

Adam Moeller

Graduation Year: Senior

College: Arts & Letters

Major(s): History and Economics

Minors(s): Education, Schooling, and Society

Scholar Group Membership: Sorin Scholars

Did you received other funding for this project?: ISLA

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance?

Project Title: Gender, Sexuality, and Morality in Uganda

Project Location: Kampala, Uganda

ND Faculty Mentor: Paul Ocobock

Project Type: Research, Conference - Attendance

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project, Career discernment and/or preparation

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Very Much

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

My work was almost entirely interview based. I carried out 36 interviews – over 50 hours of discussion – and took extensive notes. Much of my time was spent coordinating these meetings and going to different non-profits, government offices, and religious institutions to establish a connection and to learn about the work carried out by those people I wished to interview. My research question evolved over the summer: I was concerned broadly with how LGBTI Ugandans live within their society and how this has changed over time. My questions focused on the historical development of the LGBTI community in Uganda, as well as on the personal lives of individual members of the LGBTI community. I learned about the extensive challenges which have faced (and continue to face) the community in Uganda. Religious fundamentalism and evangelism combine with a hostile and moralistic political climate to encouraged psychological and often physical assault on the dignity and wellbeing of members of the LGBTI community. Those deemed too overtly out of conformity with sexual and gender norms are targeted most regularly and viciously, this typically meaning trans women and feminine gay men are most assaulted. Due to these barriers – and their ability to destroy or weaken the generally prevalent familial and communal responsibilities/loyalties – the LGBTI community has

historically been faced with a stark choice between public existence as a distinct and isolated community and disparate, yet safe, individual existence. I learned that the community evolved rapidly and rather cohesively. From individual isolation many LGBTI Ugandans – looking for opportunity or escaping a hostile situation at home – came to Kampala, a somewhat rapidly urbanizing city where much of the country's wealth is concentrated. Utilizing early social media platforms and dating sites many queer (or kuchu) Ugandans found, largely for the first time, others who shared this part of their identity. The community evolved, quietly and organically, as a collection of social groups connected by several spatial locations (mostly bars and better-off members' homes) and by a common, usually hidden, experience and identity. This part of the community's development seems largely in line with the 'typical' development of LGBT communities around the world (where research has been done). Unique to the Ugandan LGBTI community's development is the rapid professionalization of their organizations. Around 2007 the handful of existing LGBTI organizations transformed, with the aid of European donors, into professional non-profits devoted to various issues facing members of their community (health and safety) and to broader political causes (decriminalization and non-discrimination efforts). This seems to have led to the professionalization of the kuchu identity itself, where members of the LGBTI community are essentially given two choices: work in a professional capacity with an LGBTI or related organization or cope with unemployment and related ills such as harassment and poverty. While this theory needs developed, I believe the starkness of this choice is due to the rapid development of the community itself, the fundamentalist attitudes that permeate religion and politics, colonialism and its effects as well as more recent international relations which are unequal and often tainted by racism or, in the recent past with US-Uganda relations, by religious imposition into political and social matters.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

This project had a major impact on my understanding of Ugandan – and African more-broadly – history as well as my grasp of historical and present social hierarchies. I also learned a lot about research, coordination, interview tactics, and the construction of historical theory. My project will likely not have an immediate effect on the lives of LGBTI Ugandans, however I hope to be a trailblazer of sorts for historical academic research on the LGBTI community in Uganda and those in similar contexts. To my knowledge no scholar has done extensive research on the Ugandan kuchu community; very few have done similar research anywhere on the continent. In debates about sexuality and morality in Uganda, the present biases and ideals of individuals in power are reflected upon the past, as they tout a bona fide and coherent Ugandan identity (which has no tangible basis in reality). Hence my work, if done rigorously and well, will inform the Ugandan LGBTI people – and society more broadly – about the history of this community within the wider community. Informed people can more effectively push against false representations of history and work to dispel myths of cultural and moral purity. Frank Mugisha, the director of SMUG and main supporter of my research, plans to use my thesis and any articles I write based on my research this summer to lend his and allied organizations credibility in this political, religious, and ideological contest.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

This research will be the main body of knowledge from which I draw to construct my senior thesis. I will combine my interviews with an extensive media analysis of the last twenty years, international aid records, sexuality and gender theory, existing histories of LGBTI identities and communities around the world, and general histories of Uganda and the region. I also plan to participate in conferences at ND and elsewhere on LGBTI issues specifically and development topics more generally.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

I would advise students doing similar projects to arrange for a research assistant in advance. I found an individual connected with SMUG who agreed to help me, but it would be much better to have a guide/assistant arranged prior to arrival. I would also make sure, as I did, to have a locally run organization sponsor your work as it brings the researcher a large degree of (unearned) credibility. Lastly, I would advise students to be mentally prepared for the difficulty of the work. Arranging interviews of any sort is tiring work, especially with all the travel and constant communication this entails. However, when those with whom you speak are from an oppressed group, or are the oppressors of the group, it becomes quite hard to not be affected by the seriousness of the issue at hand. I was mentally and physically worn for much of my time in Uganda, and while perhaps I should have expected to hear the stories I did, nothing necessarily adequately prepares someone to listen over and over to stories of rape, molestation, family expulsions, discrimination, physical violence, and misplaced religious and political fury and blame. However, having realistic expectations of what one might encounter can certainly allay some of the stress and drain.

I acknowledge that this form has been filled out truthfully and to the best of my ability. I understand that this information will be shared with many different CUSE constituencies. As such, I have provided as much useful information as I was able. I understand that CUSE will not complete my award disbursement until this form is successfully completed. If I have any questions or concerns, I will contact CUSE before submitting this form. To illustrate that you understand all of these points, please enter your Notre Dame email in the box below.
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