

## ***Bumsters*, big black organs and old white gold: Embodied racial myths in sexual relationships of Gambian beach boys**

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### **Abstract**

Sexuality is a platform upon which ideologies are enacted. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in The Gambia, this paper discusses the embodiment of racial myths about male Black bodies and Western affluence. Methods utilized included participant observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Beach-boys, locally called *bumsters*, are a common feature of the country's tourism. Societal attitudes to *bumsters* are ambivalent. *Bumsters* variously indulge in a complex web of sexual activity ranging from commercial to non-commercial, voluntary to socially-imposed, individual to peer-driven, heterosexual to homosexual, casual to regular, particularly with foreign tourists. Narratives about their sexuality reveal an enactment of myths about the male Black body and superior sexual performance on one hand, and images of plundered wealth sitting in 'the West'—a dream destination flowing with milk and honey, and physically represented by the *toubab*—a local label for White foreigners—on the other. This highly fantasized wealth forms the core of youth aspirations to travel abroad. Sexual activity with a *toubab* is the ticket out of Africa's inherent scarcity. Metaphors and idioms of unlimited virility and dynamic manhood are reinforced through sex tourism and form part of the identity of Gambian *bumsters*. These self-images reinstate and reinforce racial stereotypes.

### **Résumé**

La sexualité est une plate forme sur laquelle les idéologies sont mises en scène. A partir d'un travail ethnographique de terrain mené en Gambie, cet article examine l'incarnation des mythes raciaux sur le corps noir masculin et sur la richesse en Occident. Les méthodes utilisées comprennent de l'observation participante, des discussions en groupes-focus et des entretiens en profondeur. Les garçons que l'on rencontre sur les plages (*Beach Boys*), localement appelés *bumsters*, sont une caractéristique courante du tourisme dans ce pays. Les attitudes sociales à leur encontre sont ambivalentes. Les *bumsters* se livrent diversement à un ensemble complexe d'activités sexuelles, commerciales ou non, volontaires ou imposées socialement, individuelles ou déterminées par des pairs, hétérosexuelles ou homosexuelles, non suivies ou régulières, en particulier avec les touristes étrangers. Les récits sur leur sexualité révèlent d'un côté une interprétation des mythes sur le corps noir masculin et la supériorité de ses performances sexuelles, et d'un autre côté, celle d'images de richesses pillées et retenues à «l'Ouest» - une destination de rêve où lait et miel coulent à flot, et physiquement représentée par le *toubab* - une étiquette locale correspondant aux étrangers blancs. Ces richesses très fantasmagiques sont au coeur des aspirations des jeunes à se rendre à l'étranger. Des

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activités sexuelles avec un *toubab* représentent le billet d'avion pour sortir de la pénurie inhérente à l'Afrique. Les métaphores et les idiomes d'une masculinité virile et dynamique sans limites sont renforcés à travers le tourisme sexuel et constituent une partie de l'identité des *bumsters* gambiens. Ces images de soi raniment et renforcent les stéréotypes raciaux.

### Resumen

La sexualidad es una plataforma donde se manifiestan las ideologías. A partir de un trabajo de campo etnográfico en Gambia, en este documento se analiza la personificación de mitos raciales acerca de los cuerpos de hombres negros y la opulencia de occidente. Los métodos utilizados para este análisis fueron la observación de los participantes, grupos de discusión y entrevistas exhaustivas. Los chicos de la playa, que localmente se llaman *bumsters*, son una característica típica del turismo del país. Las actitudes de la sociedad frente a los *bumsters* son ambivalentes. *Bumsters* dan rienda suelta a toda una serie de complejas actividades sexuales, desde relaciones comerciales a no comerciales, voluntarias a impuestas socialmente, individuales a inducidas por compañeros, heterosexuales a homosexuales, casuales a regulares, especialmente con turistas extranjeros. Los relatos sobre su sexualidad indican, por una parte, la aceptación de mitos con relación al cuerpo de hombres de color y un mejor rendimiento sexual, y por otra, las imágenes de riqueza robada en Occidente – un lugar que ofrece los placeres que todos sueñan, físicamente representado por el *toubab*, un mote local para nombrar a los extranjeros de raza blanca. Esta fantasía de opulencia constituye la base de las aspiraciones de los jóvenes por viajar al extranjero. Las relaciones sexuales con un *toubab* son el billete para abandonar la pobreza intrínseca de África. Las metáforas y jergas de la virilidad ilimitada y masculinidad dinámica son reforzadas mediante el turismo sexual y forman parte de la identidad de los *bumsters* gambianos. Estas imágenes sobre sí mismos restablecen y refuerzan los estereotipos raciales.

**Keywords:** *Bumsters, transactional sex, male sexwork, Gambia*

### Introduction

Tourism is a rapidly growing sector that boosts the economies of a growing number of developing countries around the world. Studies reveal a close and ambiguous relationship between tourism and sex (Ryan 2000, Clift and Forrest 2000, Carter and Clift 2000). In the West, research in the area has focused on three main groups—namely, homosexually active men (Clift and Forrest 1999a, b), younger holidaymakers (Rogstad 2004) and international migrants (Broring 1996). Findings report a close link between travel to sub-Saharan Africa and higher risks of heterosexual infection with HIV-1 and HIV-2 (Stears 1996, Hart and Hawkes 2000).

Research reveals an imbalance in the body of literature about the link between tourism and sex, with the lion's share of work focusing on to tourists from the West. There is much less evidence of work among receiving populations or the societies in the host destinations that tourists visit. What is available—for example work from Thailand, the Philippines, and the Caribbean—tends to focus on narrowly defined notions of 'commercial sex tourism' (see Ryan 2000 for a discussion). In this study, we therefore chose to consider a more seemingly informed grouping of beach boys—locally called *bumsters*—a host population that interacts with tourists on the Atlantic coast of The Gambia.<sup>1</sup>

### Context and setting

Bordered by Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean, The Gambia is the smallest country in West Africa. Banjul—the capital city is a seaport, and accommodates the international airport which received charter flights, regional and international airlines. Owing to a relatively lax immigration control policy, foreigners are able to travel freely to and from the country by

land, sea or air. The scenery of the Greater Banjul Area is a juxtaposition of paradoxes. Beautiful exotic beaches with trendy architectural hotels, luxurious beach resorts and the exuberance of wealth lie close to shanty townships, overcrowded peri-urban infrastructure, blatant lack, impoverishment and the realities of a struggling contemporary African society.

The Greater Banjul Area is also the main residence for foreign expatriates, tourists and immigrant traders (UN DESA Population Division 2000, IOM 2001). A growing subpopulation of immigrants (comprising political refugees from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Cassamance) also reside here (UNHCR 2001). In addition, several disillusioned rural Gambians aspire to migrate to the capital in pursuit of employment, better returns from trade and/or better living as dependents of urban kin and extended family.

The total population of the Gambia is provisionally estimated at 1.4 million (Central Statistics Department 2004). Islam is the main religion. There are four main ethnic groups: Mandinka, Fula, Wollof and Jola. Tourism is the biggest industry, employing more than 10,000 people and contributing 4.2% of the country's Gross Domestic Product in 2002 (CPA and Terres des Hommes 2003, UNICEF 2003). In 2004 per capita income was estimated at US \$330 per annum. Education levels are relatively low, particularly in the rural areas, and enrolment in secondary school is extremely low (UNICEF 2003). The sole university in the country is 4 years-old. Quaranic education locally called *madarassa* is more common particularly for male children. Polygyny is widely practiced and the average household size is 8.9 people (UNICEF 2001).

### **Study methodology**

As part of an ethnographic study of contemporary youth subcultures, sexuality and reproductive health in The Gambia, this cross-sectional investigation explored the sub-theme of 'sex in tourism' that emerged during the initial stages of fieldwork. A social constructionist approach was taken, drawing upon elements of interpretive symbolic interactionism (Denzin 1989, 1992, Christopher 2001), socio-sexual scripting (Gagnon and Simon 1973, Lewis and Kertzner 2003) and critical social theory. The methodology combined grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1997) and ethnography (Spradley 1979).

Research techniques included participant observation, focus group discussions, individual interviews, content analysis of vox pop culture, literature and policy review. The diversity of the research team (two black African females, a Gambian ex-*bumster* with partial residence in Europe, and a local Gambian man) facilitated a multi-perspectival analysis and researcher triangulation. Focus group discussions were well-suited to the male youth sub-culture in the Gambia, in which cliques ritually sit around a charcoal stove, brewing cheap Chinese green tea fondly called *attaya* in the local language, smoking and chatting late into the night. The discussions generated invaluable information about lay concepts, terms and acceptable ways of tackling sensitive issues, and revealed something of the complexity embedded within seemingly straightforward concepts.

Interviews were recorded on audio-tape, transcribed verbatim, translated into English where necessary, and entered onto a computer file. Together with field notes from participant observation, these data were subjected to narrative analysis with the help of Atlas.ti (Scientific Software Development, 2001) computer software designed for analysing large volumes of qualitative data.

Initial participants were purposefully selected based on participant observation, in addition to their willingness and availability to participate in the study. Snowball and theoretical sampling techniques were later employed to locate closeted relevant others and to expand the domain of analysis of ‘unsaturated’ sub-themes within the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). *Bumsters*, tourist taxi-drivers, tourist-crafts-market-workers, immigrants including tourists, experts and traders, and key informants from the Gambia Tourist Association (GTA) were formally interviewed. Eight *bumster*-tourist couples were informally interviewed and observed.

Data from the above study population were triangulated for comparison purposes with data collected from urban students, rural youth, unemployed youth, employed youth in both the formal and micro-enterprise sectors, and key informants including youth workers, media personalities, health personnel, teachers and provincial village elders. This comparison revealed important differences between the ‘insider’ (*bumster*) view and that of ‘outsiders’ including other non-*bumsters* involved in tourism, young people outside of tourism, and older people involved in formulating and implementing policy.

### *Ethical considerations*

The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Gambian National Council for Arts and Culture provided ethical clearance. Initial written consent to participate in the study was obtained, followed by verbal consent requested at the start of each formal session. Participants had the choice to participate, refuse or withdraw at any time with or without explaining their reasons. None of those approached refused to participate or withdrew from the study. Refreshments appropriate to the sub-culture were offered. In order to ensure anonymity, the names of places including the beaches, hotels, resorts, clubs and pubs have been changed. Participants have also been given pseudonyms to conceal their identity.

### **Findings**

#### *Bumsing—a menace to tourism?*<sup>2</sup>

During the 2002–2003 tourist season, local authorities in the Gambia in collaboration with Gambian Tourism Association (GTA) launched an intensive ‘Anti-*Bumster*’ campaign to reduce the activity of *bumsters* on the beaches. Uniformed security personnel rounded-up obvious-looking *bumsters*, shaved off their dreadlocks and began routinely patrolling the tourist areas along the coast. Under the National Youth Services Scheme,<sup>3</sup> willing *bumsters* were offered an opportunity to train for various vocational skills including work as ‘official tourist guides’.

The Gambian population, human rights activists, tourists, investors and proprietors in the tourism industry, independent economic analysts, journalists and policymakers met this initiative with mixed feelings. *Bumsters* were outraged by the action. Some permanently fled the business. Others temporarily took cover. Other societal groups were more positive about the potential of the move. Proprietors in the tourist industry welcomed the initiative as a solution to the ‘threat’ that *bumsters* posed to profits earned from tourists and *toubabs* or White foreigners.<sup>4</sup>

Content analysis of vox pop including newspapers, magazines and internet postings, and popular culture including music, gossip and heroic stories about particular *bumsters*,

confirmed some disgruntlement and a general negative attitude towards *bumsters* who were labelled variously as ‘a menace to tourism’, ‘a syndrome of beggars’, ‘beach-trudging youngsters’, ‘society’s misfits’, ‘tourist rippers’, ‘bottom of the social ladder’, ‘foolish day-dreaming misguided youths’. Other descriptions include ‘bogeymen chanters’ associated with the sharp persuasive tongues that lure tourists and ‘reggae monkey men’ because of their admiration and singing of reggae music.

The owners of a prominent chartered airline frequenting Banjul remarked:

The biggest single reason for clients not returning to The Gambia is the *bumster* issue and we respect and approve of the Government and GTA’s initiative to reduce the problem and actively support the training initiative ... With a continual lack of *bumsters*, the country’s reputation will change and then the difficult decision will be for tourism to expand rapidly or continue to evolve slowly. (Halake 2003)

A local newspaper reported:

The Gambia has a reputation as a place where you will be pestered. Unemployed lads—*bumsters*—still hang around the hotels and are reluctant to take no for an answer as they offer their services as guides or companions. But the problem is not as bad as it was before. (License 2003)

Sey (2003: 2) reports that proprietors detested the ubiquitous presence of *bumsters*’ and their ‘...counterproductive attitudes, shy mannerism and pimple (*sic*) English, causing disarray where there should be order, arousing alarm where there should be normalcy and a sense of security’. The negative attitudes of outsiders towards *bumsters* are organized through consultation with *bumsing*—a verb referring to diverse activities involved in the process of misrepresentation of facts, usually a concoction of plight stories and ineffective struggles to meet the needs of large extended families, which are convincingly fed to sympathetic wealthy-looking foreigners with the motive of moving them to pity and compassion. Vices singled out by non-*bumsters* include (i) the nagging hassling sweet words that outright strangers employ to charm foreigners, (ii) the likelihood of aggressively approaching and pursuing particularly female or soft-spoken foreigners even when they obviously cannot tolerate this behaviour, (iii) the dishonesty and lies involved in the ploys employed by able-bodied individuals begging and hassling people instead of gainfully working or labouring to earn a wage, (iv) ‘running’ several unsuspecting foreigners, reactions of pretended outrage or anger and even hostility or violence when past shams are discovered by the victims, (v) guiltlessly and coldly disposing of the victims after they have generously dished out ‘assistance’, and (vi) reports of fights between *bumsters* as they aggressively protect their ‘catch’ of specific tourists. National youth workers and policy makers variously agreed that the worst effect of *bumsing* is the seeming appearance of success made from this trade, which makes it an attractive venture to young men in schools, the rural areas and even those in gainful employment—leading some to desert their education or vocation so as to try their luck as *bumsters*.

*Bumsing, hustling and responsibility: the emic view*

Various *bumster* participants were aware of the prevalent negative societal attitudes surrounding their activities. They displayed a range of reactions. Differences varied, however, depending on personality, period spent *bumsing*, access to other forms of income generation, location of practice, availability and nature of support network, number of cultivated relationships with foreigners.

Striker: Da biggest problem is dat we 'av jus joined da beaches. Me, I come from Brikama dis season. So I 'av few contacts. Da Swedish blondie slept only two nights. I dance wid her but she up and went wid no goodbyes to me. So I 'av no contact. De policemen should 'av wait till 2 years pass.

Salim: Last season, my boys say to me we move to a far off beach. So we move from Palm Beach to New Lido Beach. There was small number tourists. But we make good money 'cos there was small number *bumsters*. And we give them good time, making trips to the provinces, walking them to markets and dancing in the night.

Kabir: Oh yes, we make good business. And Ol' Pa Karim,... he the owner of the New Lido Beach. He's all right. There're no soldiers here chasing us away. The soldiers are near the big popular beaches, not far out here. Mean soldiers.

Salim: Yeah, mean tough soldiers. They cut off them dreadlocks. Hey, no man's touching my dreadlocks. It taken me 3 years to get them locks look like this.

Sweet Stix: How they gonna catch me? At night I cruise the taxi. Three days, I work tables in the bar. In the day I could chill out in the water, or at the crafts market playing drums and singing with the Rasta six. So how they gonna catch me?

Jojo: What 'av dey been doin' all dis while? We been on dis beach for 10 years. We made friends, dey took us abroad and back, abroad and back. We are linked to Germany, UK, Sweden, everywhere. So who needs a licence to be on da beach? No me, deh! (*Flipping through the visas in his passport as proof of his extensive travels.*)

More experienced *bumsters* scornfully highlighted the irony behind the condemnation of powerful society-members who own businesses in the tourism industry, arguing that they were no different to the *bumsters* because both groups provided services to foreigners in order to survive, for self-betterment or expansion, and in order to make profits.

Maxi Gee: But dey are very unfair to say dat we cheat *toubabs*. I mean, tink about it: dey sell shrimp, barracuda 'n' ladyfish or dem big mangoes dat dey buy very cheap from de locales. Dey sell it very expensive and make big profits. So how dey better?

Ras Ali: Yo men! Why say we lie tourists with hustling stories when they also say lies when they are advertising the holiday packages and the beaches and the swimming in the ocean and the crocodiles? They also say lies to pull the tourists here. The tours take them to the good parts of our country. Why don't they go to Jos Town or Serrekunda or Latrikunda and see our bad roads and poor houses? Why don't they show pictures of the filthy water in Banjul and tell them that it is so smelly? Because they also say lies like me and him and him. Why? For to make profits.

Others argued that they do not forcefully take the money from *toubabs* but rely on foreigners to willingly give it to them. When challenged about the deception and frequent aggression interwoven with the act of processing the requests, *bumsters* often argued that *toubabs* are globally renowned for their intelligence and should therefore be able to see through the lies. Many resorted to Quaranic argument to justify the act of begging for alms saying, 'It is in accordance with our religion. The Quaran says it is better to beg than steal' Papa Jos.

When probed regarding the fabrication of plight stories, some *bumsters* drew parallels to popular legends about healthy-bodied beggars who either mimicked limping or pretended to be blind and sat with begging cans so as to move faithful Muslims to give them alms. One widely-travelled *bumster* likened *bumsing* to the political manoeuvres of several African political leaders who beg for aid from Europe or America. Similarly, a recurrent focus group discussion argument was that many wealthy and leading senior citizens in the country (including popular ministers, politicians, exemplary civil servants, successful business

personalities, etc) have a well-known history of *bumsing* on the beaches and stepping into their success on the wings of *toubab* connections. Names were variously mentioned, and wonder expressed at how quickly these successful personalities had forgotten their roots.

Several *bumsters* defended *bumsing* as a worthwhile venture because not only were the earnings much better than most salaries and wages, but also it was a source of support for their friends and extended family. Many paid school fees for siblings and children, bought household items—particularly food for their rural and urban compounds—catered for medical emergencies; contributed handsomely to cultural functions including marriages, naming ceremonies, circumcision rituals and burial rites; paid rent, accommodated relatives and regularly sent money to their homes. Family members we interviewed generally appreciated this support.

Ami: The money that my brother makes at the beaches is good because it has paid the school fees for me and my two sisters. Our father was not paying fees for the girls. And Babou (the *bumster*) buys our school dress, books, gives us money for transport and lunch.

Ma Fatou: Heh my sister, life is hard. What God brings, you do not question him. When I heard he was working on the beaches I was afraid of bad behaviour. But then he began to buy a bag of rice, cooking oil, laundry soap and firewood every month. So I thank God. When I saw his hair (referring to his dreadlocks), I feared he was becoming a Rasta like the other boys at the beach. But, what to say? He sends support. That is what is important.

Interviewer: So are you happy about Yus' new life?

Yaya Binta: You mean with the *toubab* woman?

Interview: Yes, his new life since you discovered that he is working on the beach.

Yaya Binta: He met his wife. He goes to London yearly. He brings back bags of clothes and new shoes. He has a new car. He has bought me land where he begun building a compound. I am happy. I thank God. Maybe one day he will take me to London.

Unemployment is a central theme in young people's discussions. In The Gambia *Bumsters* tapped into this wider discourse when defending their cause. They emphasized the lack of rewarding employment. Many dropped out of school at primary level, claimed they lack the training and skills to make them employable, despised the low salaries paid by most employers, and capitalized on segregative recruitment practices like tribalism, nepotism and women 'sleeping' their way into jobs. Consequently *bumsing* was seen as a Godsend solution to a dire problem.

However, Gambia Tourism Association officials complained that these same *bumsters* dodged paying taxes on the relatively high returns they make in their trade. Other *bumsters* explained that while some of them only depend on *bumsing* for sustenance, the majority supplement this with work as craft-sellers, tourist guides, escorts, entertainers, musicians, waiters, chefs, shell-gatherers, part-time tourist taxi-drivers. Thus, they argued that many of them are gainfully employed, and not unemployed as popularly believed.

Youth workers and policy-makers countered the *bumsters'* argument by claiming that *bumsing* did not require any specialisation, training or quality development of the individuals involved. However, our analysis reveals that *bumsing* is a skill that is steadily cultivated over time. According to Sey (2003), the *bumster* experience offers a kind of schooling in how to relate to tourists. There are three levels of *bumsing*: primary school level in which amateur *bumsters* hustle and see what they can get without working at all—they openly hassle *toubabs* and beg; high school level where more advanced *bumsters* cultivate a working relationship in which they mutually work with tourists to meet mutual needs; and university level whereby *bumsters* succeed in travelling abroad once or several times on a

*toubab*'s ticket. A few even graduate to the level of getting immigration papers qualifying them for permanent residence, work or citizenship in the West.

### *A White ticket to Babylon*

The biggest accusation levelled against *bumsters* by non-*bumsters* is that 'they sleep their way out of The Gambia with old White women'. This is typified in the sexual innuendoes embedded in various names given to the Gambian coast including 'Sex Paradise', 'Haven of Sex', 'Bed of Lovers', 'The lovers' paradise', etc. The media contains frequent stories of older *toubab* women flocking to the country in search and later in hot pursuit of 'the powerful bodied young Black Gambian men'.

Participant observation at the international airport, on the beaches, the touristy areas, the night life pleasure spots and the upper-class residential areas confirmed the fact that older female *toubabs* frequently paired off with comparably much younger Black Gambian men—many of whom were living on the beaches during the tourist season. We further investigated this phenomenon with eight *toubab-bumster* couples.

The 'Babylon syndrome'<sup>5</sup> in which young men daydream of, fantasize about, discuss, spend long evenings wishfully planning, and aspire towards travelling to Europe or North America in order to escape the misery encapsulated in Gambian existence, is an open ambition among *bumsters*.

Interviewer: So what is this 'Babylon, Babylon' from all the discussions yesterday?

[Laughter from the group]

Lamin: Babylon is the name we use for America, UK, Sweden, Norway, all those abroad countries.

Ousman: Yes, when we want to go to the countries of the West, we say Babylon because you never know where you will end up going.

Omar: Yes, going to abroad countries where it is better than here—we say going to Babylon.

Interviewer: So, could my home in Uganda be Babylon?

Lamin: What? Uganda? Ayiii that is Africa, deh. That is not Babylon.

Yang: Are there better jobs? Good money? Good life? No. That is out, not Babylon.

The majority (38 out of 40) of *bumster* participants had successfully had a sexual relationship with a *toubab*, many of them admitting multiple partnerships either concurrently or in sequence. The other two were hopeful this would happen soon. Most *bumsters* reported having regular sexual relationships with older White women, although some also engaged in sex with younger women, particularly students on short holiday visits.

The most frequently mentioned disadvantage of sexual relationships with younger women was the characteristic brevity due to commitments to school or jobs in the West, fear of parental disapproval when the girl returned home, and the greater hardships or impossibility of ultimately achieving the much-cherished air ticket. *Bumsters* reasoned that the savings of an elderly lady were relatively bigger, her independence from relatives greater, her experience with 'less satisfying White men' much more, and her need of a young man to boost her self image or social position higher than a younger woman's. They also argued that older White women were more frustrated with the West and would thus not object to the possibility of investing in a business or a home (compound) in The Gambia, unlike the younger ones. There was the added biological advantage that an older woman cannot conceive. Thus it is easier or less problematic to negate ties of commitment to them after the *bumsters* achieved their goal(s) including monetary capital for investment in The Gambia, a short-lived marriage or an air ticket, and residence in Babylon. Two

*bumsters* in our sample openly discussed having had sex with *toubab* male tourists, both confirming the contact had been mediated by a renowned Lebanese pimp, they had been handsomely paid in cash for their services, and the relationships terminated when the *toubabs* departed. The majority, however, claimed to stick to women particularly because of the social-cultural stigma surrounding homosexuality and its condemnation in Islam.

Dynamics within the negotiation of *bumster-toubab* sexual relationships are diverse and complex. Initiation of the relationship is predominantly the man's role, typical to local custom. Discussions about identifying potential *toubab* partners revealed reliance on networks of people associated to the tourism industry including airport ground-staff, porters and security men, tourist taxi-drivers, hotel cleaners, waiters, bar workers, disco-jockeys. These act either as informers about new arrivals, or mediators (pimps) connecting the two interested parties. Less practiced *bumsters* are reputed for walking up to single females or groups of *toubab* females and blurting out, 'Hey, do you remember me? I am Lamin and I love you'. 'I love you and I will give you a perfect love experience'. It is not uncommon for such *bumsters* to invite themselves to a single female's table and start up a conversation, even when disinterest is shown in the intrusion. A popularly successful scene for initiating interaction is the nightclub, particularly the dance floor, whereby strangers frequently dance together. Participant observation revealed coupling between *toubabs* and *bumsters* occurring on the dance-floor in two popular dance clubs highlighted in focus group discussions.

Commenting on this phenomenon, *bumsters* explained that dancing acts as a stimulant for interaction. Others commented it was the effect of drinking alcohol, feeling high from smoking weed, or the giddiness of the disco-lights. Some revealed that nightclub workers could often spot unaccompanied females and this information would be relayed to a *bumster* within the network. A few others remarked that the late hours at which the dances end encourage coupling particularly because 'As one is heading for bed, the thought of going alone is depressing' or 'the devils of lust are flying about in the night and the Satan drives people to want sex'.

Interviewer: What is the secret behind the dances?

Fox26: Because we dance close together. She can feel my body and she gets attracted.

Ebou: Yes, and the best dance is a slow R'n'B number. It gives me a chance to hold her body. She feels the muscles in my hands and my thighs.

Fox26: And for me it is good to make her feel the power of these 'john-bulls'. I put pressure into her and she thinks about what else I can do to her. She will beg me for it.<sup>6</sup>

[Screaming from the others.]

Chatting, drinks and eating quickly follow initial interaction, and it is important to contract a consequent appointment. For amateur *bumsters*, the *toubab* will pay for the refreshments, while more advanced *bumsters* prefer to invest in the relationship at this juncture with the assurance they will reap profits on each coin spent cultivating an understanding. Some *bumsters* reported having sex the first time they met. Others claimed that they preferred to proceed slowly (mostly depending on the *toubab's* availability). In the process of cultivating a relationship, plight stories are strategically and confidentially intimated to the usually sympathetic *toubabs* who are often willing to help by donating money, material items, or particular services. In expressing appreciation for the assistance, the relationship often takes on a sexual flavour.

There were several allusions to the perceived size of *bumsters'* genitalia. Indeed, size was a powerful emic explanation for the high demand of Gambian boys by *toubab* women. These metaphors and stories were frequently mentioned in the discussions and interviews about

male youth sexuality. *Bumsters* appeared to believe the myths and lived as though they were reality. Many justified their ability to maintain multiple sexual partnerships and also satisfy different partners because of this superior sexual strength and special virility.

Interviewer: Surely you guys cannot believe that it is because you are big down there?

Coco-B: Why not? Sometimes you see a dirty old *bumster*, but the *toubab* dies for him. After a short time she transforms him. Why? Because she enjoys his size. It makes her scream unlike the White men. Because he is not handsome, not rich and he is very stupid. He has nothing...

Hamet: He has a big one. That is why my babes like me. They say my *chuchu-boy* is the biggest they have ever seen. [laughter]

Moussa: I was fearing that I was paining the woman. She was shouting and crying. So I stopped. But she shouted not to stop. After, one night she told me I have the biggest one she has ever had. And yet she has two big children. So it means mine is bigger than her *toubab* husband's.

Participant observation during the low season revealed that some of the older *bumsters* were also involved in either regular sexual relationships or marital partnerships with local Gambian women. These relationships are maintained mainly because of the need for someone to look after household chores and sexual needs outside the tourist season, and the need to have children in order to fulfil social expectations and obligations. Informal interviews revealed that *bumsters* are generally indifferent to the opinions, feelings and reactions of their African women partners, specifically not expecting jealousy. A few argued that regular local partners should be grateful for the *toubab* interaction because it meant better opportunities. It was interesting to note that none of the *bumsters* in our sample admitted to their *toubab* partners that they were already sexually involved with local Gambian girls. Most reported that they kept their local relationships secret from their *toubab* lovers, and a few openly denied other partnerships in order to give the impression of being faithful to the *toubab*.

While many *bumsters* were acutely aware of negative attitudes towards the phenomenon of young men having sexual partnerships with older foreign women, they reported that the positive attributes and the expected goals far outweighed any negative impressions. For some, having an older White woman clamouring for their love was reaffirmation of their otherwise abashed self-worth and loss of significance particularly resulting from the high levels of poverty and unemployment negating their active participation in the role of successful provider. Others argued for the long-term materialistic benefits. A few claimed that they felt emotionally connected, romantically fulfilled and in tune with the older White women who were bold in their expressions of love, unlike locale girls who were restrained by inexperience and local values about decency which restricted overt portrayals of sexuality and desire, lest they are interpreted as wanton or promiscuous.

Interviewer: Ah, but they are much older than you. Doesn't that bother you?

Ali: Why should it? The prophet's wife was older than him.

EasyE: Older means, she know to love and care for a man.

Ali: Yes, I feel good to be loved by an oldie. It shows am a man.

Ceesay: And they are happy to spend money more than the young ones.

## Discussion

*Bumsters* are among the varied sex workers available to foreigners on the Gambian coast. They are heterogeneous; with varying levels of experience, expertise, exposure, skills, ethnicity, *modus operandi* and origin. Predominantly male locales, they often offer several

services to tourists and visitors in exchange for money or other gifts. Employing deception, and spinning false stories of personal plight, they target *toubabs* who are locally believed to have much more wealth than nationals. Some *bumsters* simultaneously double as waiters, hoteliers, tourist-taxi drivers, craftsmen, boatmen, fishermen, watchmen, musicians etc. The ability to participate in other vocations explains the resilience of *bumming* even in the face of national attempts to eliminate the practice.

For *bumsters*, 'Babylon'—the emic name for 'the West', is a dream destination flowing with milk, honey, prosperity and wealth. This highly fantasized wealth forms the core of young men's aspirations to travel abroad. *Bumming* and sexual activity with a *toubab* is believed to be the ticket out of Africa and its inherent scarcity. Locally labelled 'Babylon syndrome', daydreaming about going to 'Babylon' and life thereafter is a favourite pastime for particularly young men in The Gambia, perhaps due to their disillusionment with what Africa has to offer them.

Public health interventions into sexual and reproductive health must consider local understandings and the lived realities of their target recipients, in order to be appropriate and effective. Within the context of Gambian *bumsters*' sexuality and sexual health, efforts aimed at maintaining the current low levels of HIV/AIDS infection should emphasize protection specifically condom-use rather than abstinence or faithfulness to one partner because sexual activity (particularly with foreigners) is part of the *bumster* lifestyle and a source of livelihood not only for the individual men, but also their friends and relatives in extended families. Condom-use should be demystified specifically regarding claims and misconceptions about condoms being too tight, breaking or interrupting sex.

Rights-based laws and actions, while claiming universal applicability, perhaps also infringe upon the rights of minority groups such as the *bumsters* in this context. While under-age sex workers certainly need to be protected from abuse, exploitation and violation of their rights (UNICEF 2003, CPA and Terres des Hommes 2003), *bumster* sexuality and sexual activity with foreigners including tourists must be understood contextually. Several *bumsters* regard *bumming* as a source of employment and income, a lifestyle or 'estate in life', 'the only skill possessed' and a strong support for meeting local domestic and commercial needs. These *bumsters* argued they were neither abused nor used by the older wealthier *toubab* sexual partners. Instead some claimed they were using *toubabs* as 'stepping stones to prosperity' and the West. Others argued it was love. Human rights protectionists should perhaps consider *bumster-toubab* sexual relationships as not infrequently mutually beneficial and pleasurable to the two consenting adults involved. The exchange of materials and services is mutually-appreciated and not necessarily a coercive action.

Likewise local authorities and policymakers need to further understand the complexities surrounding *bumster* lifestyles and sexual activities, instead of arresting all dreadlock-wearing men on the beach. Efforts to teach *bumsters* and other tourist-guides courtesy, social grace and tourist etiquette should be further strengthened in order to eliminate the unwanted hustling of foreigners. Considering that some *toubabs* do travel to the Gambian coast for sexual holidays or more regular sexual partners, eliminating *bumsters* entirely from the beaches could reduce the high numbers of tourists visiting the country. The local tourism industry authorities should instead harness the existing services, ensuring that health and safety are priorities for locals as well as visitors.

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## Notes

1. Historical transformations in the meanings associated with *bumster* are explored in Nyanzi and Bah (*submitted*).
2. *Bumster* is the person who *bumses*, the verb is *bumsing* rather than *bumstering*.
3. A government body initiated to address the dire problem of youth unemployment in the country. We collected qualitative data with enrollees, trainers, officials and graduates of the scheme.
4. The term *toubab* evolved from localization of the English slang 'two bob', the equivalence of the cash that foreigners paid their African servants in the 1960s. However, the term *toubab* is now sometimes extended to cover wealthy black foreigners; thereby having some social or economic class implications (CPA and Terres des Hommes 2003, UNICEF 2003). The two Black African female researchers in this study were frequently referred to by *bumsters* as *suma toubab* meaning 'My *toubab*', revealing the embedded diversity of meanings within the expression.
5. Analysis of how Gambian male youths relate to symbols and meanings of Rastafarianism including 'Babylon' are discussed in Nyanzi and Bah (*submitted*).
6. 'John Bulls' is a euphemism for male genitals. It seems to be particular to this social group.

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