

Sacred Queer Stories: Personal Reflections from Community-Activist Researchers

Sebyala Raymond Brianⁱ and Fredrick Hudsonⁱⁱ

SHORT BIO

ⁱSebyala Raymond Brian and ⁱⁱFredrick Hudson are co-founders of The Nature Network, a community-based organisation of LGBTQ refugees mostly originating from Uganda, based in Nairobi, Kenya. In 2019-2020, they served as local research coordinators on the project “Sacred Queer Stories”, which was a collaboration between The Nature Network and the University of Leeds. Together with Adriaan van Klinken and Johanna Stiebert, they co-authored the book *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTI+ Refugee Lives and the Bible* (Suffolk: James Currey 2021). In this contribution to the roundtable, they narrate and reflect on their participation in and contribution to this project. The text below is an edited transcript of their input at the Es'kia Colloquium at Wits University, South Africa, on 15 September 2022.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

The Nature Network, Nairobi, Kenya
raymondbrian97@gmail.com

Hudson

I am so glad to be here with you today and celebrate the release of *Sacred Queer Stories*. I want to thank Professors Adriaan and Johanna for introducing the idea for this project to us way back when we were still refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, and for developing it with Raymond.

I have to say, when I first learnt about this idea, I was really scared. I had seen it on paper but I did not see the workability of it until we started together as a team, then it started to make sense. I was scared about the focus on the Bible – I would not say the Bible is hateful, or that it says things that are hateful to some people, or that it says things that are somewhat controversial. Instead, I would say that people use the Bible to bring hate; they twist the scriptures to their own understanding in order to hate and discriminate others. That is the context I grew up in, especially in churches. When I was younger and back home in Uganda, and also here in Kenya, you would go to church to find them talking about us, “the homosexuals”, in very bad ways: “It’s a *sin*”, “it’s *bad*”, “the Bible says this!”. That is what pastors were feeding their congregations and to us when we were growing up. So, we grew up with that *fear*, thinking that we are less than other people – thinking that our sexuality is *wrong*, thinking that it is not *right*, thinking that

we are *inhumane*, that we are *demons*, that we are *devils* and all other sorts of names they would call us.

When Professor Adriaan and Johanna initially raised the idea for this programme to us, I was scared: “*No, there’s no way we can come up with this, there’s no way I’m going to do this!*”. But as we sat down and talked about it, things changed: “*oh, actually it makes sense*”. The idea was that we could use the Bible, as a book that was previously used against us, but this time we were going to use it to tell our *own* stories, relating our own lives to Bible stories, such as Daniel in the lion’s den and the woman who was accused of adultery. We would look at these stories from our own perspective and then relate them to our own stories of what happened to us and other LGBTI refugees in Kenya who shared their stories with us for the project. So, the Bible became relatable. How can I describe it? I don’t want to exaggerate, but the project was out of this world!

It was out of this world to read those old stories from the Bible which many people were already familiar with and then look at them in our own way; relating them to our own lives and to what happened to us. For me, the story of Daniel became a recognition of my own story! And when we interviewed other people in our community, their stories also became relatable to the stories in the Bible. While conducting the interviews, I quickly realised that I was not alone in having gone through those experiences; the gravity of my own experience was put into perspective by listening to other participants who also had *impactful* stories. They too had faced immense challenges. Their stories could also change lives. Their stories about what they have gone through, how they overcame difficulties in their lives, and how they used their challenges to communicate with others and make a change are worth sharing. Thank you so much!

Sebyala Raymond Brian (aka Mother Nature)

Thank you so much to my colleague Hudson. I am delighted to be part of this conversation. People say “dreams come true” and for me, this moment is the manifestation of my dreams coming true in real life. I am incredibly excited to be here along with Drs Stella Nyanzi, Adriaan, Johanna and everyone who is participating in this conversation. I am Sebyala Raymond Brian, aka Mother Nature, the *mother of everything* in the whole world! Praise be to God! Whenever I say “praise be to God” I feel immensely loved and I believe *in* myself. I am delighted and grateful for having worked hand

in hands with Adriaan and Johanna, to have worked with my colleagues here and other people who are dear to me.

Even more so, I am grateful for having worked hand in hands with Dr Stella. Years ago, when home in Uganda, I began working with Dr Stella. To be honest, I did not feel ready for it and could not see things working out, but she made me believe in myself! At that time, anti-gay propaganda in Uganda started to go viral – people used to talk about gay people as sexual deviants, and it made me not love myself. However, things changes when I joined the research team at Makerere University and started working with Dr Stella. Things turned around from negativity to positivity. She made me believe in myself, made me believe that I *can* be gay or any other sexuality, that it does not define *you* – you have to be you, just be yourself.

In fact, my mother taught me the same lesson when I was young. When I was still a little kid, I used to get bullied a lot, at school, in the community, in my family. I was confused as a person, whether I was a boy or a girl. I was struggling personally and in class I could not relate to other people. I could not see myself being human like other people because I could not understand myself. This bullying made me so uncomfortable that I went to ask my mother whether I was a boy or a girl, and she just told me, “*You are who you are* – that’s your nature”. From that moment, when people would bully me, or whenever people would harass me about playing with girls or playing girl’s games, I would just tell them that it is my nature. That is how I chose that name, Nature! Everything obeys the law, but nature does not. It does not obey the law. It is simply who you are! I learned that I cannot differentiate between my body and my feelings. Sometimes I was *confused*, asking: who am I? What is true? What must I follow? Who started this? But I learned that I should not forget that there was a Creator, there was God who created *everybody*, who created *everything* on the earth, who created everything that has life.

Several years ago, I met Dr Adriaan in Nairobi. We were having a conversation, brainstorming ideas. Later, he wrote to me saying that what we talked about could become a big project: “Guess what? We are going to have people share their stories. We are going to have people share their life, talk about religion, about being migrants and refugees.” At the time I could not see how this was going to happen. Adriaan just assured me that everything would work out. So, I went back to the things I had learnt while

working with Dr Stella: focus group discussions, interviews, etc. We combined everything and it became the big project we are celebrating today with this wonderful book, *Sacred Queer Stories!*

At Nature Network in Nairobi, we used to have prayer meeting sessions with psycho-social support. In these sessions, we would bring people from different religions together, asking them: what do you say about your faith and being queer? Do you still believe in God? Do you feel that God is there for you? It turned out that the majority of our community loves God. However, because of the way people talk about the Bible and being gay, people distance themselves from going to church. In our prayer meeting sessions, our members would share those stories and we would pray together. It was from here that the idea for this project came about; that the Bible, which is so often used against us, can also be about us! When we started working on this, the participants became incredibly excited. They were excited to share their stories and experiences and relating them to the Bible. They wanted their stories to be heard by the world!

Sometimes you hear things, people telling you that you cannot be gay, it is impossible, it is a foreign thing, God does not make mistakes, you cannot love a fellow man or a fellow woman – all the things that people talk about, all the *propaganda!* For our participants, this was liberating: “*oh, my God, we’re going to share our stories, we’re going to be heard!*” Moreover, what made the experience different and unique was that in the project the stories were going to be dramatised, making the process very creative. Participants loved acting out their stories! The motto of Nature Network is “Art with a vision”, and as such, we wanted the project to be creative. Because not many people read books, but people love drama and film, this was a way to bring it to more people.

People often think that gay people are sinners, that they are possessed by demons, they do not read the Bible, they do not know God. But guess what? Our participants knew the Bible, much more than we thought! And they loved turning their own experiences, everything they have been through, into stories from the Bible! One production we made was a drama film called *Daniel in the Homophobic Lion’s Den*. It is about us! It captures everything we went through back in Uganda when the “Kill the gays bill” was introduced and the anti-gay propaganda went wild. When the bill was introduced, many queer people left Uganda. They became refugees because of their sexuality,

leaving everything behind and trying to start a new life in the middle of nowhere. But they did not leave their faith behind, they kept believing in God, like Daniel. It was clear how significant and relatable his story was to *them!*

The other story we worked on was about a woman found guilty of adultery. We have been there! Queer people are constantly stigmatised. People do not believe that there is love in homosexuality, they do not believe that gay people have feelings. Rather, they think of us as demonic, that we do it because of money – but we do not! We have feelings! We want to get married, go to church, we pray, and we believe in God, regardless of what other people say. All these experiences, all this trauma, connected us to these Bible stories, and we related to them. This made it easy for participants to *share* and to *act* in the drama play because it was about their lives and they were acting out themselves and what they are going through, which is *real*. The process was not always easy but we made it through by the grace of God, and we made it *happen!* People often think that some things are not possible, but they are. We have produced a book and a film about us as LGBTI refugees, and it is a dream come true!