps it has to do with the politics of the archive, right? So considering all of this, my question is, how did you navigate this line in your own work?

It's a great question. I think you're absolutely right that, particularly in Global South contexts, where the stakes are very high, and many of these struggles are dealing with criminalisation, and the decision to attack the criminal law is not one that is made lightly. And it's in some ways, inescapable. I don't think there is really a choice to do a kind of dispassionate, arm's length scholarly work in these contexts. At least, I would find it very difficult to do that. So then the question becomes how to engage with these. And this is where I wanted to do the kind of work

that would be activist-facing, but would not fall into these pitfalls that Arondekar identifies and that I very much agree with. So I became interested in alternative ways in which we might turn towards the past without necessarily claiming to be doing or producing history. I think there are different ways to think about this. I remember reading David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Homosexuality?* He argues that there's a difference between identity and identification, that when we turn towards the past for legitimation, we are not necessarily claiming an identity with historical precursors, what we are seeking is some form of connection without implying equivalence, or certainly perfect equivalence, and that these connections are meaningful to people, and we as scholars ought to be interested in why they are meaningful, rather than simply dismissing them as historically inaccurate. That seemed to open a different way of relating towards the past. And here, I became interested in memory. So the scholarship on distinctions between history and memory was also very interesting and useful for me. History as purporting to try to tell an authoritative story about what happened in the past. Memory as an account of the connections that people in the present have to the past. And the nature of that connection keeps changing, depending on what we uncover about the past, but also depending on what we're bothered about in the present. So I shifted my interest towards a study in memory. Now I've tried to distinguish history and memory, but I also explained in the book how these are not very easily distinguishable ways of engaging with the past. So there's a messy and complicated relationship between these things. But the other reason I was interested in memory is, thinking about memory gave me a way of saying, here are the stories that Ugandans are already telling themselves about the past. Here are the ways in which they are complicated and contradictory. Here are the different sets of political investments attached to each of them. So I took the position of a curator of stories, a curator who refuses to adjudicate between these stories, but collects them and presents them so that people can make up their minds about what is at stake in revisiting the past in particular ways.

Okay, since we are talking about these very complicated ways in which we can engage in the past, I was reminded that in the book, you alert us to another tendency, which is a tendency to romanticise the pre-colonial past as a time of tolerance, so to speak. So, in a way, a tendency to pink wash the pre-colonial past, as you say, but then, as you alert us, this can also be problematic.

Of course, I think here again, I was shaped by my experience in India, where one common response to the claim that homosexuality is culturally inauthentic, an import from the West etc., is to offer a counterclaim that it is homophobia that is imported from the West. Now, on one level, this is absolutely true. If one locates homophobia in legal provisions, such as the criminal penal codes that colonial authorities imposed in their colonies, but I think to end the story there and to assume that that tells the entire story of why anti-queer affects prevail in a particular place, is to assume that but for these Western colonial interventions, we would not have these phobias, these affects, these laws. And that, to me is patently not sustainable, because many post-colonial states, as we all know, have been independent for several decades, but have retained these laws on their statute books. In many cases, post-colonial regimes have re-signified and embraced these laws; they've found new uses for them. And I think if we reduce the discussion to legal provisions, then we also ignore the circulation of phobic aspects within society that may have very little to do with the law. We also assume, I think, that pre-colonial cultures and societies did not have their own ideas about what was normative and non-normative. And so while our understanding of the queer and the normative mind shift, this distinction, I think, might still be meaningful, quite apart from a discussion of how these binaries manifest themselves in western or Western influenced societies. So I guess I was trying to point to a more complicated way of thinking about normativity and non- normativity. Rather than assuming that pre-colonial societies were, havens of tolerance, this is what I mean by the slightly cheeky phrase 'pinkwashing of pre-colonialism', that I think is at work in some of our activist responses, and academic responses.

Yes, absolutely, and I think this is one of the most insightful contributions of the book. You're very clear that you are trying to avoid these kinds of simplistic explanations that place the burden of homophobia either in the west or in Africa alone. So instead, what you're doing is showing us the various forms of conversation,

tension and friction happening in-between all these actors. So what we get from this is that the making of queer-phobia in Uganda is a highly transnational process. And this transnational lens is quite central to your work, right? Why was it important to you to present a situation along those lines?

Yes, absolutely. I guess I started out thinking about homo-nationalism, and the way it manifested itself in talking about the Ugandan anti-homosexuality act. As I said, earlier, I didn't expect this to be a framing rubric in thinking about the situation because of the very well- documented involvement of US-based anti-queer activists in the promulgation of this law. But of course, the location of the crisis in Africa, uh in a country like Uganda, which has given the Western world a succession of villains in the past from Idi Amin to Joseph Kony, almost made this ripe for framing in very familiar ways. So we saw a lot of homo-nationalist discourse around the Ugandan anti-homosexuality act, media articles endlessly proclaiming that homophobia is rife in sub-Saharan Africa, gross generalisations of this kind. And of course, these needed to be criticised, and so I wanted to be critical of homo-nationalist discourse. But then I observed a different kind of tendency, which was that the critique of homo-nationalism seemed to displace responsibility for these homophobic affects entirely onto Western actors, so that the entire struggle became framed as one between two sets of Western actors that had been transported into sub-Saharan African theatre. And I was very concerned about that way of explaining the situation because it completely evacuated the agency of Ugandan actors in this situation. In a sense, this was differently insulting because it insinuated once again, that African elites and non-elites had absolutely no role to play in altering their own crises, in a sense. So I wanted to move now beyond the critiques of homo-nationalism, and to provide an alternative account of how we got to the point where this sort of legislation could be crafted. And this is where I found myself telling uh more historical materialist story of transactions between two sets, different sets of elites that unfold over a period of time, that have the cumulative effect of producing Uganda as a homophobic space. And I try and show this both in a 19th century moment, the moment of colonial encounter, but also in the contemporary 21st century moment that we're living through in which crises within global Christian denominations such as the Anglican Communion have fed these sorts of legislations and crises.

Rahul, this very last comment reminded me that another important issue in the book is the question of time and temporality, right? You make the case that the temporalities and the chronologies of queer politics in the Global South and in the Global North are different. And I guess my question is, how are they different?

Yeah, I think one crucial difference is precisely these oppositional statements that we hear in Global South contexts. Homosexuality is Western, homophobia as Western. And yeah, so you know, if we think about the first statement, ‘homosexuality is Western’ and the kinds of countermoves, that it generates, the the desire to excavate and to produce evidence of same- sex desire in a pre-colonial moment. What happens here is that the attempt to demonstrate spatial indigeneity entails a temporal quest. So this becomes a spatial temporal politics. To show that we have spatial belonging, we have to go into another time, a time that we imagined to be free of contact with the outside world and therefore pure and authentically native, itself a problematic presumption. I think this is one way in which temporal preoccupations in the Global South are different from those in the Global North, because homophobia in the Global North has never taken the form of implying that homosexuality came from elsewhere. And that's a big way in which I think spatial temporal politics in the south has been different and has generated a different kind of temporal politics.

And Rahul besides this question of time that you were alluding to now, I think that another important global friction around queer politics relates to issues of terms and languages to speak about same-sex desire, and gender nonconformity, right? Of course, there is a very long debate in academia, and many scholars have criticised the transference and imposition of Western terms and nomenclatures to the Global South. In the book, you do engage with this debate. You mentioned, for instance, the terms such as queer, transphobia, and homophobia. They are not necessarily adequate to refer and describe the variety of situations that you

observed in Uganda. You also mentioned vernacular terms that are being used on the ground, for instance, the term kuchu, which is used in Uganda, to refer to gender non-conformity. So this is a very complex and ongoing conversation. But I want to hear more about how you navigated this, this tension between terms and forms of knowledge.

Yeah, thank you. That's a great question. The problem you allude to is something that preoccupies me right from the outset of the book. So we know that queer is an Anglo-American term, and critics have asked very legitimate questions about what happens when we transport these terms and frameworks from one context to another. In Uganda, the term kuchu has been invented as an umbrella term, an overarching term to capture all forms of sexual and gender non-normativity and is the preferred term of identification for many people whom Western theorists might think of as queer. But I was very struck reading some of Stella Nyanzi's early work on something that she found, which was that many Ugandan interlocutors that she spoke to in the community did not like using the term kuchu because in their view, it connoted a radical, in-your-face style of life and activism that they did not aspire to or share, and they actually preferred the term LGBTI in preference to kuchu. And that was interesting because it seemed to me that the term kuchu, at least at the time Stella was doing this work, raised the same kinds of fault lines and aversions as the term queer did in western contexts. And that in turn made me think about how it was impossible actually to find the perfect term, the perfect overarching term to capture all of the forms of sexual and gender non-normativity that we're trying to study. So rather than conjuring up the perfect term or the perfect sign, I decided that it was more important to think about the function that the terms were playing, rather than looking for the perfect word. And it's there I think that we are alerted to the conceptual baggage of terms rather than the words themselves. So I'm more interested in the conceptual work that the terms do rather than in the geographical provenance of the term or the word itself. It's the function that's more interesting and important to me.

Okay, and with this brilliant response, I think we're ready to conclude. Rahul, this was such a fascinating chat. Thank you so much for joining us in the podcast.

Thanks Caio, it's been a great conversation.

It's our pleasure.