

Balancing an Unequal Partnership for Studying Ugandan Queer Refugees' Appropriation of Bible Stories

Stella Nyanziⁱ

SHORT BIO

ⁱStella Nyanzi is a medical anthropologist, political activist, feminist, queer rights activist, poet and currently a scholarship-holder of the Writers-in-Exile program of PEN Germany.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Writers-in-Exile program, PEN Zentrum, Deutschland
stellanyanzibah@gmail.com

ORCID

0000-0002-6400-4014

Introduction: Connections Within Generations of Knowledge Creation

I thoroughly enjoyed participating in the Sixth Annual Es'kia Colloquium organised under the leadership of Professor Grace Musila, who along with Professor Adriaan van Klinken are fellow recipients of the prestigious Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Studies fellowship. Moreover, I applaud Professor Musila for continuing to mobilise and organise academic knowledge production in, for, from, about, and with Africa. Working on the multiple complex diversities encapsulated within the label of "Africa" is critical, and often thankless, work.

The theme of this year's Es'kia Colloquium was "Epistemes | Methods | Textualities". It was strategic for Professor van Klinken to not only include the project, and the resulting book, "*Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible*", in this colloquium, but also organise the panel on "Epistemes, Methods and (Inter)Textualities". Gathering both physically and virtually relies on the internet's expanded methods of academic intercourse across vast spaces.

In this regard, it was an honour to share the panel with Sebyala Brian, who worked with me as a research assistant in Makerere University's Law, Gender, and Sexuality research project, led by Professor Sylvia Tamale, a feminist and lecturer of law. It is fulfilling for me, as a mentor, to watch and witness the growth of an individual I introduced to and mentored in conducting participatory ethnographic research under the broad rubric of the specialisation called Queer African Studies. Over twelve years ago I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork about the effects of the newly proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) on the everyday lives of same sex loving and gender non-conforming people in Uganda. During that time, Sebyala Brian was my main interlocutor in diverse urban-poor spaces, where gay men, transgender women, and queer sex workers socialised and organised.¹

I taught him the relevant research skills for ethnographic participant observation, acquiring informed consent from potential research participants, maintaining a fieldwork journal, conducting individual in-depth interviews, and transcribing and translating from Luganda to English. Following the project, Sebyala joined my small research team conducting biographic interviews about Uganda's "grandfather of gay rights", David Kato, who was violently murdered in January 2011 at the beginning of the homophobic persecution of LGBTIQ+ people living in Uganda. This murder played a significant role in escalating the exodus of LGBTIQ+ people (whether nationals, citizens, or residents) living in Uganda. Thereafter, I also worked with Sebyala on a study on LGBTIQ+ refugees living in Kampala city.² Little did either of us know at that time that we would have to flee our home country and separately experience the exodus, asylum-seeking, and exile. When I briefly sought asylum in Kenya, Sebyala established the persona of "Mother Nature", running the Nature Network programme in Matasyaland where Prof. Adriaan van Klinken was conducting research for "Queer Sacred Stories". Today, I am a scholarship-holder of the Writers-in-Exile program of PEN Germany and Sebyala has resettled in the United States of America. Our disparate trajectories as knowledge producers on

¹ Nyanzi, Stella. "Dismantling reified African culture through localized homosexualities in Uganda." *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 15, no. 8 (2013a):952-967.

² Nyanzi, Stella. "Homosexuality, sex work, and HIV/AIDS in displacement and post-conflict settings: the case of refugees in Uganda." *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 4 (2013b): 450-468.

Ugandan queer refugees intersect and blend with many of the realities we theorise about. For me, as a bystander, I am grateful to Mother Nature for creating a generative space during asylum from which knowledge was produced. Thank you for metamorphosing into a co-creator of queer knowledge on forced migrants in precarious situations of asylum seeking.

Straddling Epistemic Boundaries: Academic-Activist-Artist-Agitator

Having mapped nodes of connectivity and drawn a brief genealogy of links in shared academic knowledge creation projects, I turn to my ambivalent role as a knowledge creator. I entered this space as an academic whose most recent research and publications are in the multi-disciplinary field of Queer African Studies; as an artist whose creativity is mainly expressed through the genre of dissident poetry; as an activist who believes and participates in non-violent struggles, including the fight against religious, cultural, political, and legislative homophobia and transphobia; and as an opposition politician. As an academic-artist-activist-agitator,³ I celebrate sharing a panel with fellow academics, artists, and activists who are unafraid to straddle these different paths to forms of knowledge production (cf. Couture's 2017 challenges of activist-researchers, Speed's 2006 on critically engaged research, and Coleman's 2015 analysis of the back-and-forth within activist scholarship). As a decolonial and anti-colonial scholar, I deliberately work at breaking traditional boundaries between academic specialisation and social justice activism.

When I returned to Uganda in 1999 from the United Kingdom, where I studied for my PhD, I was appointed to work on the School of Law's Law, Gender, and Sexuality research project at a time when the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) was being conceptualised, introduced, and fomented in Uganda. With the death penalty boldly penned into the words of this proposed new law,⁴ it was impossible for me to remain an unattached,

³ Nyanzi, Stella. "Phantasmagoria: On birthing oneself as an academic-artist-activist-agitator." *Pulsations: Journal of New African Writing* 1, no.3 (2022).

⁴ DeJong, Christina, and Long, Eric. "The death penalty as genocide: The persecution of 'homosexuals' in Uganda." *Handbook of LGBT Communities, Crime and Justice*, New York: Springer, (2014) pp339-362.; Nyanzi, Stella, and Karamagi, Andrew. "The social-political dynamics of the anti-homosexuality legislation in Uganda." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality* 29 no.1 (2015):24-38.

neutral, objective, and impartial armchair anthropologist, safely producing academic knowledge about queer lives within the glass cages of the ivory tower of Makerere University. I could no longer rationalise doing research on, about, with, and for people whose lives were facing legislative and executive homophobia encapsulated in the death penalty, proposed as punishment for some forms of same-sex behaviour in Uganda. I became involved in LGBTIQA+ activism based on the knowledge I garnered as an academic scholar of queer lives. My activism has been influenced, informed, and enriched by my academic scholarship. Likewise, my academic knowledge production was greatly enhanced by my activism. In other words, a symbiotic relationship organically grew between my academic knowledge production and my activism against escalating homophobia in Uganda.

The Politics of Transnational Academic-Activist Collaborations

As an African academic and activist, I have partnered with scholars, funders, publishers, universities, and research institutions in the global north for many years of my academic career. I experienced first-hand the power asymmetries and politics of powerlessness within the unequal partnerships often formed between the global north and global south; between the United States of America, United Kingdom, or Europe on the one hand, and Africa on the other hand; between former colonisers and the formerly colonised; and between white scholars and their black colleagues. Unequal partnerships for academic knowledge production, particularly across continental divides, have several problems.⁵ Many white professors from England fly down to one of the many possible African destinations, exploit our minds and research expertise for which they pay miserable pittances to extract local knowledge from our people and communities, only to fly back to the comfort of their posts in universities and think tanks to publish single-authored papers and books. In contrast, it is noteworthy that Professor Adriaan van Klinken and Professor Johannah Stiebert name both Sebyala Brian and Fredrick Hudson as co-authors of the book *"Sacred Queer Stories:*

⁵ Crane, Johanna T. "Unequal 'partners': AIDS, academia, and the rise of global health." *Behemoth: A Journal of Civilisation* 3, no.3 (2010):78-97.; Obamba, Milton Odhiambo, and Mwema, Jane Kimbwarata. (2009) "Symmetry and asymmetry: New contours, paradigms, and politics in African academic partnerships." *Higher Education Policy* 22, no. 3 (2009):349-371.

Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible". This is a brilliant example of redressing some ongoing injustices and imbalances in north-south global partnerships of knowledge production.

Co-authorship, which transcends beyond mere tokenism (whereby non-contributors jostle to be named as authors of academic products), is important in redressing power differentials when academics collaborate with members of the communities we study to produce knowledge, partner with activists, and partner with minority grassroots communities. The politics within the praxis of such co-authorship is significantly more impactful when the minorities combine multiple intersectional layers of structural and systemic inequalities, including being non-citizens due to their sexuality in the country of research. It is important that the partnership is not only at the extractive level of generating knowledge, but also during analysis of results, feedback to the communities of research, and as recipients of cherished prestigious rewards by being named co-authors of a book.

Academic publications – particularly monographs, edited volumes, special editions of journals, journal articles, and book chapters – are exclusionary for most research participants from whom data are collected as the basis of the analyses. In addition to unaffordable costs of purchasing academic products, such as book prices, expensive journal subscription costs, blockade paywalls, etc., publishing houses located in geographical and social-spatial spaces are extremely inaccessible for local research participants. For example, a single copy of the hardback book published by James Currey for markets in Great Britain and the United States is both too expensive and too out of reach for the research participants whose data are presented and analysed in the book. Therefore, it is wonderful that the co-authors have consciously undertaken the necessary work of sourcing alternative publishing to mass produce an affordable and accessible softcover copy for readers in Africa. Indeed, the launch of the softcover edition of *"Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible"* in South Africa is commendable and exemplary.

Methodological Innovation: Triangulating Disparate Research Materials

The triangulation of the reported personal life stories with engagements of research participants and two biblical stories is methodologically innovative.

This research method reclaims and deploys the bible – a religious, cultural, and political text – to amplify the everyday struggles and victories in the lives of queer immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers. For a long time, scholars of queer African lives primarily focused on the ways in which religious scripture is weaponised and instrumentalised to violate the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people. References to the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are the most common scriptural uses to demonise, pathologise, ostracise, stigmatise, alienate, and criminalise people who reject the heteronormative order. Thus, the innovative reversal of scripture to unveil and reveal how LGBTQ+ Ugandan refugees utilise religion to navigate the trials and tribulations of their everyday lives is important to achieve epistemic justice. This is perhaps the greatest success of the team's methodological innovation.

Furthermore, the methodological innovation of triangulating the research participants' engagements with the Old Testament biblical story of Daniel in the lions' den and the New Testament gospel of Jesus and the adulterous woman, together with their personal life stories gives power to a generally invisible, silenced, erased, othered, and exoticised community of research subjects. Most African producers of knowledge (across all disciplines in African Studies) generally choose to ignore queer Africans. The personal life stories of the research participants in the vulnerable community convened by Mother Nature of the Nature Network are part of the core data set and research materials generated by this research project. Moreover, they are relied upon for interpretation and analysis in the book. Rather than depend on mere reported speech or speculation about queer refugees, the book's authors sourced and collected the life stories of their queer refugee research participants. No longer hidden, no longer invisible, no longer erased, the gay refugee, the transgender asylum seeker, the lesbian immigrant, the queer unregistered non-citizen are all on record and cast into sharp relief.

Reappropriating and utilising a book, which is variously weaponised by homophobes to persecute same-sex loving Ugandans and those of non-conforming gender identities to the point of expelling them out of a country, is powerful. However, the methodological reappropriation of Bible stories is also potentially dangerous if not used in careful moderation. The success of the methodology is, in this case, a result of two theology specialists on the team being in touch with the powerful role that religion and religious

experiences play in the lives of different African queers – some of whom are queer, Africans, and believers. The refugees in this case, were successfully able to reveal how they relate to aspects of the Bible references, particularly when going through a range of life experiences within the legal processes of asylum seeking. The interlocutory roles of the Ugandan researchers ably mediated between the theological theorisation of the lived experiences in which Sebyala Brian and Fredrick Hudson appropriate biblical scriptures and religious experiences in their everyday lives. Therefore, their position as insiders allowed them to bridge gaps between academic theorisation and the lived realities of the Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugees interviewed.

The poem, “The Company of Men”, is a beautiful interpretation of the biblical story of Daniel in the lion’s den by one of the Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugees. It further exemplifies the ways in which queer forced migrants can read between and within the lines of scripture and generate their own organic interpretations based on their everyday struggles and joys. The poet draws a lot of encouragement and hope from the story of Daniel in the company of men and God; hope that gives assurance of eventually prevailing.

Creative innovation with research methodologies is a critical ingredient and catalyst for pushing the boundaries of the budding field of Queer African Studies. Rather than shying away from exploring possibilities of analysing the interactions between biblical stories and the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ refugees who fled from their home country because of homophobia (including religious homophobia), this diverse research team devised a triangulation of unlikely research methods. Their innovation and curiosity were rewarded in ways that expanded Queer African Studies and opened possibility for queer African hermeneutics.

Conclusion: Balancing an Unequal Research Partnership

In spite of the varied challenges of asymmetrical research partnerships between the global north and global south, academics and activists, England-based scholars and Kenya-based refugees, white and black, etc., the research partnership between the four co-authors of “*Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible*” highlights that it is possible to balance out the inequalities. This can be accomplished through deliberate commitment to mutual empowerment during the research process, participatory involvement in the hard work and consequent fruits of the laborious knowledge production processes, the inclusion in public

rewards including being named as a co-author, as well as by democratising access to research products, particularly for research participants. Balancing out asymmetrical indices of power facilitates experimentation with innovative research methodologies such as the triangulation between life stories, Bible stories, and research participant interpretations of scripture.

References

- Coleman, Lara Montesinos. "Ethnography, commitment, and critique: Departing from activist scholarship." *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 3 (2015): 263–2802.
- Couture, Stéphane. "Activist scholarship: The complicated entanglements of activism and research work." *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 42 (2017): 143–147.
- Crane, Johanna T. "Unequal 'partners': AIDS, academia, and the rise of global health." *Behemoth: A Journal of Civilisation* 3, no.3 (2010): 78–97.
- DeJong, Christina, and Long, Eric. "The death penalty as genocide: The persecution of 'homosexuals' in Uganda." In *The Handbook of LGBT Communities, Crime and Justice*, edited by Dana Peterson and Vanessa R. Panfil, 339–362. New York: Springer, 2014.
- Nyanzi, Stella. "Phantasmagoria: On birthing oneself as an academic-artist-activist-agitator." *Pulsations: Journal of New African Writing* 1, no.3 (2022).
- _____. "Dismantling reified African culture through localized homosexualities in Uganda." *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 15, no.8 (2013a): 952–967.
- _____. "Homosexuality, sex work, and HIV/AIDS in displacement and post-conflict settings: the case of refugees in Uganda." *International Peacekeeping* 20, no.4 (2013b): 450–468.
- Nyanzi, Stella, and Karamagi, Andrew. "The social-political dynamics of the anti-homosexuality legislation in Uganda." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality* 29 no.1 (2015): 24–38.
- Obamba, Milton Odhiambo, and Mwema, Jane Kimbwarata. "Symmetry and asymmetry: New contours, paradigms, and politics in African academic partnerships." *Higher Education Policy* 22, no. 3 (2009): 349–371.

Speed, Shannon. "At the crossroads of human rights and anthropology: Toward a critically engaged activist research." *American Anthropologist* 108, no.1 (2006): 66–76.