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Ken Hamilton S.V.D  
*Notre Dame de Namur University*

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# The Flames of Namugongo: Issues Around Theological Narrativity, Heteronormativity, Globalization, and AIDS in Africa

**Ken Hamilton, SVD**  
**Notre Dame de Namur University**

*Hamilton's paper, delivered during the 2008 Annual Meeting in Chicago, uses the hagiography of Charles Lwanga and the Martyrs of Uganda to reveal an unrelenting problem of the Church – the ways in which the assumptions of heteronormativity and sodomitical discourse drown out the voices of those who do not fall into heteronormative sexual and/or gendered identities, and lead to the open persecution, imprisonment, and torture of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons in Uganda, and in fact all over Africa. Casting those with 'othered' sexual identities as evil, or even simply turning a deaf ear to the persecution faced by those persons, has both explicitly and implicitly added to their suffering, including ignoring the plight of AIDS victims. The solution may lie in our efforts to understand the deities of Africa.*

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Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect.

~~ Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien<sup>1</sup>

## A. The Story: Opening Scene

The Passion of the Uganda Martyrs begins as the young male royal pages, assembled outside the Kabaka's (the Bugandan king's) ivory court, are about to process into African Christianity's most celebrated martyr-passion narrative. The year is 1886, four years before the British annexation of Uganda. The leader of the pages, a certain Charles Lwanga, turns to the others and says "in a firm voice, 'let us go in.'"<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic priest John F. Faupel writes the following, in the most authoritative and thorough recounting of the martyrdom to date, *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs*:

Followed by the pages, Lwanga went through the gateway to the ivory court... Their passage... accompanied by taunts and cries of derision from the hundred or so executioners already gathered there. When the last of the pages had greeted him,

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<sup>1</sup>Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behavior Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>2</sup>J. F. Faupel, *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs*. (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1962), 149. Unless otherwise noted, my references to Faupel are to his 1962 edition. The only difference in the texts, including pagination, is that the 1965 edition includes a short appendix with excerpts from the sermon of Paul VI at the 1964 canonization.

(Kabaka) Mwanga asked, “Are they all here?” Being assured that none [were] missing, he ordered the gates to be closed and then, pointing towards the reed fence to his left, said, “Now, let everyone who follows the religion of the white men go over there...Those who are not Christian must remain near me.”<sup>3</sup>

At once, Charles Lwanga stood up, saying as he did so: “That of which a man is fully conscious he cannot disavow.” Then taking Kizito (the youngest) by the hand, and closely followed by the other Christian pages, he walked calmly to the spot indicated by the Kabaka.<sup>4</sup> Then began the long march to the hill of execution: Namugongo Hill.

A description of execution day—June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1886 (Ascension Day) —reads like a classic Christian martyr-passion, having many of the genre’s classic characters and scenes: innocent youths passionate in their new faith; a fateful confrontation with a demonized ruler; the refusal to “apostatize” or escape death, torment and torture; visions of Christ; pious affirmations and last words; encounters with witnesses along the way to execution; stripping of clothes; final exhortations and calling out to God; execution; and finally, the stories of the witnesses afterwards. Faupel’s version—his telling—continues to evoke the macabre and the surreal. In fact, the very graphic scenes included castrations, dismemberments and, of course, the burnings.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 150.

Cultural theorist Rudi Bleys gives us a painful look at the spark that set off not only this martyrdom but the civil war that led to the colonial state now known as Uganda. That “spark” is the refusal of the royal pages to have sexual relationships with the king: Mwanga II.

Mwanga, the leader of the [Ganda people] from 1884-1897 [...] maintained a “harem” full of pageboys and resisted Christianization as it became clear that anal intercourse had to be renounced. As gradually more and more boys, who had converted to either Protestantism or Catholicism, refused sexual services to Mwanga and his entourage, a conflict arose. When his favourite pageboy, Mwafu, resisted as well, Mwanga went into a paroxysm of rage and several boys were killed. It is said that about one hundred boys, later turned into the Martyrs of Buganda, had died.<sup>5</sup>

The framing or telling of this story as a high tale—a Manichean confrontation of good and evil with the former being virgin pages who were martyred for their “faith” —is, indeed, a “Faith” that stands on a battleground between hetero and other-than-hetero desire and behavior. The “evil” character in this tale is a king who, because he is framed as such (and also because he is remembered over and over again in this telling), is basically diluted to “predator,” even

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<sup>5</sup>Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behavior Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 172.

“pedophile.”<sup>6</sup> This gives the story both a mythic and a scandalous overtone. On one level, this story, when sublimated, courteously told, brushed over with high theology, or with all the gruesome details deleted, can be proclaimed in the highest of hagiographical language, placed on calendars, and even celebrated at high liturgy. On the level of “scandal,” however, it must be whispered and shushed, making it more powerful as an “open secret.”

The Uganda martyr story, moreover, is a “colonial hagiography,” one written at the cusp of colonization. It is a colonial hagiography because it “colonizes,” both the geographies of mind and (earthly) territory. It is one of several very successful saint stories, Blessed Kateri Tekawitha of the Mohawks being another. Her story has been called a “hagiographical *tour de force*,” because it was used to convince Europeans—filled with fears of race mixing and the conviction that chastity and Indian women were contradictions in terms—that, in fact, these were not contradictions.<sup>7</sup> The same is true of the story of Charles Lwanga and his Companions. For it too had to reconcile seemingly

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<sup>6</sup>This is not Faupel’s doing; nor is it just the telling of the original framers, such as Fr. J. P. Thoonen who wrote the original *Black Martyrs*. But these original accounts of the story have been overwritten by the anti-homosexual language, the abomination speech, of a very loud rightist contingent; from thus has arisen the charge of “pedophile.”

<sup>7</sup>Her life narrative was originally composed by Jesuit Pierre Cholenc at Montreal, published in Paris in 1717, and translated by another Jesuit, Juan de Urtassum in 1724. It was “an unusual instance of a text” circulating through the Catholic Atlantic world, then from the northern empire of France, via Europe, to the southern empire of Spain (Greer and Bilinkoff, 2003, 236, xix).

irreconcilable objects for the European Catholic: “Africa” and “pure saintly boys.” Lwanga and his companions are now constructed as African Dominic Savios—an Italian boy renowned for his “priceless innocence”; this truly makes their story another hagiographical *tour de force*.<sup>8</sup> Like Tekawitha, the Ugandan pages serve as templates of purity and asceticism familiar to the European.

## **B. The Issue of Heterosexism**

When I finished delivering this title at a Black Catholic Theological Symposium, an African colleague commented, quite straightforwardly, that “homosexuality is considered an abomination in Africa.” My immediate read of what he was saying was something very blunt and to the point: “Keep your arrogance off Africa. Keep your western neocolonialism and decadence off us. She has enough problems as it is without being connected to your AIDS-causing ‘homosexual agenda’ and its white privileged gay tourists and predators.” Fine, perhaps I put too much into a single comment from one individual, but such a critique is out there! And even we who are members of the African Diaspora had best be careful of falling into the often racist observations about Africa of the “Gay International.” For Joseph Massad, this phenomenon describes the missionary mentality of so many Western organizations and scholars regarding non-Western “gender variant” (etc.) populations. It is these missionary tasks, the discourse that produces them, and the organizations that

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<sup>8</sup> Donald L. Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 127.

represent them which constitute what I will call the Gay International.<sup>9</sup>

I acknowledge my colleague's critique, with all its harshness, bitterness, and truth. Indeed, I would add my own curses. I would see many reasons to leave Africa out of any queer analysis whatsoever because of what South African cultural theorist Neville Hoad points out as its radical alterity.<sup>10</sup> That is, even the best in the west—like our beloved Audre Lorde—often fall short of truly understanding what they see when they see “Africa.”<sup>11</sup>

But this essay is not about discovering or describing some African “queerness”; nor is my focus on constructions such as “homosexuality” or “Africa” *per se*. This essay, in other words, is not anthropological. It is essentially about the nature of the discourses—theological, ethical, political, global—going on right now over the subject of homosexuality and Africa. It is about what I have seen and heard and researched regarding homophobic condemnations of same-sex behavior

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<sup>9</sup>Joseph A. Massad. “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World,” in *Desiring Arabs*, ed. Joseph Massad (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 161.

<sup>10</sup>Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). That is, that analysis that interrupts the assumptions of heterosexism.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, xxiv-xxv. Hoad was referring to some stereotypes Lorde may have invoked in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansberg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, Feminist Series, 1984). Hoad, moreover, wonders if anti-homosexuality on the part of Africans is not itself a “displaced resistance to perceived and real encroachments on neo-colonial national sovereignty by economic and cultural globalization. *Op cit*, xii-xiii.



and the effect that may have on the spread of AIDS. Therefore, the problem of heterosexism and its effects, its serious effects, must be discussed. By heterosexism I mean the “infallible” regimes of truth that dictate that all things—and the sacred “norms” that guide them—are, should be, and must be ruled by the “natural” and organizing principle of reproduction. It includes the criminalization of non-hetero behavior and the systematic, institutionalized, routine, and pervasive exclusion of any truth outside the heteronorm.<sup>12</sup> As a man of the Christian church, whose mission has been tainted with racism, imperialism, sexism, and homophobia, I have some obligation to raise my voice and address these issues for Africa and the world, particularly for my own Afri-diasporic community. So the first thing I said in response to my African colleague’s warning that “homosexuality is considered an abomination in most of Africa.” is “Yes, that’s exactly my point!” “Abomination,” in fact, is a word taken right from the scriptures, particularly in Leviticus 18:22. It, therefore, was placed onto the lips of Africans by missionaries, thus reinforcing my agreement with progressive ethicists like Daniel C. Maguire, who says in his introduction to the anthology *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion*, “Heterosexism, Not Homosexuality is the Problem[!]”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Heterosexism actually harms heterosexuals too in that it does not allow for any mature examination of the full range of their desires and excludes from society the creative contributions of their non-hetero neighbors.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel C. Maguire, “Heterosexism, Not Homosexuality is the Problem,” in *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion: Problem and Prospect*, ed. Marvin Ellison and Judith Plaskow (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 1.

Homosexuality is not a problem: heterosexism is a problem, and not just for sexual minorities. To think of homosexuality as a “problem”—which even persons of liberal bent can do—is a distraction and a surrender to the unjust and poisonous prejudice of heterosexism.

Homophobia has, in irony, been called “the last respectable prejudice,”

...Unlike its cousins anti-Semitism, sexism, and racism, heterosexism has enjoyed undue immunity from critique, especially religious critique. Worse yet, religions have been the major offenders in fomenting prejudice against sexual minorities.<sup>14</sup>

That is to say, if homosexuality is a “western import”—as it is often tagged—then so is homophobia and heterosexism. And if homosexuality is viewed throughout Africa as an “abomination” —and, indeed, if this attitude hinders in any way a proper approach to AIDS, in terms of treatment, understanding how HIV is spread, dissemination of effective safeguards, etc.—then, truly, homophobia is the problem!

The title of my paper is drawn from my dissertation in which I addressed the ways Christian theology, ethics, hagiography/martyrology, and sexual politics affect both the national identity of the nation of Uganda as well as the ecclesial identity of the Catholic (and Anglican, to an extent) Church in Uganda. I combined three important analytical

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 1.

theories in this process: postcolonial, queer, and liberation theology.<sup>15</sup>

The foremost purpose of this work is to develop this research into a coherent approach toward ethics and AIDS that is in solidarity with those in the African and Afri-diasporic communities. That is to say, I research several sites where AIDS permeates and intersects with discourses of race, gender, and sexuality for and about African and African diasporic people. I will briefly discuss those issues in my final section regarding AIDSphobia. But this is a time of urgency. There is a “maafa”—a great catastrophe—out there! Many voices cry out in prayer and agony. And if we who theologize are not hearing these voices, are we not complicit to some degree in the pandemic, one fueled not only by an aggressive but non-conscious virus, but by the “virus” of ignorance, neocolonialism, homophobia, racism, and sexism orchestrated by a very conscious and ethically bankrupt Right(wing)?<sup>16</sup>

Exploring this situation, I also employ narrative criticism and deconstruction in a close reading of the 1886 Ugandan martyr-story. I want to explain how this story’s “telling”—told and retold—manipulates the sexual politics and functions as

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<sup>15</sup>I should say “post-Liberation Theology” because my critique includes both radical feminism and queer insights. Sex itself is the issue. Liberation Theology has been accused of being male dominated and silent about sex. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), 90.

<sup>16</sup>Maria Cimperman, *When God's People Have HIV/AIDS: An Approach to Ethics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press), 11. “Virus” is a metaphor African ethicist Teresa Okure uses.

one of those crucial narratives of colonization and neocolonization.<sup>17</sup> I explore how “sodomitical discourse,” in particular, was a necessary part of the West’s domination over the “darkness” and “perdition” that the missionaries “discovered.”<sup>18</sup> And I recognize, even today, that the European construction of sexuality has always coincided with the epoch of imperialism and that the two still inter-connect,” as Mercer and Julien say above. That is, the age of imperialism has not ended, just changed.

For instance, the telling or theological framing of the Ugandan martyrdom and its antagonist, Mwanga II, continues to re-establish heteronormative dominating discourses. We will see how “sodomitical” discourse continues to function in present-day Ugandan state and church politics. In particular I draw on other African narratives and sources of homophobia as well as the Anglican Church’s North vs. South struggle over homosexuality. Finally, we will look at how some traditional African sources can provide articulations for positive and inclusive approaches to AIDS in Africa.

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<sup>17</sup>I, however, highly regard and honor Charles Lwanga and his Companions, as well as the profound faith and courage that they have engendered in Ugandan Catholics and Anglicans.

<sup>18</sup>By “sodomitical discourse,” I refer to the demonization of male same-sex and gender variance that began in early redactions of the story of Sodom (and Gomorrah) in the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 19: 29-38), wherein rape of men is implied (Genesis 19: 4-5) and the city is thus destroyed by Yahweh for this and other sins.

## I. The State of Homophobia and the Martyrs

Some estimates say that 95% of Ugandans oppose the legalization of homosexuality.<sup>19</sup> Open homosexual relationships are legally punishable by life imprisonment by law, but the law, until now, has not usually been applied. But agitation from a few vocal right wing segments, all usually connected with the churches, such as the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition against Homosexuality, keep alive the threats and force public officials to reaffirm their commitment to “crack down.” Journalists risk their lives when they try to evenly report on the state of homosexual rights and AIDS prevention.<sup>20</sup>

The martyrs have been invoked today to attack gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexed, and questioning persons (glbtqi), represented in groups like Gays and Lesbians of Uganda (GALA), Musla-Uganda, and Sexual Minorities of Uganda (SMUG). This also includes attacks on the Anglican glbtqi group, Integrity Uganda” and its leader, retired Anglican bishop Christopher Senyonjo, as well as supportive scholars such as Sylvia Tamale and Ali Mazrui of Makerere University. “Safe houses” (or places of torture),

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<sup>19</sup>Based on a Steadman Group poll reported at “Behind the Mask,” <http://www.mask.org.za/article.php?cat=uganda&id=1674> (Accessed July 9, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> These facts are recorded on the website “Behind the Mask.” Regarding the threatened journalists, see in this same source the Stanford University student journalist who was “under fire in Uganda for covering gay issues.” <http://www.mask.org.za/article.php?cat=AfricaAbroad&id=1690>, (Accessed October 9, 2008).

jailings, and rape of openly non-heterosexual people is still prevalent both in Uganda and the continent.<sup>21</sup> Homophobic hate speech from ecclesial and civic leaders, among others, is allowed to drown out any voice of moderation.

Homophobic rhetoric, rooted in sodomitical discourse from the past, has appropriated the telling of the martyrs' story, and has redrawn it into a wider discourse in post-colonial Africa. As such, the martyrs have been assumed into a venomous anti-homosexual national rhetoric [and policy] regarding what it means to be an authentic African. And that is frightening.

## II. The Anglican Crisis

This bleak scenario is exacerbated by public statements of African Catholic bishops that maintain the traditional, strict teaching condemning condom use and includes scenes like that of (the late) Cardinal Outunga of Kenya burning condoms and safer sex materials.<sup>22</sup> Further, the Ugandan Anglican bishops, alienated by the easing of restrictions on homosexuality at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 and the ordination of openly-gay bishop Gene Robinson of New

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<sup>21</sup>Regarding "safe houses" as places of torture, the source is a personal interview by the author with Christopher Kalema of Musla-Uganda, Makerere University, Uganda, October 30, 2004. Beatings, rapes, and arrests of gay, lesbian, and transgendered Africans are recorded on the website "Behind the Mask.org." <http://www.mask.org.za/> (Accessed August 21, 2009).

<sup>22</sup>*New Vision (Kampala) September 29, 2003*. "Behind the Mask," October 7, 2004.

Hampshire, keep alive the threat of schism.<sup>23</sup> In March, 2005 Ugandan archbishop, Henry Luke Orombi, though he has said he is willing to “listen to views on the homosexuality debate in the Anglican Church,” issued a joint communiqué with other Anglican prelates calling on the U.S. and Canadian churches to “voluntarily withdraw their members from the Anglican Consultative Council for the period leading up to the...Lambeth Conference,” an international Anglican gathering held in 2008.<sup>24</sup> The request was intended to avoid confrontation over the issue of homosexuality and the possible result of schism. The Anglican Ugandan church is most outspoken on the issue of homosexuality.<sup>25</sup> The story of the Anglican bishop in one of Uganda’s districts worst hit by AIDS—the Kasese district—is a striking example. According to the *Washington Post*, Jackson Nzerebende Tembo, Anglican bishop of the South Rwenzori Diocese, which serves the Kasese District, refused a large donation of money and the offer of physicians from the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, headquartered in Harrisburg, because it voted “yes” on the election of Bishop Robinson.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Kevin Ward, “Same-Sex Relations in Africa and the Debate on Homosexuality in East African Anglicanism.” *Anglican Theological Review* vol. 34 no.1 (Winter 2002), 81.

<sup>24</sup>Jude Etyang and Jude Katende, “No Debate on Gays, says Orombi” *New Vision*, Kampala: Uganda (March 4, 2005). Henry Luke Orombi is the Anglican Archbishop of the Church of Uganda.

<sup>25</sup>See “Behind the Mask,” [http://www.mask.org.za/SECTIONS/AfricaPerCountry/ABC/uganda/uganda\\_84.htm](http://www.mask.org.za/SECTIONS/AfricaPerCountry/ABC/uganda/uganda_84.htm). See also Etyang and Katende, *op cit*.

<sup>26</sup>From Colbert I. King, “A Tainted Easter Message,” [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), 26 March 2005, A15.

Uganda, then, continues to be what Winston Churchill called it, the “pearl of Africa,” not just in the imperialist, economic, and cultural sense Churchill meant but, indeed, as a discursive jewel. The martyr story continues to fuel many rightist agendas, be they strictly theo-ecclesial or geopolitical. In *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and Their African Allies are Reshaping Anglicanism*, Anglican anthropologist Miranda Hassett argues that the larger scope of issues like homosexuality is the agenda(s) of the Western Right, which seeks, not without irony, to align itself with the African churches. This alliance is largely on the issue of homosexuality; the irony is that this same contingent helps to support neoliberal agendas that harm the global South. In Uganda there was always a “low church” or “evangelical” tradition in Anglicanism; orthodoxy was always measured by movements such as the Balokole or “saved ones.”<sup>27</sup> These churches were, therefore, ripe for exploitation by the rightist global North; this is an example of Hassett’s point, that the theological debate now takes place in a geopolitical locus.

Conflicts over doctrine and morality within the Episcopal Church have been effectively globalized, so that they are now widely seen as of global, rather than domestic, scale and

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<sup>27</sup>Miranda K. Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and Their African Allies are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27. This does not mean that this was all there was to the Church of Uganda. Pastorally speaking, for instance, the Church of Uganda, unlike its conservative Western counterparts, is responsible and deeply involved in the life of the whole person. Also, the Church of Uganda is more liberal regarding the role of women in leadership.



significance. The North/South movement opposing Episcopal Church [USA] policies is both conservative and globalist....<sup>28</sup>

Not merely geopolitical, our own Ugandan martyr story is theo-political and, therefore, begs for a scholarly interdisciplinarity, a conversation, as it were, between martyrology, queer studies, Uganda political (colonial and postcolonial) history and progressive neocolonial studies.

### **III. Statement of the Problem: The “Telling” of the 1886 Bugandan Martyrdom.**

Returning to our story, the narrative of the “passions” of the Uganda martyrs frames and overshadows the establishment of a regained manhood in both Ugandan Christianity and nationhood. It is not the sole establishment narrative at the cusp of colonial Ugandan history; moreover, it is not totally historical. It, however, sits as the most important story of colonial establishment and its very ahistorical “theological” character, as it were, allows it to cast a mythological or legendary shadow over Ugandan memory and identity that a strictly “historical” recounting could not. Its clothing in the language of martyrology is what makes it a theological metanarrative. It is this theological and ideological character that I am addressing when I stress the Ugandan martyrdom as a “telling” and a “retelling.” I mean that through its narrative quality it establishes itself as the prime story of Christian spiritual ascendancy, and it does this over and over again, recasting itself in powerful and subtle ways. Indeed, in

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 242.

each way it recasts itself it re-establishes that originating, engendering heteronormative text.

Importantly, this heteronormative telling and retelling of this story carries with it a canonized authority. The establishment of Christianity in Uganda—particularly Roman Catholic and Anglican Christianity—directly coincides with a narrative about transgressive same-sex desire. This makes for a provocative birth of Christianity in Eastern Africa: a “well-documented” account of so-called homosexual practice in Uganda that became “one of the defining events in the early history of Christianity in Uganda”.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the subsequent 1964 canonization of the martyrs by Pope Paul VI further inscribes dark, dangerous desire into the skin of Christian Uganda. The canonization process is also a preached message; the narrative of the “martyrdom” becomes part of a canon of new narratives at the end of the nineteenth century: the ones about “sodomy,” race, desire, and conquest. These are the “canons,” as it were, of colonization.

#### **IV. The Story Revisited, Reframed, Retold**

This story remains powerful in Uganda—though, out of respect for the office of Kabaka, it remained hushed up until recently. But every time it is recast, it threateningly re-establishes that originating heteronormative Manichean plot of ultimate good vs. ultimate evil.

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<sup>29</sup>Ward, 88.

### a. Reframed as “Infamous Crime”

For example, the late Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, John Cardinal O’Connor, preaching on the subject of the Catholic priesthood in the modern day, referred to Pope Paul VI’s 1964 homily of canonization of Charles Lwanga and his companions. The pope, he wrote, described the “homosexual advances” of Mwanga on the pages as a “crime si infâme”?<sup>30</sup> The pope’s provocative, evocative words turn the memory of the event back towards this frame of “infamous crime,” so that even theological notions like “they followed their faith” or “stood up for their faith” always means “denying the sexual trespass of an evil criminal.”

Evil trespass is the point that O’Connor chose to keep alive in the minds of the priests he addressed. He continued in the tradition of many a Christian preacher who has attempted to scare out of the clergy any form of homosexuality, the inference being that there has been quite a bit of homosexuality to scare out of the clergy. Peter Damian, for example, was Prior of the community of hermits at Fonte Avellana in Italy from 1035-1043 and was responsible for coining the term *sodomia*. Damian was known to be a superb polemicist, who “from first to last... display[ed] a talent and a taste for attack,” and regarded himself as a “writer of

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<sup>30</sup>Cardinal John O’Connor, “Ministry for Priests in the Current Circumstances.” (Vatican: The Holy See),

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_c\\_on\\_ccclergy\\_doc](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_c_on_ccclergy_doc) (Accessed March 8, 2003).

persuasions rather than of histories.”<sup>31</sup> He took the righteous role of one who was exposing an “abomination.” Damian’s disgusted tone and sophistry enlarged the importance of sodomy from that of a simple vice to a matter of faith and a doctrine of life and death.

### **b. Reframed as “Development”**

Moreover, Paul VI uses the martyrdom to expand on the meaning of the famous notion of “development.” This is done in the way the martyrs, in his description, become fighters and figures for “conscience” and “development.” In his homily of canonization, Paul VI expands on the meaning of the “crime si infame” of Namugongo:

It shows us by sufficiently manifest reasons that *new people* [ emphasis added] need a moral foundation, to affirm new spiritual habits[,] to transmit [this moral foundation] to [their] posterity; this crime expresses almost symbolically and puts into action the *passage* [emphasis added] of a simple and rough way of life[—] where remarkable human values were not missing[,] but which [were] soiled and weakened, and enslaved to itself—towards a more civilized life in which prevail higher expressions of the human spirit [as well as] better social living conditions.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 45-46.

<sup>32</sup>Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City, Italy, 1964), 56, 906. Brackets are mine.

Here Paul VI set Africa in an evangelizing speech that implied violence. In reducing the same-sex politics in the royal court to “crime” he evoked the balance of crime: punishment. This idea of crime shadows and complicates the canonization. That is to say, the shadow of “crime and punishment” muddies the aim of the canonization, which is to sublimate, spiritualize, sanitize, and silence this story of taboo sex.<sup>33</sup>

The martyrdom...is fraught with drama...something which distresses us but...the injustice and violence...tend to fade from human memory, while before the eyes of succeeding generations there remains ever present the shining example of meekness which has transformed the laying down of life into a propitiatory sacrifice...a message continually handed on to the men of today and tomorrow.<sup>34</sup>

He, further, associated the blood of the martyrs with that which opens a “new epoch” in Africa. For Paul VI, the martyrdom fulfilled Africa’s silent destiny, its “predisposition” to Christianity and its “[proper] vocation,”

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<sup>33</sup>A logical, albeit non-theological, understanding would ask that if punishment is what the “criminal” deserves, why are the martyrs punished...since the storytellers and witnesses go out of their way to say that none of the canonized *ever* engaged in such sex?

<sup>34</sup>Pope Paul VI, in his 1964 canonization discourse, English translation issued by Fides Service. Quoted in Faupel (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 225.

making it part of the “mysterious design of God.”<sup>35</sup> “The martyred are those who are the exceptions to the rule, who somehow rise above their own people’s debasement. The new epoch that the Ugandan martyrdom inaugurated was a new national consciousness and religious identity. As icons of Christian identity, and paragons of sanctity, the martyrs represented a “new people” in need of a “moral foundation” that can lead the former Buganda away from its “soiled,” “weakened,” and “enslaved” past into a “more civilized life,” that is to say, a “whiter,”<sup>36</sup> purer, “straighter” life.

Pope Paul VI, finally, referred to the martyrs as those “who sprang from the living trunk of African history to become the first fruits of Christian holiness in modern Africa.”<sup>37</sup> The use of procreative (hetero) language supercedes the homosexually-charged events of 1886, transforming it, with a phrase, into a heterosexual spectacle. He referred to the blood of the martyrs as the “seed” planted in the fertile ground of Africa.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Faupel, *African Holocaust*, 225.

<sup>36</sup>Thus, the martyrs-become-(almost) white themselves.

<sup>37</sup>I first saw this fragment of Paul VI’s 1964 homily published in a 2001 diocesan newsletter for the Black Catholics of Oakland sent by Dr. Toinette Eugene in preparation for the upcoming June 3 celebration of Martyrs Day. This phrase, therefore, shapes how American Black Catholics heard the story.

<sup>38</sup>This quote contains a language of development springing forth from the sexual language of fertility... a hetero or natural fertility borne despite the non-fertile ground of male-male sodomy. This is not to take the pope’s words literally. Rather, it is to see how words and language in general, work in their own way to frame, in this case, Africa and the martyrdom.

Such “word plays” might seem far-fetched, but the case of the Ugandan martyrs exists, as a metanarrative, in a liminal zone between language and representation. In these above examples, for instance, the martyrdom becomes a cautionary tale for contemporary priests, a case for development, and a “seminal” source for theological development.

## **V. Who was/is this Mwanga?**

Kabaka Mwanga has been called “Africa’s most famous homosexual.”<sup>39</sup> The fact that he, like all royals, had wives and children is ignored. Moreover, although he—and this is important—was the same age as many of the pages, he is cast as a “pedophile” in the modern fiction of a “dirty old man,” a predator. And although we know that same-sex activity was present in the court, it was Mwanga’s (as king) “shameful passions” that were zeroed in upon, leaving the rest of the royal court in rumor. Did he get “it” from the Muslims in the court? How did he abuse the other pages? What was he like? Was he effeminate? The texts tag him in various negative ways:

A man with a weak-looking mouth, and a rather silly sort of laugh and smile; he raises his eyebrows very high, and twitches them in surprise, or in giving assent to a statement. He looked a young and frivolous sort of man, very weak and easily led; passionate and, if provoked, petulant.

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<sup>39</sup>Ward, 88.

He looked as if he would be easily frightened, and possessed of very little courage or self-control.<sup>40</sup>

But what of the other admittedly prurient questions? How prevalent was same-sex practice in the court? What place does it play in the overall sexual politics of the court? Can one “get” desire, “catch” desire from someone else (e.g., Arab traders)? If that’s not possible, is it not then within the realm of possibility that same-sex desire (along with other sexual desires and practices) is pre-Arab, pre-European?<sup>41</sup> Is it possible that there were other “gender variant,” effeminate men or masculine women in the country before the missionaries exposed them? These are the honest questions about sexuality that metanarratives like this one obscure. What were the love relationships of the other men? What about the romance and the triangles between men, between women and men, and between women? What did the missionaries know of this practice from Europe? (e.g.: Could we infer that the missionaries also “knew” about the Orientalist contention of Arab sodomy?) And, what of the non-sexual intrigue and real threats of European colonization that stirred up all this tension?

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<sup>40</sup>Faupel, *African Holocaust*, 67.

<sup>41</sup>There, actually, is a growing body of scholarship that points to the existence of same-sex, gender variant practice and roles in pre-colonial Africa. See, for instance, Murray, Stephen O. and Will Roscoe. *Boy-wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001). The problem, again, is not so much that such practices existed/s, but how to understand the meaning they held and hold in various African cultures. And, of course, racism and colonialism have served to muddy the scene, making it difficult to even speak on the subject.



But since Mwanga's so-called homosexuality is most useful to the European missionaries, explorers, and entrepreneurs--and since he obliged them by carrying out the bloody executions--Mwanga is, indeed, Africa's most famous homosexual. Indeed, Mwanga, years after losing the kingdom of Buganda to British colonial forces, is still a stereotype, his name a noun and adjective for a predatory sodomite.<sup>42</sup> An article in the *New Vision*, one of Uganda's leading daily newspapers, by a Ugandan Christian pastor named Martin Ssempe is revealing.<sup>43</sup> For him, Mwanga is the personification of any non-African, anti-God "agenda." He speaks of this agenda as a "gradual global Mwanga" that is spreading across the world and destroying Christian societies and families, particularly in Africa. He had his own "personal Mwanga experience with a famous Ugandan" (whom he describes but does not name) who offered him a job only if he would have sex with him. A "personal Mwanga" from his point of view is, evidently, a predatory male, or any man who makes a pass at him.

## **VI. Wheyting Be Dat? The Homosexual in Non-theological African Narrative.**

African scholar Chris Dunton's groundbreaking essay, "Wheyting be Dat? The Treatment of Homosexuality in

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<sup>42</sup>Though, of course, this is not from all sources, such as those who do not wish to throw aspersions on the Kabakas.

<sup>43</sup>Martin Ssempe, "When Faith, State, and State-inspired Homosexuality Clash." *New Vision*, June 3, 2005.

<http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/459/437768>.

African Literature”<sup>44</sup>, questions the assumptions and the “unsaying” (or denials) of African homosexuality by “post-colonial” (i.e, after colonial times) African writers.<sup>45</sup> These unsayings—seen in public pronouncements of African politicians and clergy—construct Africa as patriarchal and heteronormative and assume that homosexuality and effeminacy are part of the racism and colonial oppression internalized by, in Frantz Fanon’s term, the “Negrophobic man.”<sup>46</sup>

In general, “homosexuality” is presented in post-colonial speech as a rupture in traditional African mores. It is supposedly exposed as a colonialist plot, and the homosexual’s personal identity is brought forward in this plot.<sup>47</sup> The title “Wheyting be dat?” refers to a line asked by a puzzled grandmotherly character in the African play, *Big Berrin*, by Yulissa A Maddy. The grandmother asks,

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<sup>44</sup>Chris Dunton, “Wheyting be Dat?!”: The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature,” *Research in African Literature* vol. 20 no. 3 (Fall 1989): 422-448.

<sup>45</sup>Marc Epprecht, “The 'Unsay' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24/4 (Dec. 1998) 631-51.

<sup>46</sup>This is psychiatrist and postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s expression connecting the self-hatred of African men with repressed homosexual tendencies. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 156.

<sup>47</sup>Guarav Desai, “Out in Africa,” in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John Hawley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 140-41.

“Homosexuality? Wheyting [what] be dat?”<sup>48</sup> Dunton’s point is that homosexuality is still depicted in the great majority of texts as either unknown or as a stigmatized “‘un-African’ activity.” These texts most often depict African homosexuality in negative ways: as confused and deeply colonized men and women, as traitors to African identity, as “spectacularly effeminate,” as pimp-cum-menservants, as lesbians providing “exotic relief,” and, as in our case from Buganda, as “predators” and “pedophiles.” Moreover, some modern African literature continues the plots that “[enact]...elaborate symbolic executions....”<sup>49</sup>

Many of these writers, however, at least understand the complexity of issues around sexuality and gender in Africa.<sup>50</sup> Theologians can learn from literature to step back and look at our own narrative strategies and then transpose our idealism into plots. Narrative theology, in fact, is the better way to approach sexual complexities. As the late Mujerista thea/ologian, Marcella Althaus-Reid, taught, developing a theology of “sex stories” expands the interpretation and understanding of the complex subjects of theology.<sup>51</sup> Such a

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<sup>48</sup>Chris Dunton, “Wheyting?” 423.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 424.

<sup>50</sup>Of Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*, for instance, Dunton wrote that when in African literature homosexuality “becomes liberated [it] is granted a greater capacity to disturb” (Dunton, 423).

<sup>51</sup>Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge Press, 2000). Althaus-Reid, who died in February of 2009, might also be called a pioneer of sexual

hermeneutic allows us to discover that there are more stories than categories, expanding Christian theology and ethics, which are both, she feels, presently lacking in imagination and power.<sup>52</sup> For Althaus-Reid, all theology contains the elements of some sexual narrative, be it the procreativity or creativity of high systematics or the inside stories of the secret spiritual lives of Christian ancestors, clerics, religious, or of theologians themselves.<sup>53</sup> Knowing that these sexual stories are different, complex, and often very difficult helps the theologian and ethicist complete necessary hermeneutical circles.

## VII. Facing AIDSphobia and Human Rights

AIDS is, in the words of cultural worker Jan Zita Grover, a “360-degree sense-surround,” and “there is no door out of it leading back.”<sup>54</sup> Both theoretically and theologically speaking, that hoped-for “door leading back” refers to the old comfortable positions of “normalcy,” of stable straight family identities, of old political coalitions and nationalisms, and of

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theology, especially “queer theology.” Liberation Theology, she held, must be transformed by both feminist and queer theologies.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 132.

<sup>53</sup>See, for instance, Virginia Burrus’ discussion of the “erotics of ancient hagiography” in *The Sex Lives of Saints: The Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>54</sup>David Woodhead, “HIV, Space, and the Constitution of Identities” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge Press, 1995), 231-44.

the abomination rhetoric and tired patriarchal condemnations of “indecenty.” But that way is closed. That is the way of AIDSphobia.

Queer theorist and black speculative fiction writer Samuel R. Delany believes that HIV/AIDS is that phenomenon through which, into which, so many other discourses now pass. It is a matrix. In his essay “The Rhetoric of Sex/The Discourse of Desire” he writes:

[HIV/AIDS]...is certainly the largest material factor in the transformation of the discourse of desire and that transformation’s manifestation is the rhetoric of sex...for AIDS has come as close to unifying certain strands of sexual discourse as it has come to fraying certain others.<sup>55</sup>

Delany’s observation is what grounds AIDS theory, a theory that demands the most radical and honest of critiques. By “radical” I refer to a materialist interruption to the erotophobic, somatophobic, and idealist strains found in much of Roman Catholic sexual ethics.<sup>56</sup> That is, I am looking at the

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<sup>55</sup>Samuel R. Delany, “Out in Africa,” in his collection, *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliturg* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 34.

<sup>56</sup>Somatophobia is defined as fear of pleasure and fear of the body, the latter being essentially associated, according to much of radical sex feminist theology and exegesis, with the woman. See Aline Rousselle, *Porneia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions Among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992); Virginia Burrus, “Word in Flesh: The Bodies and

effect of the dominant Christian theological narrative on the bodies and spirits of Africans. This task is daunting; but the discursive, symbolic opportunities are great.

Presently, the condemnation of homosexuality, condoms, and the privileging of marital sex and chastity (abstinence only) places the burden of the spread of AIDS on hidden sexual practices—often men having sex with men; and most often women carrying the burden of the disease in their bodies often due to the hidden (often same-sex) behavior of their husbands.<sup>57</sup> AIDS activists in Africa claim that the denial of the reality of men-having-sex-with-men has skewed even HIV information campaigns. Indeed, one source even claims that “heterosexist approaches to HIV prevention campaigns have actually led some people to believe that anal sex is safe and that gay sex does not require protection.”<sup>58</sup> There are still complaints of a horrible lack of attention on the part of the government to treating the disease in the LGBT community in Uganda.

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Sexualities of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity” in *Diacritics* 28.2 (1998): 52.

<sup>57</sup>Neil McKenna, *The Silent Epidemic: HIV/AIDS and Men Who Have Sex with Men in the Developing World* (London: Panos, 1999),

<http://www.panos.org.uk/images/books/> This is seen in the truck driver culture in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, where men bring HIV/AIDS back home. I personally conducted an interview in 2003 with HIV+ Patricia Vito, whose husband had given her AIDS, and (later on) a number of activists in Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) who witnessed this sad phenomenon.

<sup>58</sup>Author interview with “Daniel,” [Info@mask.org.za](mailto:Info@mask.org.za), (March 7, 2005).

These attitudes regarding the un-African-ness of homosexuality and the insistence on a pure heterosexual identity for Africa affects the way AIDS is seen and not seen, the way it is transmitted and treated. AIDS theory in Africa is receiving increasingly significant notice and treatment by African scholars. AIDS becomes central to African queer scholarship specifically because the continent, perhaps more than anywhere else, has to pass through a sieve of demonization or denial of same-sex practice, legalized homophobia, secrecy, and, now, neo-colonialism. Moreover, the basic constructions that frame the discussions about “homosexuality” or “AIDS in Africa” are filled with racist fictions rigged by the West.<sup>59</sup> And so homophobia and heterosexism hold much responsibility for AIDS deaths in Africa.

African scholars like Chris Dunton and Mai Palmberg warned about the danger in identifying the “curse” of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality, because such identification is “not only ill-informed, it is dangerous, as it obscures real knowledge about the disease and muddles any practical awareness as to how to deal with it.”<sup>60</sup> Their argument against homophobia, then, is both humanitarian and pragmatic; that is, it understands the ethical and the actual material byproducts of homophobic discourse for effected or affected Africans.

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<sup>59</sup>See, for instance, Cindy Patton’s “Inventing African AIDS,” *Inventing AIDS*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>60</sup>Chris Dunton and Mai Palmberg, “Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa.” *Current African Issues* 19 (Uppsala, Sweden: The Nordic Africa Institute, 1996), 28.

The questions remain: Can Africans create resistance to heteronormativity? “Are gay rights a part of human rights?”<sup>61</sup> How can we find solidarity with Africa in this ongoing crisis? The solutions are complex, but perhaps one answer to these questions can be found in a surprising source: traditional African spirituality and religion.

### **Conclusion: The Return of Nende**

An article reprinted on the website “Dispatches from the Vanishing World,” entitled “The Gods Break Through in Uganda: The Nende Files”, reports the 1997 visit of the progressive late Ugandan Catholic theologian Fr. John Mary Waliggo to Nsambya Hospital, Kampala.<sup>62</sup> He interviewed Sister Nelizinho Carhalho, a heroic nun who started the first blood-screening program in AIDS-ravaged Kampala. While there, the characteristics of the god Nende were recalled: a god of “plague attacks...sleeping sickness...”<sup>63</sup> One of the priests at the hospital then said, “We would like a god of AIDS.” His words are an invocation and an implied invitation to Nende, or to Kawimpule, the god of bubonic plague, or to the goddess

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>62</sup>*Lapis Magazine*, “The Gods Break Through in Uganda: The Nende Files,” *Dispatches from the Vanishing World. The Reader's Website Dedicated to Preserving Species and Culture* Issue 4 (Spring 1997), <http://www.dispatchesfromthevanishingworld.com/pastdispatches/uganda/uganda1.html> (Accessed August 19, 2009).

<sup>63</sup>Brother Tarcis A Nsobya, *The African Heroes* (Kibusi: Mirianum Press, 1999), 10.



Mukasa, protectress of the procreated, to return and serve the African people in this time of AIDS. The interesting thing is that the Ugandan martyrs were burned facing Nende, the god they supposedly insulted.<sup>64</sup> Charles Lwanga had been dedicated to the goddess of Lake Victoria and procreation, Mukasa. It is said that, before his conversion to Christianity, Charles Lwanga was “determined to be a priest to the god Mukasa.”<sup>65</sup> Interrupting the heteronormative telling of the martyrs’ story can be not only a contemporary contribution to understanding how this story writes itself upon the bodies of Africans today, it also can serve to present a new template, a new close reading and interpretation of the story. The martyrs become the patrons of a new understanding of sex, sexual ethics, and those populations and persons affected by AIDS.

What is important about Nende and so many African and Afri-diasporic deities, or orishas, is the non-condemnatory nature, indeed the sex-positive positions, of so many of them. For glbtqi persons in Africa, there is indeed great potential and power in the return of gay-friendly ancestors and of various gender-variant orishas. Most important is that these are African divinities. Africa is their home—wherever “Africa” travels, across whatever oceans or plains or eras, they go too.

Later that afternoon, after visiting with the sick of the Kampala hospital, Fr. Waliggo invited the reporter of the story

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<sup>64</sup>Loiuse Pirouet, *Strong in the Faith: The Witness of the Uganda Martyrs* (Mukono, Uganda: Church of Uganda Literature Centre, 1969), 41.

<sup>65</sup>Nsoby, 10.

in “Dispatches from the Vanishing World” to tea. Reportedly, Waliggo was asked “Are the old gods alive for the Baganda, now that most are devout Christians?” Waliggo responded: “How can they go? Where can they go? They are part and parcel of us.”

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