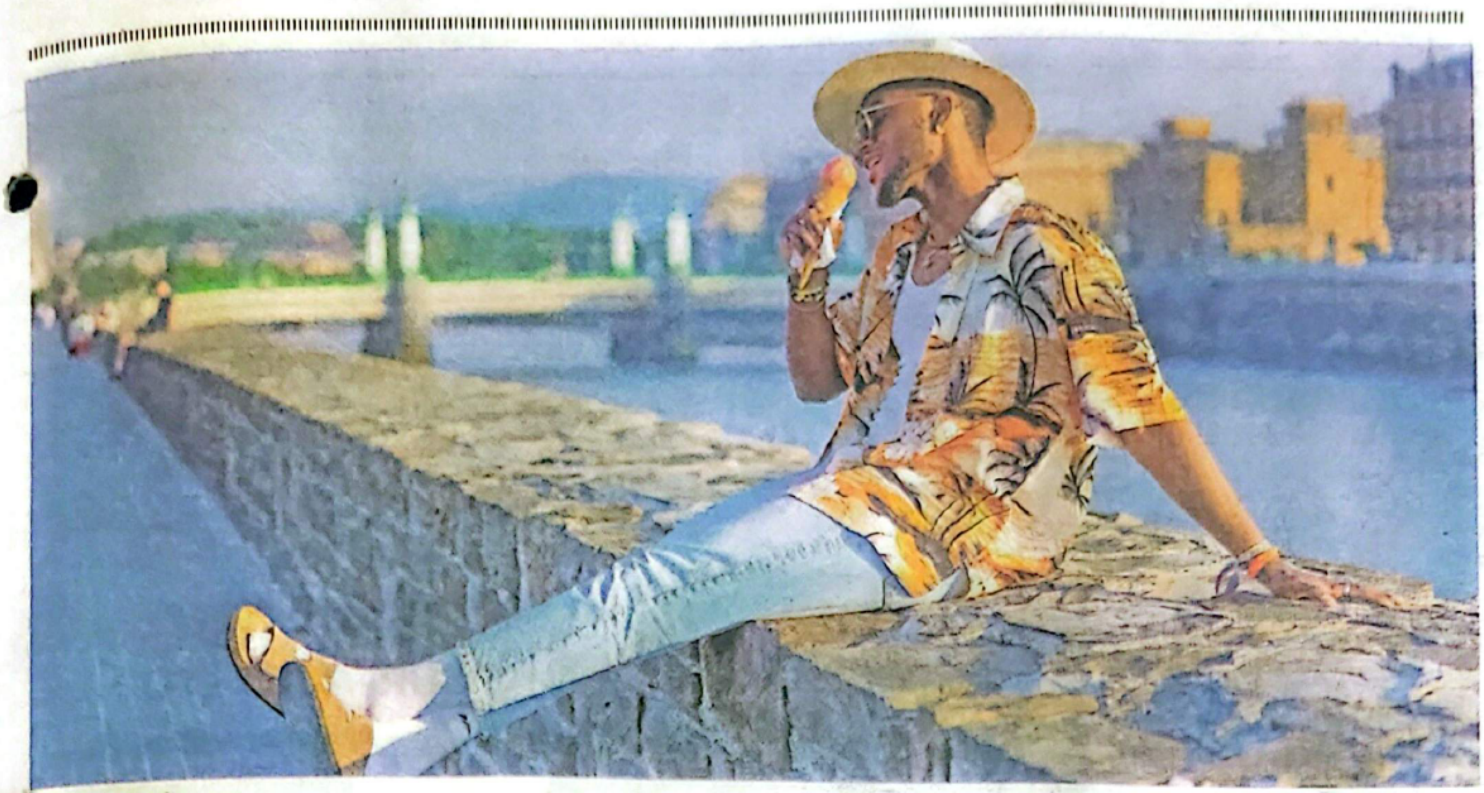
certs in the 1980s raising money for fam-

Looking back, we arrived in Kampala 10 years ago carrying deep and largely

down roots here; Fr



The mouth is for eating – 'okurya'



BLURRY LINES

with Tony Natif

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Back in 2018, Uganda's President caused quite the international newsflash when in an address to his fellow countrymen, the man from Rwakitura took a sharp turn and attacked a hot issue, head on.

No pun intended. He issued what he called a "public warning" against the practice of oral sex; branding it as a practice imposed on his unsuspecting country people by his favourite boogeyman, the West.

With the seriousness of a parish priest stunned that his unmarried parishioners are engaging in copulation, hence risking hell fire and brimstone, the President thundered: "Let me take this opportunity to warn our people publicly about the wrong practices indulged in and promoted by some of the outsiders. One of them is what they call oral sex". He said the words "oral" and "sex"; as though he was unsure they should be said publicly.

He continued: "The mouth is for eating, not for sex. We know the address for sex, we know where sex is". His countrymen, largely of a younger demographic than his, laughed off his warning and moved on swiftly. Well, until a few days ago when yet another CDC study came out to link oral sex with throat cancer.

Recent data confirms that the leading cause of oropharyngeal (throat) cancers in the US, is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which is mainly transmitted through oral sex. Tobacco and alcohol have been officially kicked to the distant runners up with HPV being responsible for anywhere from 60-70 percent of the cases. It can remain latent in an individual for years but this individual can unknowingly pass it on to others. Most infections resolve on their own in two years or even less. This news seems to have touched off a social media storm, with the main centre of conversation being around female pudendal regions and tongues. Some young men, obviously eager to impress online strangers, argued vehemently against the science. For others, you can tell from their submissions that this is some sort of existential crisis for their relationships. A major weapon of pleasure is being yanked away from them by those pesky, pleasure-hating scientists.

A mix of anger and denial that would put Kübler-Ross to shame. But of course that does not change the reality and the risk. The link between oral sex and throat cancer has been known for decades. For some of us dinosaurs, we remember 15 years ago when actor Michael Douglas, he of *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*, told the world that he had been diagnosed with throat cancer and blamed oral sex for it. Around the time, he was going around on international TVs to crusade against this disease. I was cutting my teeth in the vaccine access area of public health and my choice of work was in the human papilloma vaccine roll out space in Sub-Saharan Africa.

At the time, there was huge vaccine hesitancy, especially among parents of nine-14-year-old girls for whom the vaccine was primarily indicated to prevent cervical cancer. Some whispers among academics were growing louder for having the vaccine given to boys to prevent anal cancer. Australia led the way, our societies cringed at that thought. Now, it looks like we have come full circle.

Might it be easier to encourage young people to have HPV tests and then take vaccines than it is to get them off of the sexual exploration train? The President might disagree. The alternative might be to ask a bunch of people with a healthy disdain for condoms to somehow embrace dental dams in order to safely pleasure their partners. Sexual and reproductive health practitioners certainly have their work cut out.

Stay safe over yonder!

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