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Adriaan van Klinken and Johanna Stiebert, with Sebyala Brian and Frederick Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2021, pp.xix+255, hardback, ISBN 978 1 84701 283 8.

As Stella Nyanzi says in her introduction, this book 'is about the possibilities of paradoxes. Combining the affirmative roles of religion ...with non-heteronormative sexual orientations and non-binary gender identities...'. The book is a collaborative project between academic theologians from Leeds University and Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugees living in Nairobi, who tell their stories and reflect on how the Bible continues to move and support them, despite the 'clobber texts' which churches and mosques use to condemn those they stigmatise as 'homosexuals'. The first part of the book contains the stories of 12 individuals who felt compelled to escape their homeland at a time when Ugandan society was consumed by angry debates surrounding the passing of the 2014 Anti-Homosexual Act in 2014. This act was swiftly declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, on purely procedural grounds. Despite threats to re-introduce similar legislation, this has not so far happened. Nevertheless its toxic legacy remains.

The 12 'life-stories' tell of ostracism, in Uganda, by family, a vicious anti-gay press, denunciation by church leaders, and discrimination by employers, in one case involving being blackmailed into coercive sex. The decision to go to Kenya was made individually by each person, and at different times. While the UN High Commission for Refugees was able to offer assistance, the atmosphere in the host country was hardly less hostile than at home. As refugees they were not able to find employment, few had competence in Swahili (and feared that gaining fluency in the language might compromise their attempts to move on to western countries). Some were forced to locate to the Kakuma refugee camp among large communities of refugees from war-torn countries. They felt completely out of place. The Ugandan LGTBQ refugees suffered discrimination and hostility even from UNHCR officials. Sex work was often the only way to survive financially. Many of the witnesses live in a refuge provided by The Nature Network, co-founded by Sebyala Brian, who provides the first life story.

The 12 life-story witnesses all come from religious backgrounds: Catholic, Anglican, 'Born-Again' Pentecostal churches, and Islam. Religion remains an important source of inspiration and comfort. 'The Bible, its condemning and loving at the same time', as Sebyala realistically asserts (p.33). The story tellers speak of the strength they gained from David (in his fight against Goliath; no-one mentioned his relationship with Jonathan), Job, Daniel, and the disciple 'who used to sleep very close to Jesus' (p.53). While acknowledging the difficulty of the Genesis creation stories, with their apparently stark male/female dualism, one story teller boldly affirms that a non-binary identity constitutes the fabric of their being, whatever the Bible might say. Another speaks of the expulsion from Paradise, perhaps identifying with their own refugee status; another speaks more optimistically of God's command in the garden of Eden, to 'go and make the world a better place' (their summary of the Genesis texts). The Muslim story teller was affirmed by Sura 93, *Ad-Duhaa*: 'Don't despair, I have not forgotten you. Do you remember that you were an orphaned I raised you?' Similarly, a Christian quoted Matthew 11:28-30: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest'.

The academic authors allow the story tellers to relate their stories without intervention or commentary. But the second half of the book aims to interpret the the 'inter-reading' of life stories and Bible stories. They concentrate on two stories popular for the LGBTQ+ community: Daniel in the lions' den, and 'Jesus and the guys charged with indecency' [i.e. the story of Jesus's rescue of the woman accused of adultery]. One of the inspirations for their hermeneutic are the writings of Southern African theologians Gerald West, in providing contextualised community responses to biblical texts during and after the apartheid years; and Musa Dube's work among women and sexual minorities during the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

This fascinating book does not attempt a sociological analysis: the story tellers are not respondents to a survey, nor necessarily representative of gay sexual minorities as a whole. A large proportion of the twelve would identify as trans-gender or non-binary. This is partly because the focus of the stories comes from residents of the Nature Network, which, while open to all LGBTQ+, has particularly been the home for trans-gender refugees. This raises the question about whether trans-gender people are particularly vulnerable to stigmatisation in Uganda. 'Straight acting' male gay and lesbian people can more easily hide their sexual identity and do

not, to the same extent, feel that fleeing the country is their only way of survival. A large number of the story tellers speak of a Catholic upbringing. For me this was surprising, in that the Catholic Church in Uganda has been much less abrasive in addressing homosexuality than the Anglican and Pentecostal churches. The majority of the refugees are Baganda, and/or residents of the capital, Kampala. What is the situation in more rural parts of the country? The difficult reception of the Ugandans in Kakuma camp also highlights the fact those who flee because of sexual orientation are a very different phenomenon from those who flee as whole communities because of internal conflict, war or famine.

The focus on the story of Daniel has an interesting historical dimension which is not discussed in this book. The first Ugandan Anglican and Catholic converts in the latter part of the 19th century were high status young men at the court of the Kabaka. They were often compared, at the time, with Daniel and his companions at the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. Their refusal to compromise their faith led to persecution and death by burning at the execution site of Namugongo. The story of the three companions of Daniel in the burning fiery furnace inspired the martyrs. Unlike the story in the book of Daniel, their reward was beyond this world. Kabaka Mwangwa's 'homosexuality' (a somewhat anachronistic term) has often, especially by the churches, been blamed for this persecution. Others have lauded the king for his nationalism, his defence of Buganda in the face of the very real threat of European imperialism. Ironically, Mwangwa did eventually rebel against the British colonial power. He was captured and exiled to the Seychelles, where he admitted defeat, and accepted to be baptised. What did he choose as his baptismal name? - 'Danieri' (the Luganda version of Daniel)!

The poem by gay activist and exile in USA, Tom Rogers Muyanga-Mukasa, 'Accused of a Sodomy Act', is a meditation, from an LGBTQ perspective, on the biblical story of the woman 'caught in adultery'. His final stanza well reflects the ostracism, resilience and the humanistic hope of those Ugandans who have suffered and survived. The poet puts these words into the mouth of Jesus:

'Go and treat yourself with love,
you are as splendidly made as any,
all the creatures are formidably made,
go and do not seek vengeance,
rather lead your life fully. (p.213).

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