

“Accused of a Sodomy Act”: Bible, Queer Poetry and African Narrative Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of poetry and narrative methods in African-centred queer biblical studies and theology. As a case in point, it presents a poem, titled “Accused of a Sodomy Act,” by Tom Muyunga-Mukasa, that was written as part of a queer Bible reading project with Ugandan LGBTQ refugees. The poem is a contemporary re-telling of the gospel story about Jesus and the “woman caught in adultery” in the context of socio-political homophobia in Uganda. The poem is complemented by an autobiographical reflection by the writer, providing insight into his personal experiences of growing up as gay and religious in Uganda. This is embedded in a more general discussion, relating the poem to trends of life storytelling in African LGBTQ activism, and to established narrative methodologies in African theological and biblical studies scholarship. Overall, the article makes a methodological contribution, by foregrounding queer poetry and storytelling as innovations in African narrative hermeneutics that expand the established concern with gender and sexuality beyond a heterosexual framework, and that include the marginalised voices and experiences of LGBTQ people.

KEYWORDS

Bible, LGBTQ, poetry, narrative hermeneutics, life storytelling, African queer theology

Introduction¹

In the face of social, political and religious homo- or LGBTQ-phobia, across the African continent, African LGBTQ activists and communities in recent years have resorted to creative methods of claiming visibility and making their voices and life experienced heard. This includes the method of autobiographical life-writing and life-storytelling. Countries as diverse as Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia and South Africa have witnessed the publication of collections of LGBTQ stories and poems. This trend reflects the adoption of life storytelling as a method of visibility and resistance by African LGBTQ activists. The rationale for this, as captured by Zethu Matebeni, is that personal life narratives complicate the “ridiculous notion that same-sex desire and sexuality is un-African ... by fusing religion, family and sexual desires with everyday practices of being

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African.”² One critical observation is that the stories and poems in these collections frequently narrate negative as well as positive experiences with religion, express religious belief, and use language of faith. This interest in religion is explicitly reflected in the title of Unoma Azuah’s collection of Nigerian LGBTQ life stories, *Blessed Body* and in the title of Romeo Oriogun’s poetry collection, *Sacrament of Bodies*.³

Sometimes, these writings explicitly invoke biblical references. For instance, in the Kenyan collection *Stories of Our Lives*, a narrator who describes herself as “a lesbian, a sex worker activist and mother of three children,” tells about the discrimination that she has experienced from fellow Christians but which could not stop her from believing in, and praising God. She then states:

My favourite story in the Bible is the one where Jesus drank from the water pot of a woman accused of being a prostitute. Jesus did not care whether she was a prostitute or whether she was HIV positive. God sees us for who we are. He sees what is good in me. He is up there telling his angels that there are things that I am doing that are better than what the Christians who are pointing fingers are doing. There is no big sin or small sin before the eyes of God. Being a homosexual is irrelevant to him.⁴

The Bible story invoked here, of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-26), provides the narrator with points of identification: she identifies with the woman in the story who is stigmatised as a sexual outlaw on the basis of her marital history and status; she also takes inspiration and strength from Jesus’s attitude towards this woman, which for the narrator confirms her belief that God is also favourable towards her.

On the basis of invocations of the Bible and of religious language more generally such as in this story, it has been argued that African LGBTQ autobiographical writing provides a critical starting point for African narrative queer theology.⁵ This insight also underlies the Sacred Queer Stories project, of which the present article is an output. The project made use of community-based activist research methods,⁶ working with a community of Ugandan LGBTQ refugees based in Nairobi, Kenya, and facilitating an inter-reading of their life stories with selected bible stories. In the following sections, the article

² Zethu Matebeni, “Introduction,” in *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender*, ed. Unoma Azuah (Jackson: CookingPot, 2016), 1.

³ Unoma Azuah (ed), *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender* (Jackson: CookingPot, 2016); Romeo Oriogun, *Sacrament of Bodies* (African Poetry book series) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

⁴ The Nest, *Stories of Our Lives* (Nairobi: The Nest Collective, 2015), 164.

⁵ Adriaan van Klinken, “Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology,” *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context* 47.3 (2018): 211-229; Adriaan van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019).

⁶ Lisa Hunter, Elke Emerald, and Gregory Martin, *Participatory Activist Research in the Globalised World: Social Change through the Cultural Professions* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

will briefly present the project as such, followed by a broader account of storytelling methods in African biblical studies and theology. As a case in point, it will then present and discuss one of the creative texts produced through the project—the poem “Accused of a Sodomy Act,” written by Tom Muyunga-Mukasa. The poem itself is followed by an autobiographical reflection by the writer, and by a more general commentary. The article concludes with a short comparative reading of the poem “Accused of a Sodomy Act,” with a poem by Ghanaian theologian Rose Teteki Abbey, inspired by the same Bible story.

The Sacred Queer Stories Project

The research project “Sacred Queer Stories” (2019-2021) is a collaboration between The Nature Network (TNN), a community-based organisation of mostly Ugandan LGBTQ refugees based in Nairobi, Kenya, and the University of Leeds. The project was jointly conceived and led by Leeds academics, Johanna Stiebert and Adriaan van Klinken, and the TNN coordinators, Sebyala Brian and Fredrick Hudson; it received funding from the British Academy.

LGBTQ persons from Uganda begun to flee their home country in two waves. The first wave emerged after a group of American evangelicals led by Pastor Scott Lively, a self-proclaimed expert on the destruction of the “gay agenda movement,” held a series of talks in Uganda, in collaboration with local religious and political actors, most notably Pastor Martin Sempa and Member of Parliament David Bahati. The latter subsequently drafted a new anti-homosexuality bill in 2009, which was dubbed the “Kill the Gays Bill” because of the inclusion of a death penalty clause.⁷ The campaign heavily contributed to the politicisation of homosexuality in Uganda, with many of those suspected of ‘sodomy’ being named, shamed, and defamed in the media and by the public. The second wave emerged after a revised version of the bill—with the death penalty clause removed—finally passed through the Ugandan parliament and was signed into law: the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act. Although the act was only short lived (it was annulled by the Constitutional Court six months after its passing), it intensified the climate of social, political, and religious homophobia in Uganda.⁸ According to estimations, hundreds of LGBTQ Ugandans left the country, many of them seeking refuge in neighbouring Kenya.⁹ Their hope, when fleeing to Kenya, was that they would soon be resettled in a country

⁷ Kirsten Cheney, “Locating Neocolonialism, ‘Tradition,’ and Human Rights in Uganda’s ‘Gay Death Penalty,’” *African Studies Review* 55.2 (2012): 77-95.

⁸ Barbara Bompani, “‘For God and My Country’: Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches and the Framing of a New Political Discourse in Uganda,” in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 19-34.

⁹ Gitta Zomorodi, “Responding to LGBT Forced Migration in East Africa,” *Forced Migration Review* 52 (2016): 91-93.

somewhere in the global North. However, the resettlement process administrated by UNHCR¹⁰ is notoriously slow, and many of the refugees have found themselves stuck in Kenya for years, facing many challenges. TNN is one of several community-based organisations through which the refugees have organised themselves. Launched in 2015, it provides food and shelter, as well as psycho-social and spiritual support, to members of the LGBTQ refugee community in the Nairobi metropolitan area. The lead author of this article (Adriaan van Klinken) is a white European, UK-based, gay-identifying academic who has followed and been part of the work of TNN since its launch. The Sacred Queer Stories project was born out of this long-standing relationship, built on principles of trust, reciprocity, mutuality, and respect that are central in participatory activist research.¹¹ The present article is written in the same spirit of collaborative research, in this case specifically with community activist and TNN co-founding member, Tom Muyunga-Mukasa (introduced below). Two sections of the article—the poem, and the autobiographical reflection—are solely authored by Tom, while Adriaan served as lead author of the remaining sections with input from Tom.

The aim of the project is to explore the intersections of bible stories and the life stories of Ugandan LGBTQ refugees, as a contribution to the process of building queer African archives.¹² More specifically, it examines the potential of reclaiming the Bible and using it to signify the queer lives of LGBTQ refugees in East Africa. The rationale for this is two-fold. First, autobiographical life storytelling is an important and empowering method for members of marginalised communities, such as LGBTQ people, to overcome their silencing in society and claim a space to make themselves heard.¹³ It also builds on long-standing oral storytelling traditions in African cultures¹⁴ Second, the Bible is an authoritative religious text and a popular cultural archive in contemporary Africa.¹⁵ As much as the Bible serves to reinforce existing power structures and social inequalities, not at least in relation to LGBTQ sexualities in African contexts,¹⁶ the premise of our project is that sacred Scripture can also be reclaimed for purposes of community empowerment and social transformation. In other words, in relation to questions of

¹⁰ UNHCR stands for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee. It is the UN agency mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people, and to assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country.

¹¹ Hunter, Emerald, and Martin, *Participatory Activist Research in the Globalised World*.

¹² Keguro Macharia, "Archive and Method in Queer African Studies," *Agenda* 29.1 (2015): 140-146.

¹³ Shari Stone-Mediatore, *Reading across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁴ Russell H. Kaschula (ed.), *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Contexts* (Claremont: New Africa Books, 2001).

¹⁵ Gerald West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

¹⁶ Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (eds.), *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

sexual diversity, the Bible has become a 'site of struggle' in contemporary Africa,¹⁷ and this site can be engaged critically, creatively and constructively by those communities who in popular discourses tend to be marginalised, if not discriminated against, by that very same Bible.

The project design was inspired by the methodology of Contextual Bible Study developed and practiced by the Ujaama Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa.¹⁸ This was combined with life storytelling methods, thus utilising the text of the Bible as a resource for participants to identify, map and reflect on their own life experiences. This methodology expands existing work in queer studies in religion,¹⁹ particularly building on the insight of 'life stories as queer theologies.'²⁰ It also expands narrative methods in African theological and biblical studies, especially in the work of women scholars, as will be explored in the next section.

In the day-long group sessions (that took place late 2019 and early 2020), participants engaged in a collective reading of select bible stories, linking the main characters and events in the story to their own life experiences as Ugandan LGBTQ refugees, and they subsequently developed and performed a drama play that retells the story in their own life context. We worked with two bible stories, identified and selected by the participants: the story of Daniel in the lion's den, which resulted in a retelling titled 'Daniel in the Homophobic Lions' Den,' and the story of Jesus and the "woman caught in adultery," resulting in the retelling titled 'Jesus and the Guys Charged with Indecency.'²¹ These stories had been selected by asking participants for their favourite bible story. This phrasing of the question helped to avoid a focus on the so-called clobber passages—the verses in the Bible often used against LGBTQ persons, and instead to reclaim the Bible as a text with which participants could recognise themselves in and identify with. Where these clobber passages require to be approached with hermeneutics of suspicion, our participants generally demonstrated hermeneutics of trust towards the Bible as a whole. Even when the clobber passages came up in discussions, they tended to be dismissed by participants as irrelevant on the basis of their personal belief that God is love, and that the Bible therefore is a message about God's love. As such, they intuitively reinforced a

¹⁷ Gerald West, "Towards an African Liberationist Queer Theological Pedagogy," *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 155 (2016): 222.

¹⁸ Gerald West, "Reading the Bible with the Marginalised: The Value/s of Contextual Bible Reading," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1.2 (2015): 235-261.

¹⁹ Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

²⁰ Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 131.

²¹ Video recordings of these two drama plays can be found on the YouTube channel of The Nature Network (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMetf5VFntLHGzvtWtOwmKQ>), and are also embedded in the website of the Sacred Queer Stories project (<https://sacredqueerstories.leeds.ac.uk/films/>).

key insight of queer Bible reading strategies, as captured by Robert Goss and Mona West in their book *Take Back the Word*, where they write:

The whole Bible is a text of terror because of the ways in which our abuse has been justified by the misinterpretation of a few obscure passages. We believe the point of reference for a queer reading of scripture is the notion that the Bible is our friend. When we approach the Bible as a friendly text, as a text that “does not harm,” the terror of the Scriptures is transformed into the life-giving Word of God.²²

A detailed account of the process followed in the project, and an analysis of the creative outputs, will be presented in a forthcoming monograph. The present article focuses on one specific creative output, that in fact had not been planned but emerged organically: a poem.

One of the participants in the project was Tom Muyunga-Mukasa. He is one of the first refugees who left Uganda for Kenya and applied for asylum in the USA based on grounds of political and sexual orientation in 2012. Since then, he has stayed in close contact with the LGBTQ refugee community in Kenya; at the time of the Sacred Queer Stories project he was back in Nairobi to work with TNN and support its programmes. Tom worked closely with Sebyala Brian and Fredrick Hudson as local project coordinators, and the three of them served as facilitators of the bible reading and drama sessions. Inspired by these sessions, Tom—known for writing poetry—ended up writing two poems as another creative form of retelling the two bible stories through the lens of contemporary Ugandan LGBTQ experience. The poem ‘Accused of a Sodomy Act’ was one of them, and it was inspired by the group work about the story of Jesus and the “woman caught in adultery.” As recounted below, this poem was inspired by his own life experiences growing up both in urban and rural Uganda where they would go for holidays and farm-work. For the purpose of this article, we discuss Tom’s piece of queer poetry in relation to narrative methods in African biblical studies and theology, and as an expansion of existing work in African feminist biblical scholarship.

Storytelling Methods in African Biblical Studies and Theology

There exists an established tradition of narrative methods in African biblical studies and theology. Particularly women scholars have adopted and developed narrative methodologies, building on the centrality of oral traditions in African cultures, as well as on the use of storytelling in feminist scholarship. As Sarojini Nadar observes, ‘the work of feminist theologians in Africa bears testimony to this respect for story as a legitimate

²² Robert E. Goss and Mona West, “Introduction,” *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, eds. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 5.

method and source of theology, and therefore African women's theologies have aptly been named "narrative theologies."²³ These narrative methods are creative and diverse, as they weave together the stories of women characters in African myths and folklore, with the stories of women in African history and contemporary society, with the stories of women in the Bible and church history, with the life stories of women theologians themselves. Specifically in the field of African biblical hermeneutics, Musa Dube distinguishes at least five different narrative methods and strategies, the bottom line being that storytelling methods serve 'to read the Bible and African cultures together' in critical, innovative and transformative ways.²⁴ One key example of this, included in Dube's edited volume *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, is in fact a poem, titled 'I Am the Woman.' Here, Ghanaian theologian Rose Teteki Abbey engages three stories from the gospels, about women whom Jesus interacted with, and she retells their stories in such a way that she herself identifies with them and in the process feels liberated and empowered. As Dube introduces the poem,

She [Rose Teteki Abbey] reimagines the experiences of biblical women and articulates what the patriarchal authors did not bother to explicate. ... Yet in retelling these stories, Abbey seeks not only to expose their oppression, but also to show that the encounter with Jesus brought a new world—the liberation of women from patriarchal cultures and laws. This she reclaims as our right to empowerment, for we are these women.²⁵

Abbey's poem is particularly relevant here, because one of the stories she engages with is the one about Jesus and the "woman caught in adultery"—the same story that we worked with in the Sacred Queer Stories project, and that inspired Muyunga-Mukasa's poem, 'Accused of a Sodomy Act.'

Abbey's contemporary retelling of this story opens with the line, 'I am the woman caught in adultery'. She pictures the woman as someone facing social pressure to stay in an abusive marriage, then kicked out of the house, with her hungry children, by her husband, and seeing no other option then to give herself to another man for money to feed her children—realities that are all too common among women in Africa and across the world. Abbey then narrates the encounter between Jesus and the woman as a liberating one, as Jesus interrogates the attitude of condemnation and judgement of the woman's accusers and sets the woman in freedom. This section of the poem concludes with the lines,

²³ Sarojini Nadar, "Her-Stories and Her-Theologies: Charting Feminist Theologies in Africa," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 35 (2009): 142.

²⁴ Musa W. Dube, "Introduction," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2001), 4.

²⁵ Dube, "Introduction," 4-5.

I was free, my sisters, I was free.

Christ saw through their false religion.

True religion liberates.

Religion that enslaves us is false.²⁶

The poem thus illustrates a point made by two other Ghanaian theologians, Mercy Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, that Jesus through his counter-cultural relations with women “has become for us [African women] the Christ, the anointed one who liberates, the companion, the friend.”²⁷

The poem “Accused of a Sodomy Act” does something similar as Abbey’s poem, as it retells the same biblical story in a contemporary African context, in a way that is liberating towards those marginalised and stigmatised on the basis of societal norms of gender and sexuality. In that sense, Muyunga-Mukasa’s poem reflects and builds on the tradition of narrative hermeneutics of liberation, developed by African women theologians. However, it also expands that tradition, by broadening its scope from a concern with gender and sexuality within a heterosexual framework to a frame that recognises diverse sexualities. Thus, the poem presents an example of African queer narrative hermeneutics, and expands a recently emerging engagement with LGBTQ issues in African biblical studies and theology.²⁸ In the remainder of this article, we first present the text of the poem, followed by an autobiographical reflection by its author, and by a more general commentary of the text.

Accused of a Sodomy Act²⁹

At first it was whispered,
it became the rumour,

²⁶ Rose Teteki Abbey, “I Am the Woman,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2001), 25.

²⁷ Mercy Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, “The Christ for African Women,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, eds. Mercy Oduyoye and Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 43-44.

²⁸ See Masiwa Ragies Gunda, “African Christian Theology and Sexuality: Some Considerations,” in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias K. Bongmba (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), 367-380; Lilly Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, “To Move or Not to Move! Queering Borders and Faith in the Context of Diverse Sexualities in Southern Africa,” in *Borderland Religion: Ambiguous Practices of Difference, Hope and Beyond*, eds. Daisy L. Machado, Bryan S. Turner, and Trygve Eiliv Wyller (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 74-86; Gerald West, Charlene van der Walt, and Kapya Kaoma, “When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa,” *HTS Theological Studies*, 17.1 (2016): 1-8; Adriaan van Klinken and Masiwa Ragies Gunda, “Taking Up the Cudgels Against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian Theologies on Homosexuality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 59.1 (2012): 114-138.

²⁹ By Tom Muyunga-Mukasa.

the teller added spices,
the listener inundated by stories.
Some listeners were taken aback,
shocked;
others went about doing their business,
less bothered.
The tale of the man at the corner.
It was where we had our water point,
the village water point;
the 'water-man' as we called him,
the man at the corner,
the man who oversees the point,
this man,
it was said,
sleeps with fellow men,
never with women.

In my village the older elders,
the frailest and gauntest of them all,
said this was common in their time,
it was never frowned upon,
it was never spoken about aloud.
They said it all changed later:
the ones who brought a certain Book,
also introduced laws
through which
this act was frowned upon.
The latter elders
now lead the teams
to frown upon the act.

Jesus, it was said,
was on his way to our part,
most likely
on the market day;
on that day
they were to report
the waterman.

Quietly the accusers laid traps,
but the waterman
escaped the traps;
at one time they lined up a girl
to the waterman,
the girl was sent,
to have him seduced.
She failed in all attempts.
Next
they sent younger boys,
two,
three,
four young boys,
one after the other.
All failed to lure him.

Then some in our village
failed to pay their water bills;
the waterman
put down
every one of them
in a book of debts;
he sent the book
to the debt-collector;
they promised to pay,
they gave excuses,
they also
looked for ways
to bring a case
against the waterman,
any case,
a case that would stick,
so that
they could banish the waterman.
They connived
to have the waterman replaced.

I saw and heard all this

from my closeted corner;
I wondered
how my case would be,
when Jesus
were to come to our village.
This is how
my case would unfold:

I am similar
to the waterman
in almost all ways.
My family
took me
through a circle of shame.
It was during a funeral
of one of our clan members.
Funerals
are also communal rites of passage;
at a time like this
families resolve issues:
they disown
wayward daughters and sons;
they reconcile
over past misunderstandings;
newer plans are made,
name-giving is done,
wrongs are righted;
a blanket ostracisation betides
they who go against
the clan norms;
the norm is:
a man lies with a woman,
a woman lies with a man,
masculinity is the one half,
whose other half is femininity.

In my case
I lie with a fellow man;

I know of women too,
who lie with fellow women.
I am considered
a half who can never be whole.
Patriarchy draws hard lines,
in form of
masculinity and femininity.

In Jesus' presence,
with the accusers
having evidence against me,
with me all tied up,
bound and bruised,
emotionally and physically,
they would accuse me thus:
'we do not like him at all',
the elders would say;
'we have remedies for this kind of practice',
the elders would continue;
'he never lies with a woman',
this from fellow age-mates;
'he never shows us his children',
this from the immediate family;
'we offered medicinal herbs in case of a dysfunction',
this from the aunties;
'we are ready to give him our girls in marriage',
this from the match-maker families outshouting each other;
'the rains no longer come in their right seasons',
the farmers would shout;
'all our animals die in large numbers,
added the animal keepers.

Jesus would then look at each one of the accusers,
and would then look at me for a longer time.

Jesus would ask:

'How many of you have dug trenches to trap rain-water?'

'How many of you are not aware of the destruction of crop pests?'

'How many of you have rain-water storage tanks at their houses?'

'How many of you have a child for every sexual act they engaged in?'
'How many of you have not woken up in beds other than your marriage beds?'
'How many fathers among you have not got children out of wedlock?'
'How many of you fathers pay for childcare for all your children?'
'those among you who have not sinned at all, let them continue with any accusation.'

Jesus had drawn the people
around him,
he showed us our human limits;
they disappeared one by one,
they perceived a side of Jesus that was different.
Jesus would bend down again,
stand upright in his full height,
to ask where everyone had gone.
His godly nature
that stretches limitlessly.
At that moment I knew
about the other half in me,
a half of me I had buried so deep;
I reconciled myself to that other half,
Jesus drew it out of me;
my knees buckled,
I felt face down.
Jesus bent down to pick me up,
'Where are your accusers?'
he asked,
'Gone!'
said I,
'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.'

An Autobiographical Reflection³⁰

³⁰ By Tom Muyunga-Mukasa.

The poem “Accused of a Sodomy Act” weaves together the biblical story about Jesus and the woman accused of adultery (John 8:1-11) and my own experiences of growing up in Uganda and coming to terms with my sexuality. My family had two homes, one in the city (Kampala) and one in the village in the rural area where my relatives from my father’s side come from. I spent part of my childhood and youth in the village. The story about the waterman, which is narrated in the poem, is based on my personal observations and experiences there.

The village had a waterman. He never left his job and our pump never broke down at all. This made him an especially important person in our village. He presided over meetings, sat on tribunals, was consulted on several issues, and engaged in mediation sessions. Whenever he travelled to the city to pick up supplies for the pump and his household, he would bring gifts for various people. He was one of the few men who had maintained his BSA motorcycle. Its loud sound from the exhaust had a galvanizing stimulus that marked shared purpose and a sense of pride in hard work. The government had built the pumping station, a modern house with plumbing, a beautifully landscaped compound, and a chain-linked fence with a high metallic gate. It was a warm place when the waterman let you in. It was also a very private place. Many honey-moon events took place here. The waterman let his house and compound to be used for parties but by 6:00pm it was known, all guests must have vacated after cleaning up. This whole idea of a structured and timed partying on very well-manicured lawns was novel for the people in the rural villages. He was the talk of the village and many more villages beyond ours.

My village talked about how wonderful he was. Well, well! That was in his face but behind closed doors, behind his back there were whispers! I do not know if it was out of awe or jealousy! The next village would talk about him too, of his wonderful conduct and how many households wanted him to marry one of their daughters. Many homesteads had approached the waterman, pleading that he should have their daughters. But he would have none of that. We called him the waterman because that was the simplest name, we could use to describe him. He was the maintainer, cleaner, custodian, keeper of the water-pump and one of the few government employees besides the schoolteachers and a public health inspector. These officers were key people in pointing our village in the direction the government was taking. They are the ones who broke down big words like “workshops,” “seminars,” “conferences,” “party politics,” “decentralization,” “gender-balance,” and other such policy-infused words. But still, the waterman never took a woman.

However, there were occasional university level boys from the city who would visit and spend weekends at his gated and private place. The boys were well-groomed on all occasions; they were different in walk, skin hue and body-sizes. They kept within the

compound. Other than that, the waterman never let the pump breakdown even when we knew other government water pumps had long broken down and the pumping stations were derelict. Ours stayed pumping strong. The motivation could have come from the produce collected and sold by the industrious clan members of our village. Again, the waterman was instrumental in this because besides being a skilled engineer, he was also an agricultural extension worker. He helped improve the agricultural skills of the people in the area. This in turn led to a bumper harvest in a variety of produce which were food crops and some produce sold to get cash too.

Our village-home is a central item in our life because it was built at the ancestral grounds which were handed over to our great-great grandfather in or around 1900 during the Buganda Land Agreement. Our great-great grandfather was one of the chiefs who worked for the British colonial masters as an interpreter and agent. This land was a reward for his work. Or so we are told. Another version is that our great-great grandfather was an official during the reign of the Buganda king, Ssekabaka Muteesa (I). He was one of the persons chosen by the missionaries then to work as an interpreter. Having gained skills, he was the right choice for the British colonialists to work with as an agent. He made sure people under his charge followed the laws of the British. He was ridiculed behind his back but in his face, everyone paid their respects.

Many would point out that the waterman had leadership characters like those of my great-great grandfather. This enamoured many of them toward the waterman. Many felt they owed this man their dedication to work their gardens; the produce was used to send children to school, renovate homes as well as improve on their standard of living. The waterman was strict too and when the government announced the introduction of water taxes, he was the lead money collector. This he did regularly; he sent the money he collected to the government offices promptly. Our pump kept running and the waterman never married any of the village girls but had the boys come over frequently.

The frequency of the boys who were guests to the waterman and the denials to the many suggestions for marriage by many households were noticed by the village members. It became the recipe for admonishment if a boy never expressed any liking for girls. They would say, "We do not want you to do things like the waterman does!" All this was whispered behind his ears. He knew it all, but he kept doing his business anyway.

It was around this time that there was a funeral-cum-get-together event in the village. This event was complex and in it were other occasions such as: naming children; chastising wayward daughters or some sons who were taking long to show their spouses or interest in the opposite sex; this was the event when it was decided all pending rituals should be performed. This included all events from other sub-clans and distant relatives. It took two weeks to finish this event. It was this same occasion that I was paraded along

with other younger males like me to explain why I was not married and delayed showing the clan grandchildren. Five of my siblings who followed me had wed years back and had children. “No excuse there,” they pointed out! I did not have anything to show.

Well, I had but not what they would expect. This was a heteronormativity court. It is at this occasion that I saw how large heterosexuality rears its head in all the affairs of our lives. I looked at the presiding committee and a mental advocate listed their crimes and misdemeanours. I zeroed in on three members all of whom were the senior-most elders in our clan.

For instance, the chairperson of the presiding committee himself had nine wives yet he was Catholic. The latest catch was almost my age and we heard rumours that the chairperson promised her so much that she had to leave another man for him. She was about three months pregnant before he met her. She was forced to abort but officially we were told it was a miscarriage. All in the name of being the chairperson’s wife! The second chairperson too had a litany of scandals, but all this precariousness was hushed up and labelled as masculine conquests that deserved celebration. And so was the third chairperson too. When one heard them read the crimes or passing judgment over others it was like they were the angels. This event had its consequences, which included ultimatums; threats of disinheritance and disownment; public shaming; calls for public apologies; appeasement; heir installing; food, drink, and sex. It is at this event that I was given the final notice to marry or I never set foot back in that family. There was mention of habits like those of the waterman and other admonishments. All the while on my knees, I chose to keep silent, put on an appeasement face and promised to abide by whatever they asked. Deep inside me I knew this was the last event I shall ever be part of with my family!

Looking back at those events now, I am reminded of Rabbi Alfred Bettleheim who once said, in a quote widely circulated online: “Prejudice saves us a painful trouble, the trouble of thinking.” There are things we are quick to do unless we train our minds to interrogate them. A moment of self-aggrandizement can grip one when a biblical quote fulfils one’s fancy. Many a times before I learnt how to study texts, I would cherry pick verses and applaud myself for an activity well done, never minding the consequence. In the journey to discover myself I have met others who are looking at their lives and deciding to be better versions of themselves. There are some who are dodging a form of reality that once sated can bring one peace of mind. There are others who have met two realities and can live with both. The story of Jesus and the “woman caught in adultery” resonates with my experiences of reckoning with what I want my future to be or not to be. The story affirms my quest to live my life to the fullest. The one experience I feel must have polished my self-search was this experience in the village. In the poem, I retell the biblical story. I

imagine Jesus visiting our village, and my relatives and fellow villagers reporting me to him, as if they'd caught me in the act of sodomy—and as if Jesus would care!

A Commentary

To conclude, we offer some more general interpretative comments on the poem. The setting of the poem in a village is significant. This interrogates popular conceptions in Uganda and across Africa that homosexuality is a modern and urban phenomenon, inspired by Western culture, and instead it implicitly suggests that there are rural traditions of same-sex relationships. Here, it is also noteworthy that although some villagers are shocked by the rumours about the waterman, “others went about doing their business, less bothered.” This nuances monolithic representations of ubiquitous and pervasive homophobia in Uganda.

Another important interrogation of popular representations is captured in the stanza about the “older elders” who said that homosexuality was “common in their time / it was never frowned upon / it was never spoken about aloud.” This refers to precolonial histories of same-sex sexuality among the Baganda (the people of the Buganda Kingdom, in the country now known as Uganda). Where political and religious leaders in Uganda nowadays claim that homosexuality is “un-African” and in conflict with traditional values, in fact it was practiced, and tolerated, in communities as long as it was not too visible.³¹ As the poem suggests, this culture begun to change as a result of colonialism and Christian mission, when same-sex practices became criminalised.³² Interestingly, the same Book that, according to the elders featured in the poem, was introduced and as a result of which the act of sodomy became frowned upon, is used by the writer of the poem to resist this new culture of moral judgement and criminalisation. As such, the poem represents a contestation with missionary-imposed (and now widely embraced) interpretations of the Bible and exemplifies an African postcolonial queer appropriation of the same book.³³

There is an interesting economic and class aspect to the story narrated in the poem, with the waterman being depicted as a man of relatively high status and with good connections, while the villagers “failed to pay their water bills” and end-up being indebted to him. Although no reasons are given as to why they failed to pay—did they not want to pay, or could they not afford it?—this part of the poem does resonate with some of the economic and class dimensions of contemporary politics around homosexuality in

³¹ Stella Nyanzi, “Dismantling Reified African Culture through Localised Homosexualities in Uganda,” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 15.8 (2013): 952-967.

³² Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), chapter 1.

³³ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

Uganda and elsewhere in Africa, with gay men, in particular, being associated—rightly or not—with global connections and financial resources from the West. Although the I-person in the poem claims to be like the waterman “in almost all ways,” this may not apply to the waterman’s position of relative economic privilege and the freedom this affords. The I-person, after all, appears to be young, is not financially independent, and is at risk of being disowned by his family. This is, in fact, reminiscent of the situation of LGBTQ refugees—some of them may come from fairly well to do families, but as refugees in Kenya they lack support from their relatives, have often been disowned, and struggle to make ends meet; even upon resettlement, for instance in the USA, they have to start from scratch building their lives in a completely new country.

The detailed and vivid depiction of village life in the poem is remarkable, and it offers points of recognition and identification for many readers who are familiar with life in rural parts of Africa, such as the centrality of the water point, the culture of gossip and rumours, the role of the elders, the workings of kinship networks, the importance of funerals as communal events, and the policing of socio-cultural norms by the community. This is the setting in which the poem reimagines Jesus to arrive, as an outsider who is however familiar with the local culture and customs in the village, and who has the authority to intervene in them. The poem illustrates that Jesus might have been brought to this part of Africa by European missionaries but has become African and is seen in local vocabulary as a mediator, leader and elder.³⁴ The I-figure in the poem is a closeted young man struggling to come to terms with his sexuality while fearing judgment from the community and facing pressure from his family. The insinuations about, and accusations towards him have traumatised him: “tied up, bound and bruised, emotionally and physically.” Like the woman in the biblical story, the I-figure in the poem remains silent, as if the culture of hetero-patriarchy deprives its victims from their voice. But in the poem, as in the Bible story, Jesus turns against the accusers—fellow villagers and relatives—, asking them to look in the mirror for introspection, and to judge their own lifestyles and behaviours before they judge others. He then restores the human dignity of the accused, seeing him as a full person rather than as sinner. In the Bible story Jesus sends the woman away with the words, “Go and sin no more,” which can still be read as an indirect reference to her sinfulness. In the poem, the words of dismissal leave no room for doubt:

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.

³⁴ Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004).

rather lead your life fully.

In the same way as Jesus in the Bible story intervenes in the politics of patriarchy, in this poem he intervenes in the politics of homophobia and heteronormativity. He affirms the I-figure with words of love and grace, encouraging self-acceptance and empowering him to live life to the fullest.

Reading “Accused of an Act of Sodomy” alongside the earlier-mentioned poem by Rose Teteki Abbey, “I Am the Woman,” reveals the similarities between African feminist and queer narrative hermeneutics. Both poems, inspired by the same biblical story, retell the biblical story in a contemporary African context. The I-persons in both poems identify directly with the “woman caught in adultery” centred in the original story, and they feel empowered by the way in which Jesus relates to the woman, claiming it as an affirmation of their own quest for liberation from marginalisation and oppression on the basis of socio-cultural norms of gender and sexuality. The earlier-quoted concluding lines of Abbey’s poem, about true religion being liberating and bringing freedom, are implicitly echoed in Muyunga-Mukasa’s poem, where Jesus affirms the I-person in love and puts them in freedom. Both poems are examples of an African narrative biblical hermeneutics of liberation, applied to gender and to sexuality respectively. Although such hermeneutics is well-established in relation to gender inequalities, it is far less common, in African contexts, to apply it to inequalities relating to sexual identity. Thus, the poem “Accused of an Act of Sodomy” exemplifies and reinforces a point made by Gerald West, about the ongoing importance of a hermeneutics of liberation in the quest for African queer theologies.³⁵ The poem further illustrates the ongoing relevance of narrative hermeneutics in the light of the same quest. Hence, we suggest that an adequate African queer theology of liberation might well take the form of narrative theology, engaging creatively with Bible stories and with life experiences of struggle, hope and search for freedom.

Conclusion

The poem discussed in this article re-imagines the Bible story about Jesus and the “woman caught in adultery” in the context of community-based homophobia in Uganda. Queer poetry and storytelling present an innovation in African narrative biblical and theological hermeneutics by expanding the established concern with gender and sexuality beyond a heterosexual framework, and by recognising diverse sexualities. Although this article has only discussed a single poem, by putting this in the context of an emerging body of African queer autobiographical writing it has explored the broader potential of

³⁵ West, “Towards an African Liberationist Queer Theological Pedagogy.”

narrative methodologies in documenting queer African lives and rendering these theologically and biblically meaningful and productive. This potential will hopefully be recognised and realised by further work in the field of African queer studies, where storytelling methods have been appropriated but with little reference to narrative traditions of sacred scripture, and in the field of African biblical studies, where there is a tradition of reclaiming the Bible from (neo)colonial and patriarchal cultures through narrative hermeneutics but where the engagement with LGBTQ perspectives is still at an early stage. "Accused of a Sodomy Act" is part of a new chapter in African biblical appropriation, with LGBTQ people reading the Bible through the lens of their life experiences and retelling biblical stories in the context of contemporary queer Africa.

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