



The Queer Faith Tensions: A Poetic Inquiry into the Privacy of the 'Inner Worlds' of African Closeted Queer Clergy

Chammah J. Kaunda¹ · Mathias Fubah Alubafi^{2,3}

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Abstract

This article argues that poetic inquiry is a valuable method for unmasking the interior religious experiences of African closeted queer clergy. It demonstrates how poetic inquiry could function as analytic tool for the decolonisation, reclamation, reinsertion and reconstitution of the closeted queer cleric's belonging in African religio-cultural spaces in which their sexualities are been exorcised and alienated. It also makes visible the ongoing complexities of closeted queer clergy and the processes of interrogating their faith tensions through negotiating and subverting ecclesiastical and cultural alienations. Finally, it shows how closeted queer clergy interpret Christian faith as a tool for lived faith tensions between uncertainty and hope; fear and resistance; alienation and belonging; rejection and acceptance.

Keywords African Christianity · Closeted queer clergy · Faith tensions · Well-being · Poetic inquiry

Introduction

Empirical analyses from various African countries demonstrate how queer persons¹ experience religious and cultural prejudice, and discrimination in the church and society (Bongmba, 2016; Chitando & Mateveke, 2017; Epprecht, 2013; Kaoma,

¹ The focus of this study is not on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersex (LGBTQI) community as whole, but only on priests who have described themselves as queer clerics.

✉ Chammah J. Kaunda
ckaunda@yonsei.ac.kr; pastorchammha@gmail.com

Mathias Fubah Alubafi
malubafi@hsrc.ac.za

¹ Yonsei University, 85 Songdogwahak-ro, Yeonsu, Incheon 21983, Republic of Korea

² Human and Social Development of Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa

³ Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Limpopo, Mankweng, South Africa

2014; Nyeck, 2016). There is enough evidence indicating that LGBTQI persons feel alienated from their African cultures, social relations and community within the church (Kaoma, 2018; West et al., 2016). Scholars confirm a widespread informed religious stigma against queer communities, and an ignorance about their sexualities and genders in many African societies and church communities (Finerty, 2013). In some African countries queer persons continue to face state-sanctioned religious prejudice and discrimination (van Klinken, 2014, 2017, 2018; Chitando and van Klinken eds. 2016a, b; Kaunda, 2016; Ukah, 2018; van Klinken & Obadare, 2019).

Even in countries such as South Africa where queer persons have constitutional rights, research shows that queer persons, especially the queer clergy remain “aliens in the household of God” (Germond & de Gruchy, 1997) – they continue to face immense resistance from their fellow clerics and congregants. The empirical research by Dlamini (2019) and Mbote et al. (2018) on the experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa reveals that most queer clergy concealed their sexualities and genders to avoid discrimination. However, there is also evidence that the Christian faith is paradoxically utilised as a critical site of resistance among some queer Christians in Africa. In the study among Kenyan queer Christians, Adriaan van Klinken (2019) noted how African cultural practices and Christianity are being navigated, negotiated, appropriated and transformed to sanction queer Christian imaginations. Dlamini (2019) made a similar observation among queer clergy in South Africa, that despite the alienation most of them maintain, they are passionate about ministering and serving the people of God.

However, these studies have given little attention to the consideration of how poetic inquiry could inform research on understanding how closeted queer clergy Christian practices are not neutral but profoundly political and linked to concrete inner struggles and resistance against religious homophobia. However, the complexities of queer clergies prophetic resistance remain obfuscated within African Christian imaginations. In religion and health studies, there is a need to understand the faith tensions of African queer clergy who have not disclosed their sexualities and genders. The concept of faith tension refers to the ongoing queer clergies inner struggle and search to resist dominant realities informed by heterosexist imaginations. Understanding how such faith tensions are engaged among closeted clergy is significant as research shows that internalised religious homophobia can become a source of mental ill-health (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Lassiter, et al., 2019). This study focuses on understanding how faith tensions are deployed as sites of struggle for the construction of alternative realities amidst religio-cultural and sociopolitical alienations and contradictions. It gives attention to the closeted queer cleric’s lived faith tensions and how these promote the decolonisation of religious practices and beliefs, and foster agency and mental wellbeing. Thus, the poetic inquiry is utilised as an approach to explore and unveil faith tensions among closeted African queer clergy by reconstructing qualitative data into poems for analysis.

The Intentionality of Poetic Inquiry

A poetic inquiry is an indispensable approach in African studies. The principal function of poetic inquiry is to unmask and analyse the inner life of people within their social contexts. This qualitative method is particularly valuable for a religious-based inquiry on the faith tensions of closeted queer clergy. Their faith tensions form the foundation for their remaining in Christian pastoral work despite immense alienation. The method integrates qualitative social research with religious interpretations of lived faith tensions among closeted queer clergy. Poetic inquiry is increasingly utilised as a critical method in social science and humanities to represent the experiences of marginalised communities “in a more approachable, powerful, emotionally poignant, and accurate form than prose research reports allow” (Faulkner, 2019a, b). The method involves “the use of poetry crafted from research endeavours, either before project analysis, as a project analysis, and/or poetry that is part of or that constitutes an entire research project” (Faulkner, 2019b). It is a creative and novel process “of turning research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experience and reflections into poems or poetic forms” (Faulkner, 2019b). The technique “uses structures, rhythm, repetition, pause and symbols, and thereby not only engages the reader/listener’s body but also reveals the process of self-construction, deferral, transformation as well as inconsistencies and contradictions” (Görlich, 2016). Thus, it is a form of qualitative approach, which reorganises empirical datasets into poetic discourses and utilises various analytical techniques to analyse them. This makes research within religion “accessible, visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage” (Denzin, 2014).

Poetic inquiry pushes research boundaries to transcend naturalisms by making emotional context noticeable and visible in order to touch the reader/listener at a deeper emotional level. Poetic inquiry as a utilisation of alternative forms of representations discloses that inner “experiences are so complex and intensely emotional that creative forms of representation can reflect their texture more evocatively than traditional academic text” (Brearley, 2001). The approach gives us glimpses into the hidden world of closeted queer clergy that Laura Brearley (2001) argues “would otherwise be inaccessible and they invite us to see more clearly and feel more deeply”. Poetic inquiry, therefore “breathes new life into the” data by “challenging the voice of the omniscient academic observer” (Brearley, 2001).

As demonstrated in the poems of the closeted queer clergy shown in this paper, employing poetic inquiry as a methodological resource has the potential to enriched religious and health studies. It can help religious and health researchers pay particular attention to the mental health of the queer communities in the church and society. Andrew Yip and Page (2013) argue, “sexuality is not only about personal emotions, choices, troubles and decisions, it is also about culture and politics, where [the] personal and social intertwine—and at times collide”. Thus, poetic inquiry seeks to reach deeper into the inner religious life of closeted queer clergy. It is an invitation “to engage as active witnesses within our research sites, as witnesses standing

beside participants in their search for justice, recognition, healing, and a better life” (Prendergast, 2015). This methodology helps to uncover hidden faith tensions in order to gain a better understanding of the closeted queer cleric’s ways of making religious meaning, and the application of these reformulated Christian beliefs as tools for negotiating and resisting heteronormativity and heterosexism within alienated ecclesiastical and sociocultural contexts.

Research Design and Methods

This pilot study explored faith tensions among closeted queer clergy in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in an African nation with a high level of intolerance to queer communities. The country and the names of the queer clerics interviewed are intentionally withheld to protect their identities. It is the condition of international research ethics that participants are presented in anonymous writings. The closeted queer clergy in this African nation are a hard-to-reach population with practical and ethical problems (Alaszewski, 2006; Coxon, 1988, 1996; Milligan et al., 2005; Wheeler & Reis, 1991). To engage such a population, researchers have suggested a technique of solicited diaries for individual reflections on inner experiences and struggles (Bolger et al., 2003; Ortlipp, 2008). We utilised solicited diaries to collect qualitative data from six closeted queer clerics in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. The participants were asked to reflect on the interplay of faith, ministry and life in the context of ecclesiastical and sociocultural alienation. They were requested to write daily unstructured personal reflections of about a quarter a page in length for seven consecutive days on whatever topic came to mind. The method allowed for flexibility and heterogeneity and generated rich qualitative data; more so than many traditional of the qualitative methods that rely on retrospection. It was also an effective method as most closeted queer clergy were reluctant to meet and engage in face-to-face interviews but were willing to write their reflections in a diary.

Purposeful/opportunistic and snowball qualitative selections were employed as strategies for sampling closeted queer clergy for diary reflections. These techniques are widely utilised in qualitative research for the identification and selection of knowledgeable and experienced individuals in hard-to-reach population categories. The procedures are also perceived as the most effective strategies for use with limited resources, and for engagement with a hidden population (Patton, 2002). Patricia Leavy (2017) argues that for research with hard-to-reach populations, “a strategy of purposeful sampling is generally employed so that the ‘best’ participants are selected— those with the most to offer in regard to the topic”. The process involved identifying and deliberately selecting two key closeted queer clerics in different regions who also acted as the first-line referral points to other appropriate participants (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). We were aware from the beginning that by utilising snowball sampling we forfeited our control over the nature of the sample. Therefore, to overcome the danger of making an individual participant the orientor of the responses, we applied a double starting point method in which we identified two closeted clerics in different

Table 1 Demographics of the participants in solicited diaries

Category	Solicited diaries
Number of Participants	6
Sex	Male
Age (years)	25–45
Location	African Nation
Respondents	Closeted queer clerics

regions and different church traditions. The two initial participants suggested a total number of seven contacts, but only three of the seven contacts were willing to engage in diary reflections with the addition of the initial participants. Two contacts were unwilling to participate due to fear of unintended self-exposure and one felt that they did not have enough experience to write diary reflections. Scholars recommend that in addition to knowledge and experience, the participants' availability and willingness to keep daily diary reflections, and their ability to articulate their experiences and opinions expressively and reflectively is crucial for engaging them in the research process (Bernard, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015). Thus, as shown table one below, the sample included only six participants who met the criteria of the daily diary reflections approach.

The summary of the participants in solicited diary qualitative method are shown in Table 1.

Since this is a poetic inquiry study, the process of analysis involved *précis*ing the six transcribed diaries through strategically deleting certain passages and sentences that fell outside the scope of the interplay of a closeted queer clergy's faith, ministry and life in the context of ecclesiastical and sociocultural alienation. The process of poetic inquiry demanded that critical attention be given to the cleric's word choices, word sequences, repetitions, genre and rhythms. The process of poetic inquiry also included deleting or leaving certain words, this resulted in the creation of a gem of poems from each participant's diary reflection. There was a lot of writing and rewriting, constructing and deconstructing, which also involved constant communication with participants for clarity. This confirms Heidi van Rooyen and Raphael d'Abdon's (2020) observation that poetic inquiry is "a decolonising strategy in that it encourages greater collaboration and coexistence between researchers and research subjects, in which the former has an opportunity to escape the prison of academic jargon, and the latter is allowed to speak for themselves in new, empowering ways". The initially crafted poems were sent to the participants for critique and endorsement. In order to ensure that the poems were not shared among participants, only those poems which were extracted from their journals were sent to them for endorsement. The participants felt that the poems epitomised their unsettled faith tensions as confirmed by the following response from one of them. "I love the way [you] have talked about queer clergy in the poems from our weak reflections I agree with [you] 100,000%". It is worth noting that 1% of participants did not have any comments about the poems, however this aspect is not discussed in this

paper. The small proportion of work produced from the diaries is thought-provoking as it shows that the poems reflect the unsettled faith tensions discussed in this paper. Finally, the poems were subjected to a thematic analysis to extract religious meanings. What follows is a presentation and discussion of the poetic discourses of closeted queer clergy faith tensions.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations to this research. First, the qualitative method of solicited diaries makes many individuals unconfortable. For some, writing their experiences was equated with coming out. In addition, there is no strong keep a personal diary culture in many African countries. Therefore, write out in detail their thoughts and feelings at the end of each day could have been like a new burden that many would not be interested in carrying. Therefore, face-to-face interviews are more likely to generate comprehensive data than solicited dairies technique. Second, the research did not include the perspectives of those who have come out. However, some chances they would most likely affirm some of the responses from the closeted group. Third, the research relied on referral sampling means that the views might have a strong orientation towards the middle-class urban closeted cleric who shares a similar idea of reality. It might not reflect the option of the closeted cleric from the margins. The study was limited to one African nation and may not represent the perspectives of geopolitics areas.

Into the Inner Religious Lives of African Closeted Queer Clergy: Presentation of Poetry

The following is a presentation and discussion of the eight poems which arose from the poetic inquiry. These poems unmask faith intentions among closeted queer clergy and how they negotiate Christian faith for self-affirmation, self-acceptance and mental health. These poetic excerpts emerged out of an extensive poetic analysis created from the daily diary reflections of closeted African queer clerics as described above. They illustrate the complexities of ongoing inner faith tensions among the interplay of closeted queer clergy and demonstrate how closeted queer clerics negotiate, manage and subvert ecclesiastical and sociocultural alienations. The poetic presentations are followed by a discussion.

Where do I belong?

If I were a Jew
 I would not be the Pharisee
 I would be the tax collector
 The one who went to pray
 Alongside the Pharisee
 He had no merit

Yet the Lord approved him
Not simply because he was the 'other'
But was genuine in his quest for God
If I were a Samaritan
I wouldn't be the Good Samaritan
I would be the other Samaritan
The woman at the well
The Lord deeply knew her
He deeply loved her
Still, I do not know where I belong

African pastors

So holy and pious, like the Pharisees
We like to walk around sanctimoniously
Yet among us are also tax collectors
'The other'
Whom the Lord prefers to the Pharisees
They serve with a pure heart
Trembling hands
And like wounded healers
I'm a priest but not the Pharisee
but 'the other'
I'm a priest
I'm a Samaritan woman
At that well with Jesus
Wrestling with barriers of self
with culture
and with faith
Being a rainbow from childhood
And later a priest has been a journey
Struggled to fully be the tax collector
Struggled to be the Samaritan woman
I'm here because the Lord approved them both
But talking of the rainbow
I don't even know my colour
I have her as my wife
I did this to be fully a Pharisee
That priest with a good standing
Modelling family values for many others
Yet I love him too
Many more are like us
Priests and lay
A headcount among the men of the clothe,
will prove many Pharisees are tax collectors
But this is not the reason why I am struggling
My struggle is that we cannot fully be who we are

Our mother the Roman Catholic has more like us
 We are in fellowship
 We go on blind 'meetings' to 'break' their celibacy oath
 Celibacy does not even mean chastity
 Maybe I could as well be celibate
 and still have just one colour of the rainbow
 But no reverse gear now
 I will hold the two together
 I have a place in the rainbow
 Rainbow was the sign of God's love-covenant
 Love-covenant on the cross is my portion too
 And each day I live in this hope
 I know one thing
 'The Lord is God
 It is he who made us
 and we are his, we are his people
 the sheep of his pasture' (Psalms 100:3).
 This I know with conviction

I am gay

But I can't come out
 Because I'm a priest
 I'm an African
 Only my inner circle of queer friends
 know my most guarded 'holy shit'
 The reality of being pigeonholed
 And being a queer priest is a real terror
 That God is using me as the 'other' is the only hope
 The only hope I cling to amidst tears and fears
 From the periphery to the front row
 Yet pigeonholed
 I want to come out for my freedom
 But I can't dare because I am a priest
 I'm an African
 I have a family name to protect
 I have a church image to preserve
 Can there be any good news from the pigeonholed clergy?

I am a priest

A pigeonholed priest
 By my ordination
 I'm under oath of canonical obedience
 I'm under obligation to protect the discipline
 The doctrines and ethos of the Church
 Being gay is against the Church practices

It's against marriage ethos
It's also a gross indiscipline
Can amount to defrocking
Many liken me to great ministers of their time
Some even thought of me as a potential future bishop
Many young people look to me as an example
should I come out
Should I continue to live a lie
Oh Lord help me
I'm a priest
They like my ministry
But can't accept me as gay
Unless they accept me as gifted
As admirable 'other'
I shall still be fighting

It's a battle

Being my mama's favourite
My dad's pride is not simply a lofty status
It's a battle
How will I convince my mama
she will never have grandchildren
How will I make daddy believe
the pride of his manhood cannot rename him
How will the multitude who esteem me as their pastor accept
mine is an 'evil love'
Should I simply live a lie;
to make my daddy happy
to appease my mama's spirit
to please the big constituency behind me
Or simply be selfish and ignore all these and just be real
It's a battle
It's the heartache of my love
I'm a vessel for God
A herald for the gospel
I'm impacting my generation
I'm growing the Kingdom

My love is weak and faint

Yet I love you
But I'm not satisfied
I adore you
I need the grace to love you more
But I'm not satisfied
I can't be proud of my love for you

My tears roll when I think of how much you love me
How much you love me in a world full of fear and hatred
Your subjection to ridicule and shame for daring to be real
Testifies that your love is kind
Your love is patient
How can it be that a queer should gain an interest in your blood?
In your fold?
In your ministry?
Lord, I have no words
Just to say how much I love you
How much I need you every passing hour
I'm yours my Lord
I have heard your voice
Your voice said, 'you love me'
I long to rise in the arms of faith
And be closer to you
This is the only safe place
Jesus will never leave you
Never forsake you
This Jesus signed with his blood

Words are Sharper than the Two-Edge Sword: Discussion

The poetic words speak the language of inner struggles and joys, pain and wholeness, rejection and acceptance, a struggle against the world and for the world; of hatred and love and ugliness and beauty. They invoke “the liberating images of the subordination of death and destruction to the will to live” (Marcuse, 1968). The emancipatory poetic imaginations affirm the fullness of life amidst pervasive death. They challenge religious informed relations of power, not through confrontation but, rather through negotiations though at times seemingly compromised. The long process of struggles with ecclesiastical and cultural alienations have empowered closeted queer clergy on how to gently navigate heteropatriarchal discrimination. Queer clergy have refused to confine themselves to the ways heterosexist religion seeks to define them. They have defined themselves based on how they believe God perceives them as God’s objects of love. The unconditional love of Jesus has empowered them to know when to navigate, and how to manage and subvert homophobic Christian beliefs and practices. The poetic discourses above reveal how queer clergy have reconstructed Christian beliefs and practices as lived and expressed through their experiences of everyday life beyond the traditional modes of official or institutional Christianity (Bowen, 2008; Gwynne, 2008). The everyday experiences of being a queer cleric are the lens through which their Christian faith is redefined and reconstructed. The closeted clergy have not abandoned their faith tensions. Rather, they have found balance in the interpretations and practices of their faith. This approach has enabled them to develop self-acceptance which is imperative for good mental

health and personal well-being. They have claimed their religious belonging without asking for the church's permission. God embraces all and rejects no one who comes with an open heart. For instance, one participant underlines:

I have a place in the rainbow
Rainbow was the sign of God's love-covenant
Love-covenant on the cross is my portion too
And each day I live in this hope

This suggests that the everyday experiences of being the 'other' shape the religious convictions of queer clergy, which then transforms how they choose to live out their Christian lives by negotiating official dogmas, theological beliefs and other prescriptions (Ammerman, 2014a, b, 2016; Orsi, 2003). Rejecting the trap of the rigid dichotomies between being closeted and coming out, non-out-queer clergy lives are constructed as a religious protest. The non-out queer clergy define their lives as ritual actions as both an act of serving God's homophobic people and resistance against the heterosexual definition of God. However, it is important to highlight that queer clergy are also aware that their identities are entangled in their local cultures and political contexts (Hodge, 2005; Yip & Page, 2013). This is more clearly defined in the poem "It's a battle". Closeted queer clergy not only negotiate Christian faith, but also the sociocultural challenges assigned to procreation. In many African societies, procreation is not an individual choice, but rather a moral, social and spiritual obligation (Epprecht, 2004). In 'It's a battle' these cultural tensions are unpacked:

It's a battle
How will I convince my mama that she will never have grandchildren?
How will I make daddy believe the pride of his manhood cannot rename him?
Should I simply live a lie to make my daddy happy?
Should I live a lie to appease my mama's spirit?
It's a battle
It's the heartache of my love

Procreative sex is intertwined with normative notions of sexuality and kinship, where for many male couples having children is connected with family continuity through naming their children after living and deceased parents. This has been confirmed by empirical studies which argue that one reason many homosexuals remain closeted is to fulfil the procreation obligation that is found in many African cultures (Epprecht, 2013; Essack et al., 2020). The poems show this tension between conforming to the cultural obligation of procreation with its associated heterogendered sociocultural obligations and adopting an openly gay identity. There is similar tension linked to the Christian faith.

I am gay
But I can't come out
Because I'm a priest
I'm an African

Research has shown that the cultural context which informs the orientation and expression of lived queer clergy faith expressions shapes their actions and experiences while allowing them to retain a sense of agency (Essack et al., 2020). For example, a queer cleric asks, “should I simply make an honourable practical compromise in the pursuit that will lift us all?” In engaging lived faith tensions, it is always important to investigate how the Christian faith and cultural contexts shape queer identities and influence how the queer community manage their reformulated Christian beliefs and practices related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Scholars who have studied lived religions among queer communities find that they are mostly situated in secular contexts which tend to stress liberal assumptions of freedom and agency for individual emancipation (Nynäs & Yip, 2013; Page & Yip, 2017; Shipley et al., 2016). This ideological orientation conflicts with the faith tensions above which are influenced by traditional worldviews and African informed Christian faith. In this context, the queer cleric’s quest for freedom is always negotiated with cultural values, practices and attitudes which seem to be shaped by views that are embedded in their spiritual communities of practice.

I want to come out for my freedom
 But I can’t dare because I am a priest
 I’m an African
 I have a family name to protect
 I have a church image to preserve

Queer clergy lived faith tensions are always in conflict between what they want to be and what their context dictates they have to be. The queer clergy appropriate and negotiate Christian faith, cultural values, sexualities and genders in their everyday experiences to fit their unique needs. This means negotiation and reconstruction of beliefs and practices are part of what it means to be a closeted queer cleric. Therefore, researchers should pay close attention to how such reformulated religious ideas are actually lived and how queer clergy constantly appropriate, redefine, reconstruct and negotiate them in creating their closeted queer clergy spiritualities. The queer cleric’s acts of negotiation have the potential to evoke innovations of Christian values, by promoting dynamism and transformations that could challenge institutional Christianity with its prescribed beliefs and practices that are to be believed, received and revered without questioning (Yip et al., 2011). Indeed, poetic discourses show that there is always some degree of negotiation, reconstruction, dissension, and reflection of lived experiences that in turn, influence how queer clergy direct their religious lives by living in affirming ways (Primiano, 1995). This process of negotiation which is informed by closeted queerness, Christianity and a cultural worldview has potential to innovate Christian faith in its contemporary search for a just and equitable society.

The above poetic discourses show that the closeted queer cleric’s personally formulated faith tensions play an important role in their daily life, provide foundational resources in difficult times and have the potential to promote positive mental wellbeing. For example, in the poem, “My love is weak and faint” the queer cleric

identifies their struggle with “fear and hatred” with Christ’s suffering. The argument is that Christ suffered because He dared to be real.

Your subjection to ridicule and shame for daring to be real
How can it be that a queer should gain an interest in your blood?

Through such radical personal constructed faith tensions, closeted queer clergy can rethink and subvert non-affirming Christian beliefs and resist rejection from faith communities and accept that they are fully and unconditionally accepted by Jesus. This reformulated Christian faith helps them to resist choosing between their faith and queer identity.

But no reverse gear now
I will hold the two together
I have a place in the rainbow
Rainbow was the sign of God’s love-covenant
Love-covenant on the cross is my portion too
And each day I live in this hope
I know one thing
‘The Lord is God
It is he who made us
and we are his, we are his people
the sheep of his pasture’ (Psalms 100:3).
This I know with conviction

The line ‘This I know with conviction’, is a statement of deep self-conviction. The closeted queer cleric is essentially speaking to themselves. This is more than a mere therapeutic technique. Instead, it is a spiritual resource for mental power to resist non-affirming Christian practices and beliefs. It is a spiritual resource for living and struggling with what it means to be queer in a homophobic context. The spiritual resources are utilised as inner weapons of defiance to subvert the ugliness that forms the external surroundings of queer communities—the ugliness of homophobia. Such spiritual resources can function as reservoirs of hope, meaning creation and as an inspiration for the closeted queer clergy. For instance, the excerpt in another poem demonstrates a strong sense of the closeted queer cleric’s consciousness of God’s voice of unconditional love.

I have heard your voice
Your voice said, ‘you love me’
I long to rise in the arms of faith
And be closer to you
This is the only safe place

Such understandings and interpretations of Christian faith seek to navigate the reality of ugliness which is constantly subsumed within inner tensions as captured in the words “you love me... the only safe place”. The ‘safe place’ is not an external place but the hidden world of self. This creatively building into the tension of ‘I want to come out for my freedom. But I can’t dare because I am a priest

and an African'. However, this does not mean that such a closeted cleric intends to give up his sexual identity as argued in another poem, "no reverse gear now. I will hold the two together. I have a place in the rainbow". It appears that the closeted queer clergy have embraced "death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful" (Barth, 1957). It is this spiritual inner beauty that is utilised to negate and resist the ugliness of homophobia and heteropatriarchy.

Conclusion

The words in the poems only faintly capture the inner world of closeted queer clergy which appear to be heavily fortified with spiritual resources, which at the same time empower them to withstand the ugliness of their external reality. Words describe but cannot capture the true reality of the hidden world of the human soul. For some closeted clergy, internalising the spiritual beauty of divine love and acceptance appears to help them not only in constructing their self-affirmation and self-acceptance but also in developing a genuine love for the people of God and authentically serve them despite their manifestation of homophobic ugliness. The form and manifestation of the inner world of closeted clergy has the potential to challenge and transform the negative assumptions many people have about sexual minorities. This inner world emancipates them from the tyranny of the external ugliness of rejection and hatred and in a very subtle way seeks to manifest divine redemptive power amidst homophobia and sexual injustice. Arguably, this way of holding faith in tension seems to provide self-validation and resources for positive mental health and personal well-being among queer clergy. Future poetic inquiries should focus on understanding how such an understanding and interpretation of Christian faith influences the mental health of closeted queer clergies in concrete ways.

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Declarations

Conflict of interests The author declares no conflicting interests.

Ethical Approval The ethical clearance was approved by the office of Research Affairs of Yonsei University. The approval required that participants be informed about the aims, objectives and process of the research. Each participant was requested to sign a written consent form based on their voluntary participation in daily diaries reflections. Permission also asked after the poetic inquiry analysis was done.

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