

Investigating the understanding of Gender and Sexuality within isiZulu Religion

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PLAGARISM DECLARATION

I, Sanelisiwe Khanyile declare that this is my original research, completed as part of the qualification for a Master's in Gender, Health and Religion within the discipline of Theology and Religion at the School of Arts, College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

This research paper has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

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Signed at **Home, Durban, Umlazi** on **05 November 2025**

Signature: 

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ABSTRACT

The Zulu people originated from Nguni-speaking tribes and established a powerful kingdom in southern Africa under the leadership of Shaka in the early 19th century. Currently, there are over 9 million Zulu people living mainly in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. The Zulu language and traditional beliefs continue to play an important role in their culture, though many Zulu have also adopted aspects of Christianity and urban lifestyles. Rites of passage like puberty ceremonies and respect for elders remain significant cultural practices for the Zulu people.

Zulu identity has changed over time. Before the ascendancy of King Shaka, the term Zulu referred to only one clan that recognised "Zulu" as its founding ancestor. After Shaka's mission of conquest and consolidation, the term came to refer to hundreds of clans under the control of the Zulu monarchy. Today Zulu "ethnic" identity is linked to the language and the monarchy. A person's identity is made up of their own character combined with their family and social roots. Identity, like culture, is ever changing. For example, a woman can be a teacher, mother, wife and driver to her children. This is what the Zulu identity is made of, a combination of respecting your culture and your identification as a Zulu.

Gender is a social or cultural category influenced by stereotypes about female and male behaviour that exists in our attitudes and beliefs. Such beliefs are often said to be culturally produced or constructed (Goodman, 199:8). Judith Butler(1999) argues that gender is not determined by biology but is socially constructed and, therefore, subject to change and contestation, Butler 1999; Connell, 2009). The roots of Western understanding of gender can be linked to colonialism, modernisation ideas, and the imposition of European cultural and religious hegemony that were established and expanded across the colonies (Oyewumi, 2002; Chauraya, 2012). Gender in Africa involves recognise the continent's vast cultural, social and historical diversity Gender roles and identities across Africa are shaped by a complex interplay of traditional beliefs, colonial legacies, and contemporary influences. IsiZulu men and women, as are all South Africans, through the influence of rites and traditions of their families and their religious elders, are trained to perform their masculine and feminine roles, duties, and expectations in society. Men who fail to conform are seen as weak. At the same time, lesbian women are perceived as assuming men's roles in society. These labels suggest a strong and pervasive link between sexism and heterosexism (Blumenfeld, 2000:4; Msibi, 2008:8; Francis & Msibi, 2011:9).

The LGBTQ community refers to a diverse group of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others, as indicated by the plus sign (+). This community encompasses a wide range of sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions. The LGBTQ+ community is a vital and dynamic part of society, advocating for inclusivity, understanding, and equality for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Glossary

ATR: African Traditional Religion.

African culture: The diverse customs, beliefs, traditions, and practices of the people of Africa.

Colonialism: The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country.

Decolonisation: The action or process of state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent.

Heteronormativity: Suggesting or believing that only heterosexual relationships are normal or right and that men and women have naturally different roles.

Heterosexuality: The state of being heterosexual.

Homophobia: Harmful or unfair things a person does based on fear or dislike of gay people or queer people.

Homosexuality: A romantic/sexual attraction, or sexual behaviour between people of the same sex or gender.

LGBTQ: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.

Isangoma: African traditional healers.

Isitabane: A derogatory isiZulu and isiXhosa term for a gay person.

Polygamy: The practice or custom of having more than one wife.

Sexual orientation: A person's identity in relation to the gender or genders to which they are sexually attracted.

Transgender: Denoting or relating to a person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex registered for them at birth.

KZN: KwaZulu-Natal.

Ubutabane: A term used to refer to homosexuality.

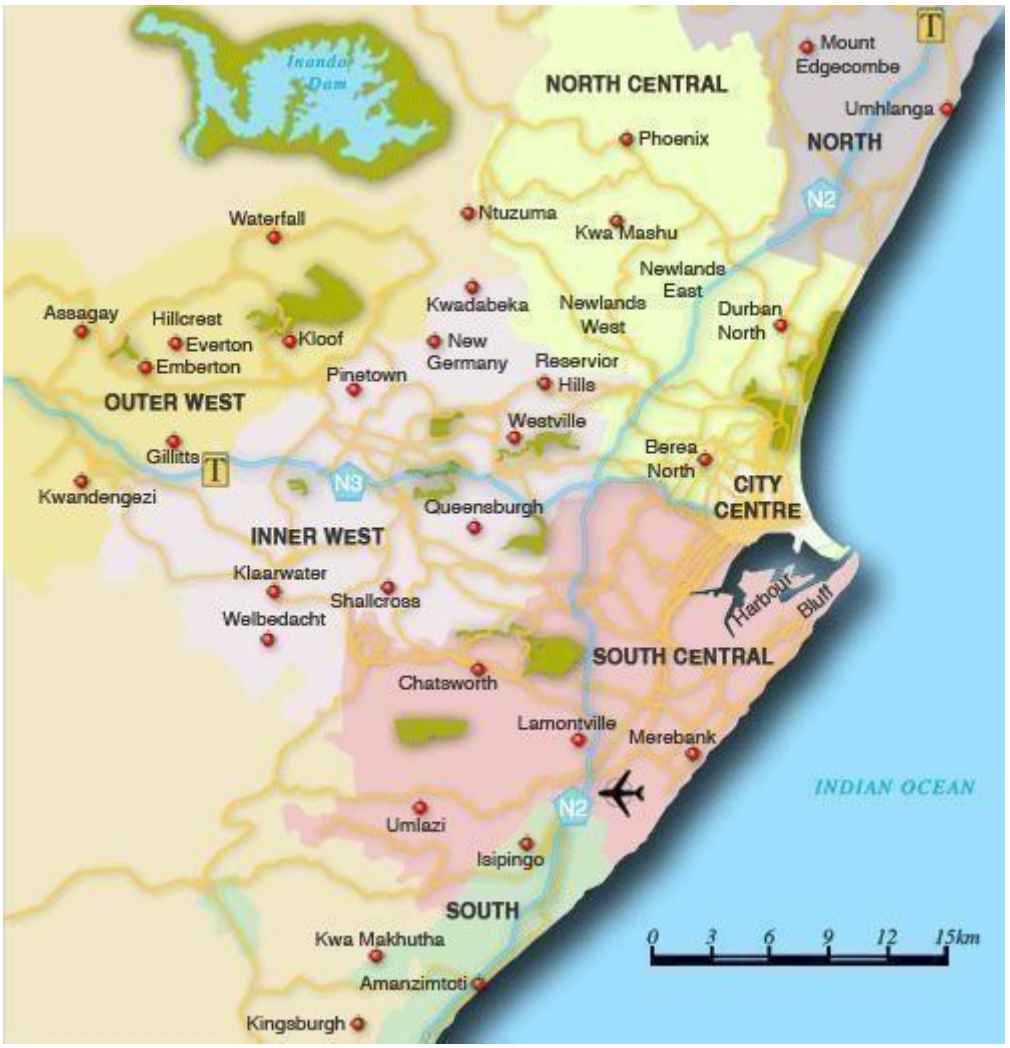
IsiZulu: The Bantu language of the Zulus, one of the official languages of South Africa.

uMemulo: A traditional coming-of-age ceremony for a young woman.

uKuhlowa: Virginity test

uKulusa: Cattle herding

KwaZulu-Natal Map



https://www.roomsforafrica.com/dest/south-africa/KwaZulu-Natal.jsp **(Accessed 30 April 2025)**

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Chapter 1 – General introduction of the study

1.1 Introduction

Deeply connected to ancestral traditions and vibrant ritual practices, isiZulu religion remains a cornerstone of identity for millions (Msibi, 2016). Exploring gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion involves engaging with a rich tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and cultural norms. We, as the amZulu (isiZulu individuals), are part of the broader Nguni ethnic group in South Africa and hold a holistic perspective that intertwines spirituality, community and identity (Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013). Our understanding of gender and sexuality as amaZulu is multifaceted and continually evolving as traditional customs interact with modern influences (Msibi, 2016). This creates a dynamic space where identities are actively negotiated and expressed. Ongoing research and open dialogue within and about the amaZulu communities are essential to illuminate these nuanced perspectives and promote inclusivity and respect for diverse experiences. Such research includes studies conducted by critical thinkers such as Rudwick (2011), Matabeni (2011), Msibi (2012), and Khuzwayo-Mangwaza (2021).

A queer inquiry into isiZulu religious constructions of gender and sexuality is crucial for developing acceptance and inclusion within these communities. By challenging established norms, encouraging conversation, and amplifying diverse stories, such an approach can help build a more inclusive understanding of identity that honours both cultural heritage and individual rights. The word "queer" is used to include many different kinds of people whose feelings about love, gender, or how they show themselves are not the same as being straight or identifying only as a man or a woman (Jagose, 1996). This enriches the isiZulu religious practices and contributes to a fairer, more equitable society. At the crossroads of traditional isiZulu cosmology and contemporary LGBTQ identities lies a complex field of negotiation, resistance, and spiritual reconciliation. This project aims to investigate how gender and sexuality are defined and understood within the isiZulu religion, and to identify the main influences that contribute to the construction of gender and sexuality, while also investigating how the teachings of religious leaders are interpreted by the isiZulu communities.

Drawing on oral narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews, which centre the lived experience of isiZulu religious practitioners, this project argues that diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations have long existed within isiZulu cultural frameworks, articulated through indigenous vocabularies and symbolic systems, and are not recent Western imports or colonial corruptions, as often claimed by cultural gatekeepers. The ancestral realm (*amadlozi)*

in isiZulu spirituality provides a particularly rich context for exploring these tensions. Traditional healers *(izangoma)* who identify as LGBTQ often describe their calling as rooted in ancestral demands that transcend contemporary gender boundaries (Phiri, 2016). Their embodied experiences challenge simplistic binaries of "tradition" versus "modernity", showing how spiritual authority can both uphold and disrupt normative gender expectations. As Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde expressed in an interview: "My ancestors chose me as I am. Who are others to question what the ancestors have blessed?" This research aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on African spiritualities that resists both colonial erasure of indigenous knowledge and reactionary cultural fundamentalism by centring the lived experiences of LGBTQ practitioners of isiZulu religion.

1.2 Background/motivation of the study

My motivation for conducting this study is inspired by the insights and exposure I have gained from LGBTQ studies, case studies, and stories during a gender and religion course I had enrolled in, in 2023. In that class, along with a few classmates, my lecturer introduced me to queer studies, which motivated me to explore this subject further. I discovered how LGBTQ individuals are treated in most African countries and communities, including my own, which sparked my interest and raised questions, such as the understanding of gender and sexuality and influences that contribute to the construction of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion. Traditional Zulu cosmology involves a complex interplay of gender roles, ancestral reverence, and spiritual practices that have historically shaped social norms and expectations. Recently, global discussions on LGBTQ+ rights have begun to challenge and broaden the traditional frameworks for understanding gender and sexuality. These contemporary perspectives have challenged the apparent normative ways in which gender and sexual identity have been perceived and practised within amaZulu tradition. These established norms understand homosexuality, and by implication other sexual and gender identities, to be unAfrican and not-Zulu-like.

The former President Jacob Zuma famously stated, “Homosexuality is a disgrace to the nation and God,” during Heritage Day celebrations in KwaDukuza, KwaZulu-Natal, in 2006, while he was Vice-President. This was in the lead-up to public hearings on same-sex marriage, which aimed to grant all individuals equal legal status, regardless of whether they were in a civil union or marriage. Former President Zuma also mentioned that, “When I was growing up, *unqingili* (homosexuals) could not stand before me” (Times Live, 2006). Similarly, on the 21st of January 2012, the late AmaZulu King Goodwill Zwelethini made homophobic comments during the 133rd

anniversary of the Battle of Isandlwana, stating, “Traditionally, there were no people who engaged in same-sex relationships. There was nothing like that, and if you do it, you must know you are rotten” (Times Live, 2012). Both leaders addressed large crowds, asserting their views as "Zulu men" and labelled same-sex marriages as taboo in traditional isiZulu society. The Zulu royal household later issued a statement denying that the late King made such remarks and expressed their shock and dismay over what they called a "reckless translation" (Times Live, 2012).

The remarks made by the late King and former President not only reflect homophobic attitudes but also embody isiZulu masculine identity, as both figures are influential representations of isiZulu masculinity. Their statements reinforce the notion that any gender or sexual identity outside the dominant heterosexual norm is not only uncommon among us as amaZulu but, by implication, not part of what it means to be isiZulu. The views expressed by King Goodwill Zwelithini and former President Jacob Zuma highlight prevalent patriarchal, homophobic, and queerphobic narratives within the isiZulu culture in South Africa. Traditional within amaZulu households, especially in rural areas, are often characterised as patriarchal heteronormative environments where women are deemed inadequate for leadership roles, which are typically reserved for men. In this structure, women are assigned a lower status than men (Mncwango & Luvuno, 2015:9), with the father as the head of the family, wielding absolute authority over the wife and children (Mncwango & Luvuno, 2015:10).

Within this patriarchal, heteronormative environment, queer sexualities and gender identities are seen not only as a capitulation to Western ideas but also then reinforced as a disgrace and abomination to African culture (Mnyadi, 2016:3; Mthembu, 2023:5). There is a widespread misconception that queer sexualities and gender identities have never existed within African cultural or religious contexts, as they are understood to be a new phenomenon, yet another Western distortion imposed on African people (Collins, 2005; Carton, 2009). LGBTQ persons are therefore seen as hypocrites who seek social attention or are stigmatised as persons who “carry the black cloud of evil spirits” (Bongmba, 2016:3). These ideas amplify homophobic and queerphobic attitudes, resulting in violence that is enacted on LGBTQIA persons. Individuals from the LGBTI community have fallen victim to violence due to their gender identity and sexual orientation, and the above comments made by such public figures fuel intolerance within the Zulu communities. In Durban, the fundamental human rights of Pinky Shongwe and Lindokuhle Cele were not considered when they were murdered in daylight in front of the rest of the community because of their sexuality (Phungula, 2022).

In January 2022, Graeme Reid, the Director of the LGBT Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, wrote a letter to the Deputy Minister for Justice and Constitutional Development, John Jeffery, expressing concerns about the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals killed and violently assaulted over the past year, in circumstances that suggest their sexual orientation or identity was the reason that they were targeted (Reddy, 2022). Between February and October 2021, at least 40 LGBTQ individuals were killed across South Africa. From 2024 to mid-2025, Durban remains one of the South African cities most affected by violence against LGBTQ+ people, particularly gay men. The attacks are often brutal, sometimes fatal, and frequently involve abduction, torture, and robbery (Out LGBT Well-being, 2024). These acts of violence and dehumanisation are not congruent with a South Africa that has been famed for being a rainbow nation, not only holding within it a multitude of cultures, ethnicities, and races, but also through what is hailed as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, safeguarding LGBTQ rights and freedom of expression.

South Africa was one of the first countries to constitutionally protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the fifth in the world to legalise same-sex marriages. However, this idealistic attitude, while held within the political and legal courts of our country, does not correlate with the life experience of LGBTQ people. A disparity exists between the protection provided by the law and the lived experiences of queer individuals. Queering isiZulu understandings of gender is both a cultural and political imperative, as it challenges the patriarchal and heteronormative interpretations perpetuated by influential figures like the former President Jacob Zuma and the late King Zwelithini, it affirms the lived experiences of LGBTQ Zulus, and it opens the door for a more inclusive and dynamic cultural identity (Msibi & Redwick, 2015). Therefore, this research project aims to queer the understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion so it is potentially expanded or queered to promote gender inclusivity, acceptance, and justice for LGBTQ persons. This study is critical because it can promote gender diversity within the isiZulu religious communities and reduce the number of hate crimes experienced by the LGBTQ community. African queer sexuality must not be reduced to the representation of symptoms of suffering, pain, mourning and despair. South Africa has been famed for being a rainbow nation, not only holding within it a multitude of cultures, ethnicities, and races but also through what is hailed as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, safeguarding of LGBTIAQ rights and freedom of expression. However, this idealistic attitude, while held within the political and legal courts of our country, does not correlate with the life experience of LGBTIAQ people.

1.3 Research question

1.3.1 Key research question

How can a queer investigation of isiZulu religious constructions of gender and sexuality shape the ongoing need for LGBTIAQ inclusion and acceptance within the isiZulu religious communities?

1.3.2 Sub-research questions

- How does the isiZulu religion traditionally view and define gender and sexuality?
- How have the teachings and interpretations of isiZulu religious leaders influenced the understanding and acceptance/rejection of diverse gender and sexual identities?
  What have been the main influences contributing to the construction of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion?

1.4 Research problem

This study aims to investigate how gender and sexuality are understood and constructed within isiZulu religious practices and beliefs, focusing on the implications of these understandings for both traditional and contemporary expressions of identity, particularly concerning the inclusion and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

1.5 Objectives

To explore whether the understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion can be challenged or expanded to promote gender inclusivity, acceptance, and justice for LGBTQ persons.

1.5.1 Sub-Objectives

- To determine how the teachings and interpretations of isiZulu religious leaders influence the understanding and acceptance/rejection of diverse gender and sexual identities.
- To determine the main influences contributing to the construction of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion.

1.6 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilising semi-structured interviews with isiZulu religious practitioners, to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' beliefs,

experiences and attitudes regarding how gender and sexual identity are understood by AmaZulu. IsiZulu religion is a way of understanding amadlozi/amathonga (ancestors), who are seen and recognized as the family spirits that protect, guide, and discipline the living. This methodological approach has enabled me, as the researcher, to identify and analyse underlying patterns of belief and meanings regarding gender and sexual identity within the context of isiZulu religious practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Through purposive sampling, the study specifically targeted individuals who are custodians and active practitioners of isiZulu religious rites, such as religious elders, *izangoma,* and *izinyanga,* (Traditional healers, izangoma are spiritual diviners and mediums, while izinyanga are herbalists and medicines) to explore their interpretations of gender identities and sexuality within the isiZulu religious framework (De Vos, Strydom, Fouch & Delport, 2011:293). The central objective was to investigate whether isiZulu religion encompasses conceptions of gender and sexuality that extend beyond the dominant cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal norms commonly associated with contemporary understandings of isiZulu culture and religion.

Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for this research, as it allows for the deliberate selection of participants who possess relevant knowledge and lived experience related to the study's focus (Shahneen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019). This approach also facilitates the inclusion of marginalised or often silenced voices, such as isiZulu religious elders in same-sex relationships or gender-queer practitioners who are frequently excluded from dominant discourses (Khuzwayo-Magwaza, 2012:12). All participants were adults who reside mainly in eThekwini (Durban, Kwa-Zulu-Natal) and were aged 18 years and older. The participants included both cisgender heterosexual individuals as well as those identifying as LGBTQ, thereby ensuring a diversity of perspectives.

Data collection was conducted through one-on-one interviews, designed to centre the life experience of the participant and thus elicit rich, nuanced information. Beyond simply answering questions, these interviews aimed to capture participants lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to their knowledge and practices (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011:293). The semi-structured format provides a flexible framework that encourages dialogue, allowing the researcher to probe, clarify, and explore emergent themes through open- ended questions (Dejonckhere & Vaughn, 2018:1). Interviews were conducted via Zoom and in-person, depending on the participant's preference and availability. All interviews were audio-recorded, with virtual sessions recorded through Zoom and in-person sessions via dedicated recording software and securely stored on a password-protected Dropbox accessible only to the

researcher and the supervisor. To ensure participants could fully express their thoughts and emotions, interviews were conducted in isiZulu, the participants' home language, creating an environment conducive to authentic and comprehensive engagement.

1.7 Significance of the study

A queer examination of isiZulu religious constructions of gender and sexuality presents a critical avenue for advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusion and acceptance within isiZulu spiritual communities. This line of inquiry challenges the hetero-patriarchal dominant gender binary frameworks that pervade both cultural and religious discourses, uncovering the inherent fluidity and complexity of gender and sexual identities embedded in traditional isiZulu belief systems (Mkhize, 2020; Msibi, 2018). By embracing gender diversity, such an approach actively promotes inclusivity, enabling individuals to express their identities authentically and without constraint, which in turn enables a heightened sense of belonging, solidarity, and communal resilience (Dlamini, 2021). A central theme in this investigation is the persistent tension between entrenched patriarchal norms, such as the privileging of cisgender heterosexuality and male authority within ritual practices, and evolving understandings of identity informed by indigenous cosmologies alongside contemporary social realities (Nkabinde, 2009; Epprecht, 2013). For example, traditional Zulu society often links masculinity with social status and ritual authority while restricting women's participation in certain ceremonies due to beliefs about purity and menstruation (Mthembu, 2017). However, emerging evidence reveals more nuanced gender expressions within spiritual practices, particularly among *izangoma* and *izinyanga* (traditional healers), some of whom embody queer identities and actively challenge normative gender roles (Mkhize, 2019).

By centering these diverse experiences, queer investigations contribute to the decolonisation of dominant narratives that depict African cultures as uniformly heteronormative or hostile toward queer identities (Epprecht, 2013; Msibi, 2018). This scholarship highlights how ancestral spirituality (*amadlozi*) and ritual authority can serve as sources of validation for non- binary and same-sex expressions, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity that facilitates spiritual reconciliation and identity negotiation (Nkabinde, 2009). Despite these insights, significant gaps remain, particularly in the systematic documentation and broader recognition of queer spiritual practices within isiZulu religious contexts (Dlamini, 2021). Addressing these gaps is essential for transforming isiZulu religious communities into inclusive spaces that honour both cultural heritage and the rights of all individuals. Ultimately, queer investigations into isiZulu religious gender and sexuality not only enrich academic

discourse but also hold practical implications for social cohesion, mental health, and human rights within isiZulu communities, creating a more just and equitable society grounded in respect for diversity and cultural continuity.

Chapter 2 – Investigating the understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu communities

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews previous studies on the understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion and communities in Africa and South Africa, begin with an overview of the *amaZulu*, including our beliefs and practices. The chapter explores the influences that contribute to the understanding of gender and sexuality. It then breaks down the different gender roles that isiZulu members play, which are fundamentally shaped by social and cultural constructs that assign specific roles and behaviours to men and women.

2.2 AmaZulu

AmaZulu people, who refer to themselves as "the people of the heavens" are the largest ethnic group in South Africa, with an estimated 10 million Zulu residents in KwaZulu-Natal (Buthelezi, 2008:5). The study of the amaZulu has evolved through the years, shaped by different prevailing politics (apartheid), social and academic contexts. Previous research has ranged from early colonial ethnographies (Stuart, 1890; Bryant, 1949) and oral histories shared by the isiZulu elders to contemporary work and history centring indigenous voices, diverse genders, and sexuality. Zulu people of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, widely known by their greatest king, Shaka Zulu, are among the group known as the "Nguni". The Nguni group comprises amaZulu, amaXhosa, amaSwati, and amaNdebele (Hunter 2004). Historians such as Henry Fynn (1824), John Wright (2006), and Maxwell Shamase (2014) have covered both the historical and cultural aspects of the Zulu people and King Shaka Zulu by observing and examining the evolving image of umuntu ongumZulu (an isiZulu individual). They have told stories and written about the Zulu people. John Wright (2008) has stated that the late King Shaka Zulu played a significant role in the creation of the image of the Zulu people, (Wright, 2008:71). Wright (2008) states that King Shaka Zulu was an influential leader, and everyone called by this clan name is considered to belong to Zulu culture and follow Zulu traditions (Hadebe, 2010).

We, as Zulu people, are known for our ancestral solid beliefs and traditions, which we treasure and pass down from our ancestors (*amadlozi*) (Buthelezi, 2008). It is believed that when family members pass away, they turn to ancestors who thus look after the living, protect them against evil spirits, and bring them good fortune. According to Vilakazi (1962), amaZulu believe that *amadlozi* act as a mediator between God and humans, so their prayers are passed on to God through the *amadlozi* (Vilakazi, 1962). In order to ensure that the ancestors remain happy, the

amaZulu people give offerings to the ancestors in the form of cows and goats (Buthelezi, 2008). Mathonsi (2005) has stated that the isiZulu nation believes that the ancestors are the bridge to the almighty God called *uMvelingqangi*. Like many cultures, amaZulu believe life continues beyond death, entering the spiritual realm. We view death as a profound connection with all creation. This connection between the human and creation within life, death, and the life beyond death is illustrated within burial rites and rituals. An animal is killed, and its hide is interred with the deceased along with the deceased's personal belongings, which will aid them in their onward journey (Buthelezi, 2010).

AmaZulu people in rural areas live in households that contain extended family members or in a three-generation household structure. The physical structures are often rondavels, circular houses built of mud or concrete blocks and thatched with grass or iron sheets. Urban Zulu people live mainly in townships that were built in the 1950s and 1960s by the government to enforce racial segregation. Townships were residential areas of "Black" people and their families, close to their places of work in the cities.

Zulu culture encompasses customs and values like Ubuntu, respect for elders, love for community and solidarity, parent-child relationships, fellowship, hospitality, a sense of the sacred, and many others. Biyela (2013) states that the socio-cultural systems and conventions of the Zulu have evolved due to colonisation, the influence of Christianity, and urbanisation, which introduced new educational regulations, family dynamics, single-parent situations, gender policies, and working conditions in southern Africa. Scholars such as Mathonsi (2002) and Nyembezi (2005) analysed the way of life for umZulu (an isiZulu individual) and have argues that in traditional Zulu society, family serves as the foundation for initiating children into relational systems and raising them according to the ethical standards of their community.

2.3 AmaZulu religious practice and their understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religious communities

African Traditional Religion is the umbrella term for the religious beliefs of *umZulu* (isiZulu individuals). ATR encompasses the indigenous beliefs, rituals, symbols, cosmologies, arts, and social customs of African communities, forming a comprehensive worldview that integrates spirituality and daily life (Ndemanu, 2018:72). Central to IsiZulu religion is the recognition of *Umvelinqangi* (Supreme deity or God) alongside a profound reverence for ancestral spirits, known variously as *abaphansi*, *abant'abadala,* or *amathongo,* (ancestors/ ancestral spirits) who serve as vital mediators or messengers between the living and the divine, conveying human

petitions to the Supreme Divine Being and mediating divine guidance and insight to the living (Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013: 21; Ndemanu, 2018).

IsiZulu religious practices in connection with the isiZulu religion offer a distinctive framework that contrasts sharply with many Abrahamic religious traditions. IsiZulu practices often celebrate and valorise the female body as a symbol of fertility, sexuality, and power (Tamale 2014). Moreover, pre-colonial African societies, including those influenced by ATR, embraced diverse and fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, with roles and identities transcending rigid binaries characteristic of Western heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 2005). Amadiume (1987) and Oyewumi (2005) argue that in pre-colonial African societies, gender identities were flexible. Individuals' social roles were not always based on their physical characteristics. This openness to different genders shows clearly in spiritual practices, especially with *izangoma* (traditional healers), who often have both male and female qualities. This fluidity is reflected in spiritual practices, where gender variance is often integrated into ritual roles, such as among *izangoma* (traditional healers), who may embody both masculine and feminine traits. However, colonial and missionary encounters imposed Western heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks that disrupted and marginalised these indigenous understandings, labelling non-conforming sexualities and gender expressions as immoral or "un-African" (Tamale, 2014; Minority Africa, 2022). Despite this, contemporary scholarship and lived experiences reveal that African sexualities and gender identities are complex, historically rooted, and culturally embedded within Indigenous spiritualities (Tamale, 2014; Minority Africa, 2022).

The understanding of gender and sexuality within African traditional religion demands recognition of its holistic worldview that integrates spirituality, community, and identity and acknowledges the dynamic interplay between indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary social realities. Furthermore, meaningful dialogue about ATR and isiZulu religious practices is grounded in respect for cultural heritage, historical context, and the lived experiences of African peoples, cultivating inclusivity and challenging reductive or exclusionary interpretations (Nyamiti, 1994; Tamale, 2014).

2.3.1 Traditional gender roles

Gender in isiZulu religious communities is fundamentally shaped by social and cultural constructs that assign specific roles and behaviours to men and women, often reinforced through stereotypes embedded in attitudes and beliefs (Goodman, 1996). Within this cultural

framework, men are accorded higher status and authority, while women are typically positioned in subordinate, domestic roles. In isiZulu society, respect for men is paramount, as they are regarded as the heads of households and primary decision-makers. Bhana (2010) emphasises that chiefs and male leaders hold significant authority, rooted in the belief that men are the owners and controllers of social and familial resources. From early childhood, boys are socialised into manhood through engagement in traditionally masculine activities, preparing them for roles as providers, protectors and leaders (Bhana, 2010). IsiZulu culture exhibits a highly gendered socialisation process, where girls are primarily prepared for roles in marriage and motherhood, while boys are groomed for leadership and as providers (Msimang, 2010). Reinforcing this structure is the cultural institution of *ilobolo* (bride price), which often establishes male authority and female subordination, sometimes framing women as commodities within marriage (Zondi, 2007).

Scholars such as Buthelezi (2008) and Ntuli (2016) have indicated that the transition to adulthood for a Zulu man is marked by culturally significant rites such as paying *ilobolo* (bride price), typically involving the transfer of cattle to the bride's family, symbolising the establishment of a homestead and family lineage (Ntuli, 2016; Buthelezi, 2008). Failure to fulfil these expectations, of taking a wife and building a family, and most importantly, having cattle, can result in diminished social status and perceptions of incomplete masculinity (Taylor et al., 2013; Ntuli, 2016). Masculinity within the isiZulu religious communities is often associated with dominance, strength, courage, and authority, while femininity is linked to nurturing, submission, and domestic responsibility (Rankhotha, 2002). Women's roles are confined mainly to caregiving, household chores, beer brewing, and gathering resources, reinforcing a gendered division of labour. The cultural ceremony of *ukubuthwa*, held annually at the Zulu King's Royal Palace, serves as a formal space where young men are taught the responsibilities of manhood, including family care and respect for women. The *ukubuthwa* ceremony is a traditional Zulu ritual marking the transition of boys *(insizwa)* into adulthood, often involving their grouping into regiments (*amabutho),* which is a system with deep historical and cultural roots going back centuries (Reddy, 2018). Historically, *ukubuthwa* was linked to the military organisation of the Zulu kingdom, with age groups forming regiments trained and organised for social and martial roles (Msibi, 2012). With particular emphasis on male roles in fatherhood and continuity of the lineage, homosexuality, while not necessarily deemed sinful, remains socially stigmatised and is often kept private. Reddy (2001) and Rudwick (2011) have stated that homosexuality is frequently perceived as a failure to fulfil traditional masculine expectations.

This project aims to highlight that colonial and missionary influences have significantly reshaped gender and sexual norms, introducing homophobia and rigid patriarchy that often conflict with pre-colonial practices (Epprecht, 2004; Reddy, 2001). As Patton (1999) has stated, historically, pre-colonial isiZulu society included complex gender roles and practices, but colonialism and missionary influence introduced and entrenched patriarchal and heteronormative norms that marginalised women and LGBTQ identities (Epprecht, 2004; Patton, 1999). Homosexuality, often framed as "un-African", is, in fact, a colonial legacy that undermines indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality (Reddy, 2001). The deeply entrenched patriarchal gender roles within isiZulu culture and religion present both challenges and opportunities for LGBTQ inclusion. he traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity, rooted in social expectations around marriage, procreation, and family lineage, often marginalise non-normative gender identities and sexualities. Studies have shown that men are expected to demonstrate strength, authority, and heterosexual virility, while women are socialised into nurturing and submissive roles. These norms are reinforced through cultural practices such as *ilobolo* (bride price), *ukubuthwa* (rites of passage), and *ukuhlonipha* (respect protocols), which collectively uphold heteronormative family structures as central to social order (Bhana, 2010; Ntuli, 2016; Dlamini, 2001).

However, this rigid framework is increasingly contested in contemporary South Africa, where LGBTQ individuals within isiZulu communities seek recognition and acceptance. The tension between tradition and modernity manifests in complex ways: while many community members continue to uphold conservative views on gender and sexuality, others, particularly younger generations and spiritual practitioners, challenge these norms by reclaiming indigenous understandings of gender fluidity and sexual diversity (Rudwick, 2011; Tamale, 2014). Despite the inclusive potentials within religious practice, LGBTQ individuals often face stigma, discrimination, and even violence within isiZulu communities. Epprecht (2004) has highlighted that homophobia remains prevalent, fueled by colonial-era moral frameworks and conservative religious interpretations. Public expressions of queer identities can be met with social exclusion or familial rejection, highlighting the ongoing risks associated with visibility (Rudwick, 2011). Nonetheless, community-based initiatives and activist movements are increasingly working to bridge these divides. By engaging traditional leaders, healers and religious authorities in dialogue about gender and sexuality, these efforts aim to bring about greater understanding and acceptance. Educational programmes that emphasise the historical presence of diverse sexualities in African cultures and the spiritual legitimacy of LGBTQ identities are key strategies in this process (Minority Africa, 2022).

These negotiations of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion and communities are thus a site of both contestation and possibility. Recognising the fluidity inherent in indigenous spiritual systems offers a pathway to reimagine tradition in ways that affirm LGBTQ identities without discarding cultural heritage. This requires a decolonising approach that challenges imported heteronormative paradigms and centres on African epistemologies and lived experiences (Nyamiti, 1994; Tamale, 2014). Working towards LGBTQ inclusion within isiZulu contexts involves supporting spiritual and cultural frameworks validating diverse identities, promoting respectful dialogue, and addressing structural inequalities. Such efforts contribute not only to individual dignity and well-being but also to strengthening social cohesion and cultural resilience in a rapidly changing society.

In conclusion, gender roles in the isiZulu religion and communities is deeply patriarchal and culturally constructed, emphasising male authority and female submission. However, these roles are neither static nor monolithic; indigenous cosmologies and spiritual practices provide spaces for more fluid and diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. Understanding these dynamics requires a critical, historically informed approach that recognises the ongoing impact of colonialism while honouring indigenous knowledge and lived realities.

2.3.2 Sexual norms and practices

Sexual norms and practices within the isiZulu religion and community are intricately woven into a complex tapestry of cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and social expectations. It has been argued that historically, the isiZulu society has emphasised procreation, lineage continuity, and adherence to traditional gender roles, which have significantly influenced attitudes and behaviours related to sexuality. Heteronormative marriages are considered the cornerstone of the social order, with strong emphasis placed on the fulfilment of procreative responsibilities within the marital union (Mangwaza, 2016; Msibi, (2005). Therefore, traditional isiZulu sexual practices and norms have been regulated by customs and beliefs aimed at continuing the lineage, ensuring the health and well-being of individuals in the community. Premarital virginity, particularly for women, has been historically valued as a symbol of purity and cultural pride, often reinforced through virginity testing ceremonies (although these are increasingly contested in contemporary society due to ethical and human rights concerns). However, it is important to recognise that these norms are not monolithic or static; diverse expressions and experiences of sexuality have historically existed within isiZulu communities, albeit often marginalised or suppressed due to colonial and religious influences (Epprecht, 2004; Reddy, 2001).

2.3.3 Important rituals related to sexuality

Several rituals within isiZulu culture are intrinsically linked to sexuality, reflecting its significance in the life cycle and community well-being. These rituals often serve as rites of passage, marking transitions into adulthood, marriage and parenthood:

- *Umhlanga* (Reed Dance): This annual event, primarily for young Zulu women, emphasises virginity, purity, and cultural pride. The ritual involves gathering and presenting reeds to the Zulu Queen, symbolising female unity and adherence to traditional values (although some have criticised it as reinforcing gender stereotypes and patriarchal control).
- *Ukulusa* (Cattle herding): This is a practice of managing and caring for cattle, which holds deep cultural, spiritual and social significance.
- *Umemulo*: *uMemulo* is a rite-of-passage ceremony that marks a young girl's entry into womanhood.
- *Ilobolo* Negotiations and Marriage Ceremonies**:** The negotiation and payment of ilobolo (bride price) are central to establishing a marital union. These processes formalise the relationship and serve as a symbolic transfer of rights and responsibilities between families, including expectations around procreation and domestic roles. Marriage ceremonies themselves often include rituals that celebrate fertility and bless the couple with children.
- *Ukungenwa* (Levirate Marriage): In some traditional contexts, the custom of *ukungenwa* involves a widow marrying a male relative of her deceased husband to ensure the continuation of the family line and support the widow and her children. This practice highlight the societal emphasis on procreation and protecting vulnerable family members.
- Birth and Naming Ceremonies: Rituals surrounding childbirth and the naming of children emphasise the continuation of family lineage and the fulfilment of societal expectations. These ceremonies celebrate the new life and integrate the child into the community, reinforcing the importance of procreation and familial bonds.

2.4 African sexuality during the pre-colonial period

Early colonial-era anthropologists and writers such as Westmarck (1921), Frazer (1931), and Crawley (1929), operating within colonial administrations, framed African sexuality through a

deeply prejudiced lens (Epprecht, 2010; Tamale, 2021). They interpreted the visible nakedness of African peoples as evidence of savagery and a lack of civilisation, portraying Africans as driven by uncontrolled lust and reproduction rather than moral or social regulation (Lyons & Lyons, 2011: 82). This depiction reinforced the stereotype that Africans were sexually promiscuous and incapable of adhering to the conservative sexual norms upheld by Europeans (Tamale, 2011: 22). For example, the traditional topless dress of many African women, which celebrated feminine identity and cultural expression, was misrepresented as provocative and linked to prostitution. Tamale (2011:6) critiques this colonial framing, noting that early research on African sexualities was shaped by imperialist agendas that cast African sexual practices as immoral, primitive, and dysfunctional, narrowly conceptualised within European moral frameworks centred on reproduction and sexual "decency".

Countering these distorted outsider perspectives, indigenous African knowledge systems reveal a rich and complex history of sexual norms and practices that were integral to social cohesion, spiritual life, and individual well-being. Nhlapo (2019) argues that indigenous African knowledge systems offer a rich and complex understanding of sexual norms and practices central to social cohesion, spirituality, and individual well-being. IsiZulu scholars such as Mkhize (2015) and Gumede (2017) have critically challenged colonial narratives that misrepresented these customs by employing rigorous historical and ethnographic methods. They emphasise that indigenous sexual frameworks are deeply embedded in broader cultural and communal contexts, contrasting with the restrictive Western moral frameworks imposed during colonialism. By reclaiming these traditional knowledge systems, isiZulu academics resist colonial epistemologies and reaffirm the sophistication of African sexual ethics and social organisation. Many African societies developed sophisticated approaches to sexuality that included initiation rites, community education, and traditional healing practices, all aimed at managing sexual and reproductive health holistically (Afya Nahaki, 2024). For instance, initiation ceremonies such as the ukushona and ukucwala rites marked the transition to adulthood, teaching young people about sexuality, fertility and social responsibilities within culturally appropriate frameworks.

Within the isiZulu religion and communities, the initiation rites, such as *ukushona* (for males) and *ukucwala* (for females), mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. The *ukushona* rite involves the seclusion of young men to learn about manhood, sexual behaviour, respect and their societal roles, reinforcing cultural identity and community cohesion (Msimang, 2017). Similarly, Ngubane (1997) states that *ukucwala* prepares young women by instructing them on

womanhood, fertility, childbirth, and social duties in accordance with indigenous values. Together, these rites serve as vital vehicles for transmitting indigenous knowledge and sustaining social cohesion through ritual education.

These rites were not merely about controlling behaviour but about preparing individuals to contribute meaningfully to family and community life. Traditional healers *(izangoma* and *inyangas)* played a central role in sexual and reproductive health, offering herbal remedies, spiritual guidance, and rituals to address fertility, childbirth, and sexual well-being. Women who struggled to conceive would seek their intervention, and rituals surrounding childbirth ensured the child's safe integration into the family and community (Afya Nahaki, 2024). The scholarship of Khuzwayo- Magwaza (2019) and Matebeni (2015) offers significant insights into the intersections of sexuality, gender and indigenous African cultural paradigms. Their work highlights how spiritual possession and ancestral guidance play pivotal roles in shaping non-heteronormative sexualities and diverse gender identities within the context of African traditional healing practices (Matebeni, 2015; Khuzwayo-Magwaza, 2019). Men were also given herbal concoctions to enhance fertility and sexual performance, while circumcision rites served both hygienic and social functions, preparing boys for adult responsibilities and reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections.

Pre-colonial African sexualities were diverse and fluid, encompassing same-sex relationships, gender variance, and non-binary identities. Historical evidence documents practices such as female-female marriages in over 40 African societies, where women could marry other women and assume social roles typically reserved for men (JSTOR Daily, 2021). These relationships were socially recognised and embedded within indigenous cultural and spiritual frameworks, challenging the colonial narrative that homosexuality was foreign or unnatural. The arrival of Christian missionaries and colonial administrations radically disrupted these indigenous sexual systems. Missionaries condemned African sexual practices as sinful and sought to impose European moral codes, often criminalising and stigmatising behaviours that had previously been accepted or even celebrated (Epprecht, 2013:59). This colonial imposition led to the erasure and demonisation of many traditional practices, particularly those involving women's sexualityand non-heteronormative relationships, with long-lasting effects on African societies.

In conclusion, African sexuality during the pre-colonial period was characterised by complex, culturally embedded practices that integrated sexuality with spirituality, community well-being and social order. These practices were sophisticated and diverse, encompassing a wide range of sexual expressions and health management strategies. The colonial legacy of moral judgment

and suppression has obscured this rich history, making it imperative to centre indigenous perspectives in contemporary discussions on African sexualities.

2.4.1 Same-sex relationships

IsiZulu scholars such as Mkasi (2013), Phiri and Nadar (2016) and Mnyadi (2020) have argued that same-sex relationships within isiZulu religious communities present a complex intersection of culture, spirituality and social norms. And while mainstream isiZulu society has often viewed homosexuality as taboo or "un-African", research shows that among traditional healers (*izangoma*), same-sex relationships have long existed and carry distinct spiritual meanings (Khuzwayo- Magwaza,2019). These relationships are not merely personal choices but are sometimes understood as being influenced or "imposed" by ancestral spirits, granting the individuals involved a unique social and spiritual status within their communities (Phiri & Nadar, 2016). Unlike contemporary Western notions of sexual identity and rights, these relationships coexist with traditional beliefs about procreation, patriarchy, and community continuity without directly challenging them. It has also been argued that these nuanced reality highlights how indigenous knowledge systems and ancestral spirituality shape understandings of gender and sexuality in ways that differ significantly from dominant public discourses (Mnyadi, 2020).

Traditional healers in South Africa, such as *izangoma* and *izinyanga*, have historically faced discrimination, often being dismissed as "witch doctors". At the same time, non-heterosexual Africans frequently endure violence fuelled by the perception that homosexuality is "un-African". The lived experiences of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender traditional healers are thus doubly marginalised. Mnyadi (2020) argues that for some traditional healers, engaging in same-sex relationships is not a matter of personal choice but is dictated by ancestral spirits, whose sexual orientation in life influences the healer's relationships. This ancestral guidance challenges the conflation of homosexuality with personal identity and calls for an end to discrimination against both ancestral possession and same-sex attraction within African contexts. The double stigma faced by LGBTQ traditional healers– due to both their spiritual roles and sexual identities – reflects broader societal prejudices (Farham, 2011; Turner & Schlee, 2017).

In some cases, same-sex relationships among traditional healers carry profound spiritual significance. It has been argued that among *iziNyanga* (herbalists), *izangoma* (diviners trained through ritual dance and music), and other healers, such relationships are often understood as

expressions of ancestral will rather than individual preference, highlighting the complex interplay between spirituality and sexuality (Tamale, 2014). Nkuzi Zandile Nkabinde, a renowned lesbian sangoma, embodies this intersection by asserting that her same-sex identity is ancestrally sanctioned, challenging dominant patriarchal and heteronormative narratives within the isiZulu culture. Her lived experience reveals how ancestral possession can validate queer identities, offering a powerful counter-narrative to widespread homophobia and cultural stigma.

Despite constitutional protections for same-sex relationships in South Africa, isiZulu culture often regards homosexuality as taboo and un-African, with prevailing notions of masculinity emphasising heterosexuality and procreation (The Conversation, 2024). This cultural context generates significant health and social challenges for gay men and other sexual minorities, including stigma, mental health struggles, and barriers to healthcare access. However, within subcultures like isiNgqumo – a Zulu-based gay sociolect – individuals articulate their identities in ways that affirm both their Zulu heritage and queer experience, demonstrating resilience and cultural creativity (Rudwick, 2017). In sum, same-sex relationships within the isiZulu religion and communities are deeply entangled with ancestral spirituality, cultural identity and social norms. Recognising the ancestral and spiritual dimensions of queer identities, as exemplified by figures like Nkabinde, is essential to dismantling the double stigma faced by LGBTQ traditional healers and furthering broader acceptance within isiZulu society.

2.4.2 The impact of the Christian religion on African traditional beliefs

Khuzwayo Mangwaza (2021) explains that the arrival of Europeans, particularly Christian missionaries, brought profound transformations across Africa and played a pivotal role in the continent's colonisation. Early discourses framed missionaries as benevolent agents spreading the Gospel and providing spiritual care primarily for European settlers in Africa. These missionaries introduced the concept of "civilisation" to their African congregations, promoting philosophies they believed would uplift Black lives by steering them away from indigenous knowledge, resources, and beliefs toward a "better future" aligned with Christian salvation. However, this vision required Africans to reshape their identities, religions, and cultures to conform to European ideals. Tamale (2011:23) summarises this process succinctly: Africans were encouraged to abandon their ancestral beliefs and values in favour of the "civilised ways" of the colonisers. Ikoro and Ekevere (2016:3) further note that Christianity challenged traditional African belief systems and facilitated the spread of new modes of life, effectively undermining indigenous religions. Okon (2014:203) highlights the pressure placed on Africans

to forsake their cultural and religious heritage and adopt Western values.

Chidester, cited in Bain-Selbo (2003:5), offers a nuanced perspective on the encounters between Africans and colonisers, describing it as a practice of comparative religion. Missionaries initially failed to recognise African spiritual practices as legitimate religions, concluding instead that Africans lacked viable religious systems. Although they later acknowledged the existence of African religions, they dismissed them as inferior to Christianity (2003:2). Once missionaries conceded that African religions were indeed functional belief systems, they intensified efforts to convert Africans, determined to impose Christian doctrines on the masses. African religions, deeply intertwined with faith, spirituality, politics, economy, history and culture, were misinterpreted through European categories, which failed to capture their complexity. Moreover, missionaries and colonisers overlooked the African principle of Ubuntu, a core ethos emphasising communal interconnectedness and humanity, which is fundamental to African worldviews.

This historical trajectory reveals how Christian missionary activity was inseparable from colonial domination, serving as both a spiritual and cultural conquest that sought to reshape African identities, beliefs, and social orders according to European Christian norms. Christian missionary activities during the colonial period profoundly disrupted indigenous African cultural and religious systems, seeking not only to convert Africans to Christianity but also to transform their entire way of life by targeting key cultural practices deemed "pagan" or "uncivilised". Many traditional ceremonies– such as initiation rites that taught sexuality, morality, and social responsibility, ancestral veneration central to African spirituality, and fertility rituals – were condemned and often replaced with Christian rites, undermining the rich spiritual and social fabric of African societies (Mbiti, 1969).

Missionaries imposed Victorian-era European gender norms, promoting strict heterosexual marriage and patriarchal family structures, thereby marginalising indigenous gender roles and sexualities that were often fluid and inclusive. Practices such as polygamy, female initiation rites, and same-sex relationships faced condemnation and legal prohibition, leading to the stigmatisation of those who did not conform (Tamale, 2011; Epprecht, 2013). Furthermore, missionary schools became centres for inculcating Western values and Christian doctrine, frequently at the expense of indigenous languages and knowledge systems, developing internalised colonial attitudes that disrupted the transmission of oral histories and cultural philosophies (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986). In response to this colonial legacy, recent decades have witnessed a resurgence of indigenous religions and cultural practices, with communities

actively restoring ancestral veneration, traditional healing, and suppressed ceremonies as sources of identity and empowerment, exemplified by the revival of sangoma practices in South Africa (Mokgobi, 2014). African theologians and scholars are also engaging in decolonising theology, contextualising Christianity within African worldviews by emphasising values such as Ubuntu and communal solidarity, as championed by figures like John Mbiti and Desmond Tutu (Mbiti, 1969; Tutu, 1999).

Additionally, contemporary African queer scholars and activists challenge colonial-era homophobia by highlighting pre-colonial acceptance of diverse sexualities and gender expressions, reclaiming indigenous knowledge to advocate for LGBTQ rights within African cultural contexts (Tamale, 2011; Epprecht, 2013). Grassroots organisations and cultural institutions further facilitate dialogue among traditional leaders, religious groups, and communities to promote healing, inclusion, and cultural pride. Thus, while missionary efforts sought to replace indigenous African identities with European Christian norms, ongoing decolonisation movements are revitalising African cultural and religious traditions and restoring dignity and social cohesion while addressing contemporary challenges related to gender, sexuality and identity in postcolonial African societies.

2.4.3 Homosexuality being unAfrican

LGBTIA+ Africans frequently endure violent attacks that are rooted in the pervasive belief that homosexuality is "un-African". Despite increasing awareness, constitutional and legal freedom, and visibility of homosexuality and bisexuality, many African societies continue to harbour negative attitudes toward same-sex relationships, often asserting that such relationships are historically non-existent, Western imports, and detrimental to African cultural integrity (Zabus, 2009; Rudwick, 2011). A critical examination of African historical contexts regarding homosexual behaviour is essential to either validate or challenge this dominant narrative.

Contrary to these widespread assumptions, Ilesanmi (2013) contends that, given Africa's status as the cradle of humanity, it is plausible that homosexuality originated on the continent before human populations dispersed globally. Supporting this perspective, Zabus (2014) argues that African societies have historically exhibited greater acceptance of queer identities than commonly acknowledged. Ilesanmi (2005) further highlights that in various African cultures, individuals identifying as homosexual or transsexual were revered as manifestations of divine spirits. For example, the Yoruba thunder god Sango is traditionally depicted as a strikingly

handsome man adorned with braided hair and feminine attire, exemplifying the historical recognition and celebration of gender and sexual diversity within African cosmologies (Matory; 1994:10). From a sociological standpoint, Connell (1995:77) defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of masculinity at any given time, which aligns with dominant cultural ideals and institutional power structures. Cohen (2006:24) elaborates that heteronormativity encompasses social practices and institutions that legitimise and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and "natural, thereby normalising heterosexuality within society. Similarly, Sears and Williams (1997) characterise heterosexism as the belief in the superiority of heterosexuals, manifesting through the exclusion, whether intentional or inadvertent, of non-heterosexual individuals in policies, procedures, and social activities. This systemic bias confers privileges to those conforming to heterosexual norms while marginalising and legitimising discrimination and hostility against sexual and gender minorities who are understood as transgressing established gender roles.

Scholars argue that homophobia and queerphobia often fails to comprehend the complexity and legitimacy of diverse sexual and gender identities. Scholars such as Pillay (2018) have indicated that only about half of Black LGBTQ+ individuals openly disclose their sexual orientation, reflecting pervasive stigma and fear. Pillay (2018) posits that South Africa has yet to realize LGBTQ+ equality fully. Supporting this, the study "Attitudes towards Homosexuality and Gender Nonconformity in South Africa" reveals that while 51 percent of respondents believe gay people should enjoy the same human rights as heterosexuals, a striking 72 percent consider same-sex sexual activity morally wrong. This dissonance underscores the ongoing cultural and social challenges faced by sexual minorities in South Africa.

2.5 Conclusion

This literature review highlights several interconnected themes, such as the influence of gender construction within the isiZulu communities, the impact of the Christian religion on African traditional beliefs, as well as the argument that homosexuality is un-African, that are crucial for understanding the complexities of isiZulu constructions of gender, sexuality, and religious practice while also identifying significant gaps that this research aims to address. We, as the isiZulu ethnic group, are deeply rooted in our cultural traditions and religious beliefs, with gender roles historically framed within patriarchal norms emphasising masculinity as linked to social status and ritual authority (Nkabinde, 2008; Sibiya, 2023). Existing ethnographic and anthropological studies have provided valuable insights but often reflect the perspectives of scholars positioned outside or above the lived realities of marginalised groups, including

LGBTQIA+ individuals. These studies frequently reproduce heteronormative assumptions without critically engaging with the fluidity of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu culture.

Previous research that has been conducted on our isiZulu religious practices has revealed that while masculinity and femininity are central to ritual roles, there is also evidence of more complex and diverse gender expressions, especially among traditional healers (*izangoma* and *izinyanga*) who sometimes embody queer identities (Nkabinde, 2008; Rudwick,2017). These spiritual leaders challenge normative gender roles, suggesting that the isiZulu religion contains spaces for gender variance despite dominant patriarchal and procreation-centred ideologies that often reject same-sex relationships as "un-African" (Nkabinde, 2008). However, the literature lacks comprehensive documentation and critical analysis of these queer spiritual practices. Sibiya (2023) argues that the interplay between social and religious roles among the Zulu people/communities is primarily shaped by heteronormativity and patriarchal power structures, which privilege cisgender masculinity and female reproductive roles. However, subversive practices and identities exist within these frameworks, indicating a tension between traditional and contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. This tension remains underexplored, particularly regarding how queer identities negotiate belonging and authority within these social-religious spaces (Noyam Journals, 2023).

Placing isiZulu gender constructions within the broader African context reveals how colonial impositions introduced rigid, binary gender frameworks that disrupted indigenous, often more fluid, understandings of gender and sexuality (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Epprecht, 2013). These colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary attitudes, reinforcing the misconception that LGBTQIA+ identities are "un-African" (Matebane, Mdende, Magwaza-Khuzwayo). Decolonial scholarship challenges these assumptions by reclaiming cosmologies that validate non-binary and same-sex expressions. South Africa's progressive legal framework contrasts with persistent social homophobia and exclusion, shaped by complex interactions between law, activism, and religious-cultural beliefs (Rudwick, 2017 & Mkhize, 2021). This research argues that African religions, including isiZulu spiritualities, play an ambivalent role in reinforcing heteronormativity but also offering avenues for inclusion and identity negotiation.

This project has revealed a significant gap in systematic, intersectional analyses that centre queer isiZulu experiences within religious and social contexts. Existing literature tends to treat gender and sexuality as fixed or marginal phenomena rather than dynamic and integral to cultural identity. Therefore, this project seeks to fill this gap by employing queer theory to

explore how LGBTQ identities are lived, expressed, and negotiated within isiZulu religious practices and communities. Doing so contributes to decolonising dominant narratives, enriching academic discourse, and fostering more inclusive cultural and religious spaces.

Chapter 3 – Queering isiZulu

3.1 Introduction

This study investigates how gender and sexuality is understood and constructed within the isiZulu religious practices and community. It focuses on the implications of the beliefs and understandings for traditional identity and a way of life for umZulu (an isiZulu individual), and the inclusion and acceptance of the LGBTQ individuals. Furthermore, this study aims to illuminate the fluid and diverse nature of gender identities, expressions, and sexualities within the isiZulu religion and communities, while challenging socially constructed norms influencing gender and sexuality within isiZulu religious and cultural settings. The literature review has unpacked emerging themes that contribute to the traditional image and identity of being *umZulu* (being a Zulu person), such as *AmaZulu* (which covers the history of the Zulu kingdom and beliefs, religious practices and their understanding of gender and sexuality, and African sexuality during pre-colonial period.

This chapter uses queer theory as a lens to investigate beliefs about gender and sexuality within the context of the isiZulu religion, interrogating colonial and Christian influences that often erase or pathologises indigenous systems of understanding gender and sexuality, obscuring how ancestral spiritual practices historically accommodated queer subjectivities (Klinken & Out, 2017). For instance, the isiZulu *sangomas* (traditional healers) in same-sex relationships often legitimise their identities through ancestral spirit possession, framing same-sex attraction as divinely ordained (Mkasi, 2013; Mkhize, 2016). This practice, alongside the scholarship of Ifi Amadiume (1987), Oreyonke Oyewumi (2005), and Stella Nyanzi (2022), challenges colonial-era impositions and assumptions of heterosexism of indigenous cultures as well as the myth that homosexuality is "un-African."

3.2 Roots and trends in the development of queer theory

Queer theory interrogates and disrupts traditional Western notions of gender and sexuality, exposing the social and power structures that shape these concepts (Fangbin, 2024). The phrase "queer theory" was first coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz. De Lauretis (1991) identifies three core aims for queer theory: rejecting heterosexuality as the default sexual norm; questioning the unity of lesbian and gay studies as a single field; and highlighting race's role in sexual biases. Originally a derogatory term meaning strange or abnormal, “queer”, was often used to insult homosexuals (Halperin, 2003) and has complex multivocal beginnings Terresa De Lauretis (1991), as well as Hannah Mcann

and Whitney Monaghan (2020), note that queer theory's complexity arises from its interdisciplinary roots, drawing deeply from its roots in activism – in racial justice movements, gay, lesbian and trans identities, and HIV and AIDS as well as feminist, post-structuralism, and postcolonial critiques. McCann and Monaghan (2020) describe the reclamation and reinvention of the term “queer”, first emerging among activists as an act of resistance to the structural discrimination and violence that was often inflicted upon the homosexual and trans communities, evolving into the Pride movements, then evolving into an inclusive term for sexualities and identities resisting heteronormativity. It thus entails questioning the fixed binary of norms of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual, western norms that have been historically defined human gender and sexuality, while emphasising fluidity and diversity of identities (Spargo, 1991). It critiques privileging of heterosexuality and examines social institutions upholding heteronormativity, analysing power dynamics surrounding sexuality in literature, film, music and media (Spargo, 1991).

Queer theory’s feminist and postmodernist heritages assert that gender, biological sex, sexual behaviours, and identity are socially constructed (Callis, 2009). Foundational thinkers such as Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) significantly shaped its development by advancing cultural shifts toward gender and sexuality, introducing the concept of gender performativity that challenges fixed gender identities. Butler's (1990) work argues that gender is not biologically fixed but is culturally constructed and performed, rejecting universal definitions of gender and supporting a more fluid understanding of identity. Sedgwick (1985) expanded queer theory by analysing how Western culture enforces binary sexual categories and introduced concepts that reveal the instability of these categories. Other important contributors like Michael Warner (1999) critiqued the normalisation of gay rights as it could continue the exclusion of sexual and gender identities that do not fall into the category of homosexual. David Halperin (2024) asserts that queer is a stance that resists all forms of essentialist approaches to gender and sexuality.

Butler's (1990) seminal idea of gender performativity, introduced in Gender Trouble, suggests that gender is constructed through repeated socially accepted behaviours and productions rather than biologically fixed. This means that gender is not an inherent, stable trait, but one that is produced and reproduced through cultural and social practices (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1988). It implies gender is fluid and mutable, rather than being limited to only binary heteronormative categories of male and female (Butler, 1988; Ghosal, 2024). Butler (1990) critiques the prevailing heteronormative and patriarchal social order, which positions heterosexuality and

cisgender identities as natural and normative. She demonstrates how these norms regulate and discipline bodies and identities through the repetition of gendered performances aligned with societal expectations, thereby maintaining power structures (Butler, 1990; Singh, 2024). Drawing on the work of the French post-structuralist, Michel Foucault, Butler (1990) understands heterosexism an ideology that shapes societal power, enforcing through norms, via social rituals and institutions, what identities are possible and accepted and what identities are dangerous and are to be controlled, silenced, erased or pathologised. Although this power analysis has been helpful and has influenced many queer theory scholars, Butler (1990) has been criticised for not paying as much attention to race, class and the effects of colonialism in the construction of western normative heterosexuality (Shepherd, 2016).

The work and critiques of Judith Butler's plays an important role in this study, because it challenges fixed, binary ideas of gender prevalent in isiZulu religious and cultural contexts, especially those shaped by colonial and Christian influences. Butler's (1990) concept of performativity helps analyse how gender identities are enacted and resisted in religious spaces, highlighting indigenous queer subjectivities and fluid expressions (Butler, 1990; Matebeni et al., 2018). The dialogue between queer theory and intersectionality has been productive in highlighting the need for analyses that do not isolate sexual normativity from other social antagonisms, such as racism and nationalism (Rasmussen, 2015; Robert, 2016). This intersectional approach is crucial for understanding the lived realities of queer subjects who experience multiple, overlapping forms of marginalisation and is particularly useful to this study as it explores the complexity of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religion.

3.3 Queer theory and religion

Within the study of religion, queer theory has increasingly challenged heteronormative assumptions embedded in religious texts and institutions globally. Queer readings of religion interrogate how religious discourses construct and police gender and sexuality, opening possibilities for more inclusive interpretations. West (2009) has made significant contributions by exploring biblical criticism through a queer lens, highlighting how traditional interpretations uphold heteronormativity, and offering queer readings that uncover marginalised voices within scripture. Van der Walt (2018) addresses the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion, emphasising the need to decolonise religious narratives and challenge patriarchal norms within local contexts. Davids (2017) engages with theology and queer praxis, focusing on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people engaging with faith traditions in South Africa. While the contributions of West, van der Walt, and Davids are vital, their focus is mainly concentrated

on problematising heteropatriarchal gender and sexual assumptions held with Christian theology and Biblical hermeneutics.". Sibisi (2020) offers critical insights into the embodiment and spirituality of queer identities within African religious spaces, examining how indigenous and contemporary queer expressions coexist and resist hegemonic religious norms. Perhaps most crucially for this topic, Sizwe Sithole's (2019) work centres on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and isiZulu religious contexts, offering an in-depth intersectional analysis of how queer identities navigate and challenge dominant patriarchal and heteronormative isiZulu religious frameworks. Together, these scholars form a rich body of South African scholarship that not only critiques heteronormativity within religious contexts but also emphasises indigenous knowledge systems and lived realities, thereby expanding queer theory beyond its origins in the global North into decolonial, African-centred perspectives.

However, it can still be argued that this intersection remains underexplored in African and South African contexts. Indigenous languages and religious traditions, such as those of the isiZulu, have been largely marginalised in queer theoretical discourse, a gap currently being addressed by scholars like Lindiwe Khuzwayo- Magwaza (2021) and Sizwe Sithole (2019). with emerging research on *isiNgqumo* (a decision) and other local expressions of same-sex desire. These insights problematise the presumed normativity that Western-informed heteronormative religious pronouncements assume and centre the experiences and lived realities of indigenous queer experiences, highlighting simultaneously the tragedy of exclusion as well as creative forms of resistance by LGBTIQ people themselves. Despite progress, significant challenges remain, including the limited application of intersectional queer theory to indigenous African religious contexts and the underrepresentation of local voices shaping queer-inclusive religious practices.

Much of the existing literature is dominated by Western perspectives, even though African scholars (Oyewumui, (2002), Amadiume, (1997), Tamale, (2021) have demonstrated, through important historical narratives, that queer identities have existed in Africa historically,, and the social relations through which gender and sexuality are mediated have not been limited to heteropatriarchal arrangements. These problematise the assumption that Africa is heteropatriarchal as well as the assertion that homosexuality, trans and queer identities are unAfrican. Their scholarship highlights the urgent need to centre African queer lived realities, such as those documented by Zethu Matebeni (2018), highlighting indigenous practices as primary religious contexts for discussing queer-related issues in Africa. Moreover, much scholarship tends to emphasise the conflict between queer identities and religion, often

overlooking how queer individuals actively reinterpret and negotiate religious meanings to promote inclusion.

This study aims to address these gaps by employing an intersectional queer framework to examine isiZulu religious constructions of gender and sexuality. By centring isiZulu cultural and religious contexts, this research challenges Western-dominated queer theoretical paradigms and highlights indigenous forms of queer agency. It aims to demonstrate how queer investigations can inform ongoing efforts toward LGBTQ inclusion and acceptance within isiZulu religious communities, contributing both to academic discourse and practical strategies for social transformation. Through this approach, the study not only enriches queer theory with localised, intersectional insights but also advances the critical project of bringing about more inclusive religious spaces in South Africa.

3.4 Queer in Africa

Queer identities in Africa are complex, dynamic, and resilient expressions shaped by diverse social, cultural, political, economic and religious forces (Matebeni, Monro, & Reddy, 2018). These authors emphasise that queer African lives are negotiated within intersecting power and traditional structures. These profoundly shape gender and sexuality constructions, including LGBTIA identities, by enforcing normative roles tied to procreation, lineage and social duties, with deviations often threatened as being risks to social and spiritual order (Matebeni, Monro & Reddy, 2018). Political authority and religious belief intertwine in traditional leadership, marginalising or condemning non-normative sexualities and gender expressions as contrary to communal and ancestral laws. Political authority and religious belief intertwine in traditional leadership, marginalising or condemning non-normative sexualities and gender expressions as contrary to communal and ancestral laws. Queer identities must negotiate for their visibility and acceptance in contexts in which tradition and heteronormativity prevail (Matebeni, 2018). The resilience of queer identities emerges through resistance, reinterpretation and alternative expressions of gender and sexuality within or alongside established frameworks.

African gender scholars such as Oyewumi (2005), Tamale (2011), Matebeni (2013), and Nyanzi (2014) have developed critical frameworks examining the historic construction and maintenance of gendered norms continent-wide. Queer theory fundamentally challenges dominant heteronormative binaries that situate heterosexuality as "natural" and homosexuality as deviant (Browne & Nash, 2012). They argue sexual and gender norms uphold hegemonic social orders (Sedgwick, 1990; Sullivan, 2006). In Africa, queer theory offers a vital lens for

examining the conditions that enable queer identities amidst pervasive heteronormativity. "Queer" stands as an active, disruptive force within the heterosexual matrix, challenging sexual norms and binary gender regimes defining identity (Matebeni, 2014; 2018). African queer theory, particularly in South Africa, has been reshaped by critiques of Global North models and an emphasis on local, decolonial perspectives that engage African social and religious contexts (Matebeni, 2014; Otu, 2022). These scholars highlight intersections with race, colonial legacies, and indigenous beliefs, calling attention to the relevance of queer theory beyond LGBTQIA+ populations.

Zethu Matebeni (2018) critiques the imposed categories of the Global North, emphasising queer identities rooted in local histories and postcolonial realities, including the complex roles of religion. Kwame Edwin Out (2022) applies African philosophies to fluid sexualities, showing that cultural and religious norms shape queer life across Ghana and beyond. Stella Nyanzi (2021) and others advocate queering African identities by centring local realities against Western heteronormativity, challenging patriarchal religious norms. Among the Zulu, Sithole (2018) notes cultural tensions where children with atypical genitalia historically faced exclusion and were deemed shameful or cursed (Sithole, 2018).

In isiZulu beliefs, religion significantly shapes gender and sexuality norms. Traditional cosmology and Christianity uphold heteronormative, patriarchal values, marginalising LGBTQ individuals. Yet, queer African scholars argue for reinterpretation, and creating inclusive spaces respecting diverse identities (Matebeni, 2018). This approach is crucial for LGBTQ persons facing exclusion and violence justified by religious doctrines, as it urges heterosexual communities to reconsider social and spiritual norms governing identity and belonging. Integrating queer theory with African religious studies provides tools to contest oppressive norms rooted in indigenous and imported religions, thereby advancing social transformation that benefits all (Spronk & Nyeck, 2021).

This approach offers valuable frameworks for analysing LGBTQ experiences within historical and social contexts, and at the same time, furthering self-awareness, empathy, and inclusive communities. Despite social stigma, contemporary queer Africans assert identities openly, challenging entrenched binaries and creating affirming spaces beyond rigid African traditions. In conclusion, queer theory in Africa critiques normative power structures and enables reimagining of identity and belonging, embracing multiplicity and resisting erasure. It is a critical framework for advancing social justice and cultural transformation across the continent.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of queer theory's development, tracing its roots in activism, feminism, and post-structuralism, with unique developments in Africa. African queer theory forms the theoretical foundation of this thesis by critically engaging queer theory's challenge to entrenched gender binaries and heterosexual dominance as the normative identity and desire framework (Reddy, 2018). Central to this inquiry is the understanding that gender and sexuality are framed within rigid binaries sharply dividing heterosexual and homosexual identities, reinforcing heteronormativity and marginalising non-heterosexual subjectivities (Sedgwick, 1985; Butler, 1990; Valocchi, 2005; Halperin, 2024). These binaries constrain diverse sexual identities by labelling non-heterosexuality as abnormal, and internalising pervasive norms that induce stigma and victimisation (Butler, 1990; Katz-Wise, 2012). This stigmatisation originates from the perception of heterosexuality as the default or "normal", thereby delegitimising other sexualities and triggering social pressures (Ludwig, 2011).

Queer theory seeks to dismantle these binaries and hegemonic heterosexual privilege by exposing gender and sexual identity fluidity and multiplicity, as scholars like Amadiume (1997) and Oyewumi (2002) argue. It problematises fixed categories and normative assumptions, advocating reconceptualisation, disrupting oppressive orders, and creating space for alternative identities and desires (Sedgwick, 1990). These lenses are vital in African contexts, where queer identities navigate intersections of culture, politics and religion that reinforce heteronormativity and binary gender regimes. According to Matebeni, Monro, and Reddy (2018), queer theory in Africa interrogates socio-political life, while it shapes queer resilience amid contestations.

Applying queer theory, this study emphasises understanding sexuality and gender beyond Western-centric paradigms, recognising specific African experiences where colonial legacies, indigenous practices and socio-political dynamics converge (Van Klinken, 2017; Mkhize, 2021). It highlights active negotiation and assertion of queer identities within contexts that marginalise or criminalise non-normative sexualities. Queer theory offers critical tools for analysing the maintenance and resistance of normative social orders, shifting conceptions of gender and sexuality to alleviate the burdens of stigma and exclusion (Epprecht, 2008; LaRue, 2016). As a Zulu cisgender young woman, developing queer theory here entailed conscious engagement as an insider to isiZulu culture but an outsider to the LGBTQ+ community. This positionality prompts reflexivity regarding privilege and assumptions, especially heteronormativity and patriarchy. The research approach embodies humility, openness, and a

commitment to amplifying the voices of marginalised individuals often silenced within isiZulu communities.

This research examines isiZulu religious constructions of gender and sexuality, utilising African queer theory as a critical framework to challenge fixed, normative notions of gender and sexuality. It challenges views considering heterosexuality and binary gender as "natural", highlighting social, cultural, and religious enforcement of these categories. Queer theory validates identities that fall beyond the mainstream and exposes power structures that marginalise differences. As it also questions traditional isiZulu household and community gender and sexuality constructs, where these topics remain taboo. Queer theory reveals exclusion mechanisms and resistance spaces within isiZulu traditions (Reddy, 2018), essential for advancing LGBTQ inclusion and respect. This project queers isiZulu gender constructions and religious influences, by creating educational spaces to promote gender diversity, equality, and respect. It is guided by questions that explore the construction, regulation, and contestation of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religious contexts, as well as their impacts on LGBTQ individuals.

This project employed a qualitative method that allowed for semi-structured interviews, prioritising personal narratives and lived experiences. Guided by queer theory, the interviews provided a flexible framework that encourages dialogue, allowing the researcher to probe, clarify, and explore emergent themes through open-ended questions. Therefore, the following chapter will expand on the findings of the research questions.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated that queer theory, practised from both an intersectional and a post-colonial approach, is necessary for centring indigenous African queer lived experiences and religious narratives. Drawing on intersectional queer theory and qualitative semi-structured interviews, this research project set out to gain a nuanced understanding of the beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions of isiZulu religious practitioners in their understanding of gender and sexuality, particularly with regard to LGBTQ persons. The objective is to create the space for isiZulu religious experts to share their perspectives on isiZulu religious traditions, particularly concerning constructing gender identities and sexualities within the isiZulu religious framework. The research interrogates how the isiZulu religion encompasses more diverse understandings of gender and sexuality than the cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal norms that are commonly perceived as dominant within contemporary isiZulu culture (Msibi, 2012).

As an insider to the isiZulu religious and community context, I recognise the personal significance of this study. However, my position as a cisgender individual introduces a layer of complexity. My upbringing within the isiZulu community was deeply influenced by traditional customs, which, particularly for female children, often manifested as restrictive rules rather than guidance, reinforcing prescribed gender roles and limiting space for alternative identities. While I was aware of gay men within my Umlazi community, which was notably diverse, my exposure to lesbian or queer identities was limited. Notably, I do not recall overt acts of violence based on sexuality during my youth. However, the recent escalation of reported hate crimes has compelled me to investigate the experiences of queer individuals within the isiZulu community.

Such acts of violence starkly contradict the ethos of Ubuntu, which emphasises compassion and respect for all. It is essential to recognise that these hate crimes are not isolated incidents but are symptomatic of a complex interplay of factors. Traditional isiZulu beliefs, often characterised by rigid gender roles, have been further complicated by the enduring legacies of colonialism and the pressures of contemporary social norms, resulting in the marginalisation and stigmatisation of queer identities. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the diversity within the isiZulu community; individuals and organisations are actively working to encourage acceptance and understanding. Interviews with isiZulu queer individuals reveal both the pain of discrimination and the resilience of their communities, highlighting the need for ongoing

dialogue and education to bridge the gap between tradition and inclusivity.

While I approach this research as an insider, I am also mindful of the limitations of my perspective. It is crucial to recognise the intricate interplay between traditional Zulu customs, colonial histories, and modern social dynamics that shape the lived realities of community members. Through this research, the study aims to illuminate the challenges faced by queer AmaZulu individuals as well as their remarkable resilience. The study navigates the sensitive interplay between traditional isiZulu customs and the lived experiences of queer AmaZulu people. My motivation is rooted in a belief in the fundamental equality of all people, regardless of gender or sexuality. The isiZulu religion has faced scholarly critique regarding its treatment of women, children, and queer individuals. By critically examining the influences that shape understandings of gender and sexuality, this research explores the potential for greater fluidity and transformation within these concepts. Ultimately, this study aspires to create a better understanding, promote peaceful coexistence, and advance unity and equality within the isiZulu community.

4.2 Research methodology: A qualitative approach

The theoretical framework of this study was constructed using queer theory as it seeks to uncover how gender and sexuality are constructed, regulated, and contested within isiZulu religious contexts and how these processes affect LGBTQ individuals. This study uses queer theory as a lens to investigate prevailing beliefs about gender and sexuality within the context of the isiZulu religion. Queer theory interrogates and disrupts traditional Western notions of gender and sexuality, exposing the social and power structures that shape these concepts (Fangbin, 2024). Jagose (1996) states that the term 'queer' serves as an inclusive label for all identities and groups that do not conform to heteronormative expectations.

This study foregrounds the importance of understanding sexuality and gender beyond Western-centric frameworks, recognising the specificities of African experiences where colonial legacies, indigenous cultural practices, and contemporary socio-political dynamics converge (Van Klinken, 2017; Mkhize, 2021). In questioning how gender and sexuality are traditionally viewed and defined within the isiZulu households and community, the study employed a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research emerged in the 1900s as researchers moved away from positivism and the belief in an objective reality from which data could be gathered and verified through empiricism. This shift led to a new group of researchers who adopted the qualitative research paradigm. They aimed to establish qualitative

research as "rigorous" as quantitative research and developed numerous methods to conduct qualitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Leedy and Ormrod (2013) describe qualitative research as a method with two primary objectives: to capture phenomena in their natural settings and examine their complexity. The qualitative research methodology was chosen due to the descriptive nature of the study and the need for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The principles of qualitative research, which focus on fundamental assumptions about human behaviour, underpin this study. These assumptions include viewing people as active agents who interpret and construct meanings, acting upon the world rather than being passive recipients of it (Blumer, 1962). Qualitative research also posits that there are multiple truths, none of which are singular or determinable. It suggests that truths are shaped by time, context, and the perspectives of the individuals who hold them. This methodology enables the researcher to uncover underlying social patterns within the community (Glaser, 2002:24).

The social constructionist view, supported by scholars like Hammersley (1992) and Berger and Luckmann (1967), argues that reality is shaped through shared beliefs and social interactions, challenging fixed or universal truths. This perspective is particularly relevant in exploring concepts like gender and sexual diversity, which are socially constructed and contested in many societies. Qualitative research is well-suited to examine these complexities because it allows multiple interpretations of truth and meaning. Therefore, qualitative research, focusing on the possibility of multiple interpretations of "truth(s)", is well-suited to explore these complexities. Some participants in the study highlight that gender and sexual diversity have always existed in society. As such, labelling gender and sexual diversity as "un-African", a standard view in many African societies, is a denial of a reality that exists within those societies. The existence of even one expression of gender and sexual diversity challenges the belief that such diversity does not exist. The denial of gender and sexual diversity, despite its long-standing presence, calls for a research approach that can critically examine the creation of meaning around reality, as noted by Jäger and Maier (2014:7).

> “We may therefore say that reality is meaningful, that reality exists in the way it does, only insofar as it is assigned meaning by people, who are themselves entangled into and constituted by discourses. If people no longer assign the same meaning to an object, the object changes or loses its meaning. This meaning may then be reconstructed as a former meaning mixed with others or has ceased to be valid. Even if we just watch the night sky and see constellations of stars there, we see them as a result of a discourse.

> We see the constellations because we have learned to see them. To assign meaning is not a noncommittal, merely symbolic act…"

Queer theory, as articulated by Weston (1991) and others, serves as a critical framework for challenging and re-evaluating socio-political, historical, and cultural norms around sex, gender, sexuality and power. It guides qualitative research by "queering" everyday experiences and deconstructing rigid binary categories such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual, which are socially constructed and often oppressive (Browne & Nash, 2010; Rankin & Beemyn, 2011). Rather than prescribing specific methods, queer theory informs the entire research process – from question formulation to data interpretation – emphasising the fluidity and ongoing negotiation of identities. It critiques heteronormativity and centres marginalised LGBTQ+ voices, exposing power dynamics that sustain dominant norms (Hertz & Nelson, 1998; Kennedy & Davis, 1993). In practice, queer theory enables qualitative research to adopt dynamic approaches such as longitudinal studies and narrative analysis, capturing evolving identities and experiences (Foucault, 1978). It promotes reflexivity and socially just methodologies that prioritise marginalised perspectives and disrupt conventional assumptions (Springgay & Freedman, 2013).

4.3 Research goals and objectives

The main goal of this study is to obtain an understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion and communities. Its objective is to determine how the teachings and interpretations of isiZulu religious leaders have influenced the understanding and acceptance/rejection of diverse genders and sexual identities and determine the main influences contributing to the construction of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion.

The method employed to achieve these goals was a semi-structured format that enabled a dialogue exchange, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes, and comments. This method enables the collection of open-ended data, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on the subject matter (Dejonckhere & Vaughn, 2018:1), thus extending beyond merely obtaining responses. At the same time, it prioritises understanding the participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences (De Vos, Strydom, Fouch & Delport, 2011:293).

4.4 Sampling method

Purposeful sampling is a commonly used technique in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich cases, ensuring the most effective use of limited resources (Patton,

2002). Utilising purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is a technique in which researchers deliberately select participant's specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Palinkas, 2012:116; Nikolopoulou, 2022).

Purposeful sampling involves choosing individuals or groups with extensive knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Purposeful sampling was employed for this research due to the specific focus of the study. This approach enabled the researcher to select participants who would contribute valuable, reliable, and relevant information pertinent to the research, such as AmaZulu, who possess extensive knowledge of the isiZulu rural life and ancestral belief systems. Purposive sampling, which is typically used to focus on characteristics of a population of interest, best enabled the research to answer the research questions. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique relies on the judgment of the researcher when selecting participants for the study. Usually, the sample being investigated is relatively small, as in the current study, especially when compared with probability sampling techniques (De Vos et al., 2005).

This study intentionally selected participants who are custodians and observers of isiZulu religious rites and practices, specifically, isiZulu religious elders, *izangoma* (traditional healer), and *izinyanga* (traditional healer), to gain an in-depth understanding of the isiZulu religious communities. Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for this study, as it allowed for the inclusion of participants who possess an informed understanding of the research topic and could meaningfully contribute to the discussion (Shahneen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019). This approach is also advantageous in centring voices that are often marginalised or silenced, such as isiZulu religious elders in same-sex relationships or gender-queer practitioners (Khuzwayo-Magwaza, 2012:12).

The study was conducted in the Umlazi A section of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), a large township in South Africa that was established in the 1960s, during apartheid, to house Black South Africans. It became a significant settlement, representing resilience and unity for its residents (Hunter, 2019). As the researcher, I grew up there and this enabled me to build a relationship of trust and familiarity with the participants. Through the purposeful sampling method, this study drew on the interviews carried out with nine participants (age between 34 to 60) who were purposefully selected for their expertise and active participation in isiZulu religious practices, rituals and values.

Recruitment was focused on isiZulu religious practitioners and elders residing in or near Durban (eThekwini, KwaZulu-Natal). This research utilised one-on-one interviews, a qualitative technique, to elicit rich, in-depth data.

The study included participants who were over 18 years of age, encompassing those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual as well as those who identify as LGBTIAQ. This knowledgeable group included religious elders, traditional healers, and engaged community members within the isiZulu religious sphere, who are from the A section of Umlazi. Most identified as cisgender, with five females and three males. Concerning their family status, five were married with children, and three were single parents. Importantly, all nine participants were born in KwaZulu-Natal and later migrated to Umlazi A section in pursuit of employment opportunities and improved living conditions for themselves and their children, bringing a deep and comprehensive understanding of isiZulu customs and traditional religious practices.

4.5 Methodology and data collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews as a primary research methods to gather data for this study. It is a form of informal conversation centred around pre-determined topics, allowing respondents to freely express their opinions and views (George, 2022). This method is beneficial when researchers aim to collect information about an individual's lived experiences, such as the implementation of gender and sexual diversity policies in education. A key advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they facilitate the collection of detailed insights, including the underlying causes of a phenomenon and its specific emotions (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016).

The following process characterises the semi-structured interview:

- The interviewer and participants engage in a formal interview.
- The interviewer develops and uses an 'interview guide'. This is a list of questions and topics, in a particular order, that need to be covered during the conversation.
- The interviewer follows the guide but can follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide when s/he feels that this is appropriate.

Bernard (1988) suggests that semi-structured interviews are particularly suited for situations where the researcher has only one chance to interview a participant or when multiple interviewers are deployed to gather data. The interview guide offers clear instructions for the interview process, ensuring reliable and comparable qualitative data. By using open-ended questions and focusing on key themes, the guide helps prevent the interviewer from deviating

from the planned structure. At the same time, it allows for discovering new perspectives and insights on the explored topic. Semi-structured interviews are typically preceded by observation and informal and unstructured interviews, which help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the theme. This process is considered essential for formulating relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions. However, this was unnecessary for the current study, as the literature review provided sufficient information to identify the key questions that addressed the problem statement (De Vos, Strydom, Schulze & Patel, 2005).

Some notable benefits of semi-structured interviews include the advantage of having prepared questions in advance, which allows the researcher to be well-prepared and appear knowledgeable. Additionally, they give participants the freedom to share their views on their own terms, yielding reliable and comparable qualitative data (De Vos et al., 2005). Within a qualitative research design, the interviews allowed the researcher to explore the understanding of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religious practices and among the communities. One of the main advantages of semi-structured interviews is the ability to prepare questions in advance, allowing the researcher to be well-prepared and appear knowledgeable during the interview. These interviews also allow participants to share their views on their own terms, resulting in reliable and comparable qualitative data (De Vos et al., 2005).

Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom, according to participant preference and availability. All virtual interviews were recorded on Zoom, while in-person interviews were captured using recording software. These recordings are securely stored on Dropbox, protected by a password accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Importantly, interviews were conducted in isiZulu, the participants' home language, to facilitate authentic and uninhibited expression.

The questions asked are as follows:

1. How does the isiZulu religion traditionally view and define gender and sexuality?
2. What have been the main influences contributing to the constructions of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion?
3. How have the teachings and interpretations of isiZulu religious leaders influenced the understanding and acceptance/rejection of diverse gender and sexual identities?
4. In what ways does the isiZulu religion acknowledge or accommodate non-binary or transgender identities?
5. What is your take on the argument that homosexuality is “un-African"? Do you believe

that same-sex relationships and marriages existed in the 1960s within the isiZulu religion?

These questions aimed to explore diverse interpretations of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion across various communities, to assess the possibility of a queer interpretation of the isiZulu religious views on gender and sexuality, and to deepen the understanding of gender with the intention to bring about inclusivity within IsiZulu communities. The semi-structured interview format allowed participants to speak openly and share their insights.

Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to understanding gender and sexuality among the isiZulu religious communities and their impact on the LGBTQIA+ community. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The research adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving vulnerable populations, including LGBTQ individuals.

4.6 Validity and reliability

The LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and other identities) community faces unique challenges related to discrimination, stigma, and hate crimes, which have led to many suicides and murders. This research paper will be Queering the understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion in Durban, KwaZulu- Natal. This research paper intends to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews, interviewing the IsiZulu religious leaders to gain their understanding of gender constructs and sexuality and how the religion understands and addresses the LGBTQ community.

As an isiZulu cis-gendered young woman, queer theory has provided a deep cultural understanding and access to isiZulu communities but also demanded reflexivity about the privileges and assumptions I might have about the positionality of LGBTQ individuals in isiZulu religion and community, especially regarding heteronormativity and patriarchy. Furthermore, this theoretical lens is particularly vital in African contexts, where queer identities navigate complex intersections of cultural, political, and religious forces that often reinforce heteronormativity and binary gender regimes.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Religion, Philosophy & Classics Research Ethics Committee. Upon receiving the Ethical Clearance

Certificate, all participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the nature and purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

As a cisgender isiZulu young woman researcher, I had to be careful of the terms and phrases I used when speaking or referring to queer individuals; I had to educate myself and be vigilant and respectful. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained when data was collected by assigning pseudonyms to all participants throughout the research process, except for my records. Before each interview, participants were asked whether they preferred to use their real names or pseudonyms for identification purposes. All participants agreed to use their real isiZulu names. Participants' preferences were respected, and the interviews proceeded smoothly. Participants were also allowed to use the language they felt most comfortable with for expressing themselves. After the interviews, participants were given access to their transcripts to ensure they were accurately transcribed and represented. The research data is securely stored electronically on Dropbox for five years, after which it will be disposed of.

4.8 Data analysis

The rich interview data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, a method, as Neuman (2014) describes, that seeks to illuminate underlying themes by discerning patterns and relationships within qualitative information. The journey into the data commences with the researcher's comprehensive engagement through repeated auditory and textual review of the transcripts (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This deep immersion fosters an intimate understanding of the data's scope and detail. From this familiarity, initial codes representing salient and significant data elements begin to surface (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Neuman's (2014) guidance, these codes are organised into meaningful categories, paving the way for articulating overarching themes through identifying connections between codes, sub-themes, and the broader thematic structures (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this study, this was a cyclical process of examination and refinement, ultimately yielding six principal themes, each supported by associated sub-themes and their constituent codes. The coding approach was inductive, allowing the themes to arise organically from the patterns observed within the data.

4.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presented the qualitative methodology employed in the study, comprising semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling to intricately examine the

intersections of gender, sexuality, and tradition within isiZulu religious communities. By centring the narratives of isiZulu religious elders and practitioners, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, the research reveals a plurality of perspectives that contest dominant cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal paradigms. The researcher's insider positionality enriches the analysis while transparently acknowledging the challenges inherent in navigating the coexistence of traditional customs and contemporary queer experiences. This study foregrounds the tensions between enduring cultural beliefs and the lived realities of marginalised individuals, underscoring the critical need for ongoing dialogue, education, and inclusivity.

Methodologically anchored in queer theory and qualitative inquiry, the research provides a robust framework for interrogating the construction and contestation of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religious contexts. The purposive sampling strategy and semi-structured interviews ensured the inclusion of participants with profound knowledge and lived experience, yielding nuanced and contextually grounded insights. Queer theory facilitates a critical departure from Western-centric binaries, allowing the study to explore both the oppressive and emancipatory dimensions of indigenous beliefs and practices. This theoretical lens not only challenges prevailing heteronormative and patriarchal norms but also validates diverse gender and sexual identities historically present within isiZulu communities.

The qualitative paradigm's emphasis on capturing phenomena in their natural contexts and recognising multiple, coexisting truths is particularly suited to exploring the complex realities of gender and sexual diversity. Through in-depth, open-ended interviews, the study sought to elucidates how isiZulu religious teachings, colonial legacies, and contemporary social dynamics converge to shape both the acceptance and marginalization of LGBTIAQ individuals. This methodology aimed to foster dialogue, challenge stigma, and promote inclusivity within isiZulu religious communities. By centring marginalised voices and critically examining the social construction of gender and sexuality, the research contributes to a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of human diversity in African contexts.

The thematic analysis applied in this study offers a rigorous and systematic approach to interpreting the rich qualitative data. Significant data elements were identified, coded, and organised into meaningful categories and overarching themes through repeated, immersive engagement with the transcripts. This inductive, iterative process ensured that themes emerged organically from the data, authentically reflecting participants' perspectives and experiences. The six principal themes, supported by sub-themes and codes, provide a comprehensive

framework for understanding the intricate patterns and relationships within the data, establishing a solid foundation for subsequent interpretation and scholarly discussion.

Chapter 5 – Findings and data analyses

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents data from interviews conducted to investigate understandings of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion and communities. The data generated from the interviews have been divided into two themes: a) The role that gender plays in upholding isiZulu identity, well-being, and society, and: b) It is hidden but it exists: Gender and sexuality that falls outside of heterosexual norms. These themes explore how isiZulu gender constructions are shaped and how these constructions influence understandings of gender and sexuality among isiZulu speakers.

This section examines the isiZulu gender constructions, including traditional rites and customs that contribute to influencing the understanding of gender and sexuality among isiZulu communities. These rituals and customs are highly recognised and widely respected. Butler's (1994) concept of performance highlights why young individuals in the isiZulu religion are encouraged to shadow their elders, taking these constructed ideas and giving them life (natural normativity within the community), thereby later being able to take care of the household and successfully herd the cattle. These rituals are ways in which gender is constructed through the performance of gender; therefore, they are closely tied to the spiritual and political significance of gender.

5.1.1 Gender and patriarchy

Eight of the nine participants believe that gender roles are vital. Participant 4 stated that **“**Gender roles play a significant role and are very important to keep everyone in check", and further stated that, “men have the responsibility to provide for and protect their family, and women are expected to keep the household warm and have kids, and the kids are expected to help and listen to the parents". Judith Butler's (1994) concept of performativity has played a crucial role in exploring the construction of gender and how boys and girls express their gendered subjectivities. According to Butler (1994), performativity refers to "that aspect of discourse that can produce what it names, this production always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation". She further explains that performativity "is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established" (1994:33). IsiZulu gender roles are traditionally distinct and largely patriarchal, with men and women assigned specific duties and societal expectations. Men are primarily seen as providers and protectors, socialised to be intelligent in conflict resolution and skilled in resolving societal disputes (Zondi, 2010;

Mkhize, 2010). Participant 6 explained that “Growing up in the rural area, gender roles guided every move we made at home. I was taught that there are things that I can do and cannot do because of my gender. I shadowed my Mother and older sister." Participant 9 stated that as young boys in his family, male elders would train and teach them how to slaughter chickens, goats, and cows; this is a mandatory skill to possess as a man.

Connell (1994) states that a key feature of patriarchy is the notion of traditional gender roles because traditional gender roles cast men as strong, decisive, rational and protective, while women are seen as emotional, irrational, weak, nurturing and submissive. Patriarchy is a social and ideological construct that considers men as superior to women (Rawat, 2014). Walby (1990) describes patriarchy as a social system in which men hold authority over women, children and property. Generally, gender inequality, sexism and male domination, inter alia, are characteristics of a patriarchal society (Smith, 1990; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). Consequently, these characteristics have greatly impacted various institutions, including marriage and family (Makama, 2013). Patriarchy implies that authority is vested in the male as head of the family. This means that he oversees the household's ownership and earnings, and controls the household's preferences for work, leisure and the overall affairs of the family (Heath & Ciscel, 1998).

However, different cultures have different degrees of significance in such issues (Ebert, 1988). A patriarchal society recognises male dominance and superiority over females, and the majority of isiZulu households are highly patriarchal; the grandfathers, fathers, and uncles have the loudest and final voice. Participant 5 stated that her grandfather chased and disowned his son because of his sexuality; no one was able to question him because he was the head of the household. Participant 9 explicitly expressed that having a bisexual person in the family tarnishes the family name and brings shame to it. Applying queer theory to this paragraph highlights how patriarchal power structures within isiZulu religion and communities have enforced rigid heteronormative norms that marginalise and stigmatise non-heterosexual identities. Participant 5 demonstrated the power dynamics within her family, which revealed how some individuals are subjected to violence and exclusion, with dissent silenced by patriarchal power.

In isiZulu households and communities, the patriarchal influence is deeply entrenched. Men have the final say and make all significant decisions, from naming a child at birth to approving a marriage proposal. Participant 4 shared that when she came of age, her father refused to perform the uMemulo (coming of age) ceremony. A year later, when her father passed away,

there was no one to authorise the ceremony, and her mother had to seek assistance from her uncles. Patriarchy is a system of social stratification and differentiation based on gender, and it sets the parameters for women's inequalities, placing constraints on the roles and activities of women (Makama, 2013; Salaam, 2003). Interestingly, some participants also believe domestic duties are meant for women, not men. This belief can be attributed to the age-long patriarchal culture that is prevalent in KwaZulu-Natal.

The majority of the participants argued that patriarchal households have order and peace because the man makes all the decisions, and “there is no back and forth” (Participant 1). A key feature of patriarchy is the notion of traditional gender roles. As mentioned above, traditionally gender roles cast men as strong, decisive, rational and protective, while women are seen as emotional, irrational, weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles are restrictive for both men and women, as it is degrading for a man to have some female characteristics and unattractive for a woman to have some male characteristics. Hoque (2021) argues that men in a patriarchal society have greater access to resources and enjoy greater discretionary power and professional prestige. They are considered skilled and capable and enjoy superior personal characteristics, wisdom, knowledge and intelligence compared to their female counterparts. Hussein Smith (2025) argues that transforming traditional norms that perpetuate patriarchal structures is critical for achieving gender equality and empowering women across all sectors of society. Patriarchy, characterised by deeply ingrained gender roles and power imbalances, continues to shape societal expectations, limit women's access to opportunities, and restrict their participation in leadership, education and decision-making. Traditional gender roles and patriarchal values deeply influence society's thinking and behaviour.

The isiZulu communities are no different. Traditional leaders, elders and traditional healers hold significant influence over the entire community. When asked about patriarchal influence, Participant 7 answered, "My father and uncles ensured that they passed down family traditions and rituals to us so that we can keep them alive. My father was not around as much, but my uncles ensured that the right people influenced us.” A King highly influenced other communities. "We grew up in the older days, only a few people influenced our community, and that person was the King, King Dingiswayo *NamaButho* (Zulu warriors) influenced men, and men applied those principles and rules into the households" (Participant 4). The patriarchal values in the isiZulu communities have also extended to broader societal expectations. Qui (2023) explains that there is a clear division of labour between male and female householders.

The participant findings demonstrate that men are responsible for heavy physical work in production and for interacting with the outside world. At the same time, women are responsible for household chores, caring for the elderly, raising children, managing livestock, and engaging in handicrafts. Those traditional thoughts have shaped traditional gender roles and patriarchal values. A woman's role is often regarded as secondary to men's, primarily one of support and assistance. This dynamic has fostered male chauvinism and the recurrent depiction of women in passive roles within everyday societal interactions. Women are typically responsible for household management but are often excluded from critical decision-making processes. Therefore this research argues that these patriarchal influences have left no room for gender diversity, and have led to hate crimes in most isiZulu religious communities. A queer lens demonstrates how traditional gender roles within the isiZulu community are controlled and driven by male authority, leaving no room for gender diversity. This is visible through the strict division of labour , where men work publicly and women work domestically, which is unfair and overly restrictive.

These traditional rites are essential in guiding young men and women into adulthood. For women, key expectations include purity, respect, fertility, marriage, and the preservation of family and national well-being. Women's gender identity is linked to the maintenance of patriarchal power and privilege, which forms the background of these important rites *uMkhosi womuhlanga* (reed dance), virginity testing, and *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony); these are performed in the presence of men who are the heads of the households. The repeated ideas are preserved, erasing or ignoring other gender roles that exist, such as men performing domestic chores like cooking and cleaning when away from home with the cattle, and men performing domestic chores related to cattle. Is that performance ignored?

Patriarchy remains a deeply entrenched system within isiZulu households and communities, shaping gender relations through male dominance, authority, and traditional gender roles. This social structure vests decision-making power primarily in men, reinforcing male superiority and limiting women's participation in leadership, education and critical family decisions. The perpetuation of these norms, upheld by family elders, traditional leaders, and cultural rituals, sustains gender inequalities and restricts women to supportive, domestic roles. While some participants perceive patriarchal order as a source of family stability, these rigid roles also marginalise women and suppress gender diversity, contributing to discrimination and social exclusion, including hate crimes against those who do not conform to established norms. Transforming these patriarchal values is essential for promoting gender equality and

empowering women within isiZulu society and beyond.

5.1.2 Sexuality within the isiZulu communities

The majority of participants, 7 out of 9, linked their understanding of isiZulu sexualities to religious ceremonies, such as *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (the reed dance), *ukuhlolwa* (virginity testing), *uMemulo* (coming-of-age for young unmarried girls), *ukwelusa* (cattel herding), and umshado (marriage). These rites not only define gender roles but also reinforce a sense of belonging within the community, linking participants to a shared cultural heritage. Beyond personal identity, these practices uphold political and social well-being by ensuring cohesion, respect for cultural authority, and continuity of social norms. Understanding the significance of these rituals provides essential context for the diverse perspectives shared by participants.

The 7 participants outlined that the isiZulu traditional rites and customs are deeply woven into the social and spiritual fabric of isiZulu communities, serving to mark key life stages and reinforce collective values. From a queer theoretical perspective informed by African scholars such as Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2012) and Matebeni (2017), these rites can be understood not only as practices that guide young girls and boys toward adulthood and normative gender roles into womanhood and manhood, but also as a space where dominant heteronormative ideas are both reinforced and challenged. As Participant 8 noted, "African sexualities are linked with traditional customs, procreation, and giving life" reflecting the centrality of reproductive expectations. However, Sithole's (2019) work challenges this framing by revealing how African sexualities encompass a multiplicity of desires and identities beyond procreation and binary gender roles, highlighting the presence of queer identities within indigenous contexts. Similarly, Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2021) argues that while these rites uphold communal cohesion through prescribed roles related to family, love, and marriage. As Participant 5 stated, they simultaneously create spaces where alternative sexualities can resist normative constraints embedded in African traditionality. Therefore, it can be argued that these rituals function both to maintain societal order and subtly accommodate gender and sexual diversity within the isiZulu communities.

From the young age of 9, girls are expected to attend *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance). This ceremony carries religious, traditional, and political significance. Hosted within the homestead of the isiZulu King, *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance), marries together religious rites that centre fertility and the flourishing of the amaZulu nation together with rites of passage that focus on celebrating and emphasising the sexual purity, fertility and vitality of young isiZulu

virgin maidens as part of their preparation and transition into adult womanhood (Nkosi, 2015:6), performed under the oversight of the King and his royal court and generals. Nkosi (2019:7) argues that *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance) allows young maidens to participate in an event that fosters national pride and a sense of belonging, offering them immense emotional gratification for maintaining their purity.

Nkosi (2019:7) further demonstrates how *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance) provides a platform that celebrates the maiden's purity in a positive light, showcasing that they are proud of their bodies. At the same time, they are being prepared for womanhood, a sentiment echoed by Participant 1: "UMkhosi woMhlanga is about purity, taking pride in yourself, and respecting your family name."This sense of pride in self and family is also significant for isiZulu national identity, as highlighted by Nkosi (2019:10) " where (*uMkhosi woMhlanga*) at the same time gives the King and the nation a spectacle to marvel at and motivating the young maidens through words and joyfulness". The above statement by Nkosi (2019) reveals how power is exercised through visibility and surveillance, controlling young women's bodies while promoting dominant nationalist and patriarchal agendas, which queer theory critiques as limiting diverse expressions of gender and sexuality.

According to the Zulu myth, if the young maiden carrying the reed is no longer a virgin, the reed breaks, thus embarrassing the maiden in public (Bennet, Mills & Munnick, 2010; Nkosi, 2013; Maytham-Bailey, 2014). The power dynamics are deeply embedded in surveillance and public shaming, which functions as a form of social control, where female bodies are subjected to public scrutiny and potential embarrassment, reinforcing structures that privilege heteronormativity and reproductive expectations. The young maidens are tested during the reed dance. Virginity testing is a practice that is also linked with traditional rites because it validates that the young maidens are still pure. Virginity testing varies in form across the African continent. It holds particular significance among the Nguni cultural groups of South Africa, where its execution differs across diverse societies, reflecting the spectrum of sexual attitudes (Phiri et al., 2003).

Critics such as Phiri, Chasele and Rakubu (2019) often frame the practice as a violation, specifically highlighting the physical examination of young girls' genitalia by women as a potential act of sexual harassment and abuse. Countering this perspective, Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2012) posits that virginity testing, within its traditional context, was not inherently abusive, rendering contemporary accusations potentially misinformed. Furthermore, Tong (2010) argues that the prevalent discourse surrounding this practice, often framed outside of an

African indigenous framework, lacks relevance and resonance within African epistemological traditions. Proponents, conversely, assert that the rejection of this ritual demonstrates a lack of understanding regarding its positive impacts on practitioners and initiates, often overlooking the voluntary participation of young girls. Zulu communities, including those in urban settings like *Kwa-Mashu* and *uMlazi*, where its popularity is growing, value the practice as a proactive strategy against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (Scorgie, 2002). The participants in this research project have marked this practice as one of the important rites of preserving purity for young women. Participant 1 stated that "Attending *uMkhosi woMhlanga* has moulded me for the better, virginity testing saved me from falling pregnant while studying, and it has made my parents proud."

A queer theory analysis reveals that virginity testing and the reed dance operate as powerful tools or practices that regulate young women's sexuality within the isiZulu religion and communities. These practices centre on controlling young women's bodies by publicly verifying their purity through the practice of virginity testing and attending the reed dance. *UMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance) acts as a construction of womanhood as young maidens are instructed to maintain their sexual purity while obeying traditional expectations. Therefore, a queer lens allows the study to make visible the construction of gender, as young girls are expected to attend *uMkhosi womhlanga* (reed dance) where virginity testing takes place, which later progresses to *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony). The ideal woman, according to this gender construction, is the one who maintains her virginity until marriage and upholds her family and community honour; therefore, where does this practice leave the girls who do not attend *uMkhosi woMhlanga?* Are they considered less of a maiden/woman? These rites construct an image of womanhood that is defined by sexual restraint.

Umemulo is also known as a coming-of-age rite for young girls/women (Magwaza, 1993:7). It is understood as an affirmation and celebration of the reward for the young maiden for maintaining her purity. Participant 7, when asked about their understanding of African sexuality, stated, "When I was 21, my parents performed *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony), for me to welcome me into womanhood; therefore, I have concluded that our sexualities are interconnected with purity and marriage for both genders." Magwaza (1993) and Mntambo (2020) have explained in detail the traditional practices of Africans, particularly *uMemulo.* They described the ritual process and the traditional requirements of the ceremony. Magwaza (1993:5) has focused on how orality has shaped the ritual and cultural expressions within the IsiZulu traditional ceremonies. Within *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony), she examines the

contribution of the oral tradition and its implications in how the ritual is performed and how ideas of womanhood are understood.

A queer analysis of the *uMemulo* also reveals complex power dynamics centred on regulating young women's bodies and identities within isiZulu society. However, it not only controls young females but also their mothers, as they have to get permission from the father or uncle to perform the ritual. According to isiZulu beliefs, *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony), is not performed without a male figure present to oversee the entire ceremony, as they play a significant role in slaughtering the cow and appealing to the ancestors. The practice, while celebrating the young woman's transition to adulthood, reinforces heteronormative, binary gender roles through linking womanhood with purity, respect, fertility, and marriage. Londiwe Mntambo (2020:10) states that a girl who wishes to have *ukwemula/umemulo* (coming of age ceremony), is expected to comply with the ideals of "good behaviour" (*ukuziphatha* kahle). Being considered a good Zulu woman means demonstrating and living out *ukuhlonipha* (being respectful). Upholding one's sexual purity, virginity, as well as being a young woman of respect or good behaviour in maintaining and sustaining the household, is behaviour that indicates the maturity and marriage ability of a young woman (Mntambo, 2020).

Therefore, it can be argued that the centre of power lies in the religious beliefs, cultural traditions, family structures, and religious political frameworks that uphold these rites, thereby shaping women's subjectivities and maintaining patriarchal control. Matebeni (2015) critiques such rites for enforcing normative sexualities by valorising virginity and marriage as markers of a "good woman" effectively marginalising queer, non-binary, or non-conforming identities and desires. This regulation operates through social surveillance, where compliance with ideals of ukuziphatha kahle ("good behaviour") and ukuhlonipha (respect) becomes a performative act, ensuring women's allegiance to heteropatriarchal norms. As *uMemulo*, it is not only a celebration of the young woman and the honour she brings to her family, but it is also performed with the expectation of marriage; it signifies readiness to get married and start your own family.

As Participant 2 stated, "Within our communities back in Eshowe, our sexualities are highly linked to our traditional rituals; therefore, young girls are expected to attend the reed dance, which translates into marriage, and men are expected to shadow their father and assist with cattle herding." Participant 1 further confirmed, "The understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion is highly related to binary customs; therefore, when you think about African sexuality, you think about marriage and purity, which only involves men and women." From the data and the literature on the subject of these rites of passage, religious rites of coming

of age uphold, celebrate, and inscribe virginity, fertility, and purity as roles and expectations onto young girls and women and, by implication, older women. These roles are developed in such a way that they are also intrinsically linked to the very fabric of isiZulu identity and to the political well-being and vibrancy of the amaZulu people, which is of paramount importance in upholding the honour of the family and, by extension, the nation. Key expectations of womanhood, therefore, are purity, respect, fertility, marriage, and the preservation of the well-being of the family and nation.

In conclusion, the data above shows that women's gender identity and sexuality are inevitably intertwined with the maintenance of patriarchal power and privilege, which forms the background of both these important rituals. The celebration of *uMkhosi woMhlanga* is performed in the presence and the court of the isiZulu King, a sign of the power and vitality of AmaZulu, and the rite of *uMemulo* in honour of the family/home of whom the father and uncles are the head. A queer lens, therefore, questions the privilege of existence in preserving these traditional customs. It can be argued that the gender constructions within the isiZulu religion are used as a vehicle to promote and maintain patriarchal practices. Men are remaining as the heads of household and are the only voices that matter.

5.1.3 Ukulusa: The family and manhood

The traditional rites for boys/young men are linked to *ukulusa* (herding of cattle), as the significance of cattle in isiZulu religious, spiritual, and cultural life holds deep meaning. Cattle are not only indicators of the material wealth and status of a family but are also critical spiritual bonds that link the living members of the Zulu with amadlozi their ancestors/ the departed) The *amadlozi* are thus constantly present, aware of, and involved in the lives of the living (Berglund, 1976; Oosthuizen, 1996). To be schooled in the care of the family herd, therefore, is not only to care for the family's wealth or prosperity, but more importantly, it is to be skilled in being the custodian of the family's history and future through maintaining the right relationship with the ancestors.

Ukulusa (herding the cattle) is traditionally a responsibility given to young boys from the age of six. They have to look after their father's herd by taking the cattle to pasture just after sunrise and bringing them back after sunset (Oosthuizen, 1996). Participant 2 stated that "*Izinkomo* (cattle) are very important, because they generate economic assets, and the cattle symbolise the family's wealth." The traditional Zulu homestead consists of houses grouped around the cattle kraal, or byre, which is considered the spiritual and ritual centre of the home. The family herd

is an integral and highly significant component of the household (Dhlomo, 1945). It is also important to note that some cattle are used as gifts to the bride's father; therefore, they must be well-maintained.

While herding, they ensure the cattle do not enter anyone's fields, keep them in the open, take them to drink water, and protect them from theft or attack. This role teaches boys responsibility and is part of their upbringing into manhood. Participant 3 also stated that "African sexualities are mostly connected to binary individuals; as young boys, our fathers took us to the initiation ceremony, which marks the transition from boyhood to manhood. That experience moulded me into the man I am today." This shows that young men are responsible and can be trusted to grow and maintain the household (Grant, 1994). They also learn stick fighting and how to handle a knobkerrie as part of their training. A queer lens reveals that from a young age, boys are entrusted with the most valuable assets of the family, as the aim is to cultivate responsible men who will lead the family in the right direction, while being reliable and fulfilling their family duties. However, it is essential to note that the domestic chores men perform while away with the cattle, such as cleaning and cooking, are often overlooked when discussing men's duties and responsibilities within isiZulu communities. Why are these responsibilities not mentioned?

5.1.4 Between purity and cattle

The key takeaways from the participants' view and understanding of African sexualities demonstrated that the isiZulu traditional rites/customs are put in place to preserve the health of the nation, by encouraging girls from a young age to attend *uMkhosi woMhlanga*. This aims to maintain and preserve young girls' purity by abstaining from sex. Participation does not stop at the age of 16 but goes to 21 years old, when one is expected to marry. The participant's view aligns with that of Nkosi (2019) and Magwaza (1993).

As the above shows, these gender constructions and roles are protected through these rites/customs that are significantly recognised and respected by the majority of the community, and do not protect or consider queer individuals. These rites/customs automatically place women who confirm and attend them in a higher position than an individual who does not. What does this mean for a young queer isiZulu woman who does not attend *uMkhosi* woMhlanga? Does this mean that the isiZulu women only have value when they can be of value to the community, in terms of fertility and maintaining a household, or do women have value because they are people? What happens to women who date women, women who do not date,

single mothers, and those who refuse to get married because of the violence? These ideas have become so much a part of the isiZulu culture that they can prevent conversations about gender diversity. The same argument can be applied to young boys, as they are also expected to shadow their uncles and fathers when heading the cattle, with the hope that they will one day take over and lead the household.

5.1.5 Oral history

When asked about the main influences that contribute to the construction of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion/communities, all the participants highlighted that oral traditions (family stories, songs, superstitions), such as word of mouth (passed down by the elders, mentors, and traditional healers (*iziyanga nabathandazi*), played a significant role in shaping their understanding of who and how they should be. Participant 1 stated, "My elders played a significant role in shaping the woman that I am today, at home, from my grandmother to my mother and aunts. Those women have positively influenced my life and encouraged me to maintain my purity. Also, my mentor, Mam Sonto, guided me into womanhood during our reed dance classes. While my mother was a strict parent and only believed in black and white, Mam Sonto taught me about practicing safe sex."

Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2021) states that gender and sexuality education remain taboo in many African communities, and this perspective is not easily changed. Discussions surrounding sexualities are often excluded from everyday social conversations. Participant 9 reported a lack of parental guidance on sex and sexuality, relying instead on school-based information. This resulted in fear and reluctance to ask questions about bodily changes, gender, and sexuality. He expressed a belief in adhering to traditional gender roles, specifically marrying and continuing the family lineage.

Oral tradition and history are significant aspects of African religion and culture. The isiZulu customs/rituals are passed down from the elders to the younger generation through stories, songs and examples. These traditions are not just religious principles, but also an integral part of our cultural identity, passed down through stories, myths, and tales (Magwaza, 1993:16). Oral traditions are a vital component of the Zulus' cultural heritage, expressed in various forms and expressions. Folklore is the primary source of these oral traditions, which persist, regardless of whether they are recorded in writing. It continues parallel to written records, often intermingling with them (Dundes, 1965; Turner, 2005). Oral communication in isiZulu has become the norm; Magwaza (1993) states that most isiZulu ceremonies/customs and rituals are

primarily oral. That they are "oral" means that they are handed down from one generation to the next through the oral channel. All interaction takes place in a face-to-face situation. Even with the ancestors, people maintain *babhekene nabaphansi ngqo*, meaning they face the ancestors directly but adopt a respectful attitude toward them (Magwaza, 1993).

Elders usually pass down the oral traditions; they are considered more experienced in the family or community and they are regarded as the storehouses of customs, having lived long. It is held that the one who has seen most and lived longest is a significant source of knowledge (Magwaza, 1993). Participant 5 stated,

> My grandfather was a father figure to me and my siblings; my dad passed away when I was 10 years old. Therefore, he played that role for me; all the knowledge his parents had passed on to him was passed on to his grandkids. My family consulted many traditional healers, seeking guidance and help from them. As I grew older, I would also consult them here and there. UBaba Ndlangamadla has and still plays a significant role in my life. He helped protect my house when I bought it and has been a good influence ever since, ensuring that I do not forget our customs and ways of life as a Zulu Man.

Participant 6 shared that Gogo Tshangase (a traditional healer) played a significant role in moulding the person that I am today. Through her/guidance, I have succeeded in my calling." The belief in ancestors is often linked to the belief in the existence of a higher power, such as God. According to Vilakazi (1962), the Zulu people believe that "uMvelinqangi" should not be consulted directly. The *amadlozi* (ancestors) are regarded as the medium of communication between the living and uMvelinqangi (God). The belief in ancestors strongly controls the moral and social behaviour of the Zulu people. An intimate connection exists between the ancestors and the acts of their living descendants. Berglund (1975:197) indeed points out that the Zulu society comprises the survivors and the ancestors. The descendants cannot survive without the existence of their ancestors. The two are closely tied together, making the traditional healers the mediators.

Traditional healers (*izangoma*, *izinyaga*, *abathandazi*) play a vital role in healing physical, emotional, and spiritual illnesses by diagnosing and treating ailments believed to arise from spiritual imbalances, witchcraft, or ancestral displeasure. They use herbal medicines (*umuthi*) alongside spiritual practices, such as divination, often involving the reading of bones or entering trance states to communicate with ancestors and uncover the root causes of problems. *Izangoma* also perform important cultural rituals, including birth and death rites, cleansing

ceremonies, and protection rituals, which help maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual world. Beyond their healing functions, they serve as custodians of cultural knowledge and the social order, guiding their communities through spiritual and social challenges (Vilakazi, 1962; Ngubeni, 1977; Van Rensburg & Mans, 1982; Hadebe, 1986).

In conclusion, the data above shows that gender constructions are shaped by passed-down oral knowledge/traditions shared by generations. It also demonstrates that isiZulu elders and custodians are trusted with the information. Regarding gender construction and sexuality, Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2012) states that sex conversations are still taboo in many isiZulu religious households and communities, which should be reconsidered since these rituals aim to promote purity and virginity. Therefore, the findings of this research suggest that these rites should be used as a platform to educate young girls about safe sex, just like Mam Sonto was able to educate Participant 1 about practicing safe sex. The ideology of sex being impure can be restricted to safe sex, safe sex that can promote sexual health, and the use of condoms. Therefore, oral history shapes the ways gender is enacted to maintain traditional customs, include performative practices. The performativity discussed by Butler (1990) is highlighted by Participant 5 when he shadows his grandfather; therefore, the idea of manhood is performed, acted, and verbalised in the stories of his grandfather, and has been passed down to his generation. A queer lens queer queries what is passed down, including the assumption of power, of how it is enacted and maintained in oral history.

5.2 It is hidden, but it exists: gender and sexual expression that falls outside of heterosexual norms.

In the discussions that formed around the question of the perceived origin of homosexuality, 7 out of 9 participants argued that same-sex relationships have existed for centuries, and those who participated in those relationships have hidden it well because it is frowned upon. Participant 3 stated, “That lifestyle has always existed; by my house, there was an uncle that I was told as a kid to never go near because of how he carried himself; that uncle lived with another uncle." Participant 8 further explained why it was hidden, "People hide that side of their life because it is not accepted in the isiZulu communities, as it brings shame and disrespect into the family name."

African queer scholars and activists, such as Tamale (2011) and Epprecht (2019), have challenged colonial-era homophobia by highlighting pre-colonial acceptance of diverse sexualities and gender expressions, reclaiming indigenous knowledge to advocate for

LGBTQIA+ rights within African cultural contexts. These scholars argue that Christian missionaries came to Africa to disturb the gender diversity in Africa. The participants' thoughts and views align with the arguments made by scholars such as Tamale (2011) and Epprecht (2013) when they say that homosexuality has always existed in African countries; it was just hidden from the public. Participant 1 stated, "I believe that homosexuality has always been there; it is just that it was extremely hidden from the public; it was something that was always kept secret." Although all seven participants concur that homosexuality has historically existed in Africa, they each offer distinct explanations for why it remained concealed. In specific communities, it was kept hidden because it was considered shameful, damaging to the family's reputation, and lacked recognition or understanding. Consequently, it can be argued that isiZulu religious communities have received little to no education regarding gender diversity. The findings demonstrate that gender has never been a fixed phenomenon; however, it has been affected by Western influence. Additionally, queer theory has helped to uncover the silenced and erased history of African sexualities and gender diversity.

This colonial imposition led to the erasure and demonisation of many traditional practices, particularly those involving women's sexuality and non-heteronormative relationships, with long-lasting effects on African societies. Many African societies developed sophisticated approaches to sexuality that included initiation rites, community education, and traditional healing practices, all aimed at managing sexual and reproductive health holistically (Afya Nahaki, 2024). For instance, initiation ceremonies such as the *umemulo* (coming of age ceremony) and *ukucwala* (traditional Zulu male initiation) rites marked the transition to adulthood, teaching young people about sexuality, fertility, and social responsibilities within culturally appropriate frameworks. These rites were not merely about controlling behaviour but about preparing individuals to contribute meaningfully to family and community life. Historical evidence documents practices such as female-female marriages in over 40 African societies, where women could marry other women and assume social roles typically reserved for men (JSTOR Daily, 2021). Homosexual relationships were socially recognised and embedded within indigenous cultural and spiritual frameworks, challenging the colonial narrative that homosexuality was foreign or unnatural.

The arrival of Christian missionaries and colonial administrations radically disrupted these indigenous sexual systems. Missionaries condemned African sexual practices as sinful and sought to impose European moral codes, often criminalising and stigmatising behaviour hat had previously been accepted or even celebrated (Epprecht, 2013:59). This colonial imposition

led to the erasure and demonisation of many traditional practices, particularly those involving women's sexuality and non-heteronormative relationships, with long-lasting effects on African societies. African sexuality during the pre-colonial period was characterised by complex, culturally embedded practices that integrated sexuality with spirituality, community well-being, and social order. These practices were sophisticated and diverse, encompassing a wide range of sexual expressions and health management strategies. The colonial legacy of moral judgment and suppression has obscured this rich history, making it imperative to centre indigenous perspectives in contemporary discussions on African sexualities.

While the vast majority agreed that same-sex relationships have always existed in Africa, 2 participants strongly disagreed that such relations existed before Christianity came to Africa. Participant 2, when asked about the existence of same-sex relationships, stated, "I strongly believe that homosexuality is un-African; growing up in Eshowe, you could not see anything like that. Men behaved like proper men, and women acted like women, taking care of the household." Khuzwayo Mangwaza (2021) explains that the arrival of Europeans, particularly Christian missionaries, brought profound transformations across Africa and played a pivotal role in the continent's colonisation. Early discourses framed missionaries as benevolent agents spreading the Gospel and providing spiritual care primarily for European settlers in Africa. These missionaries introduced the concept of "civilisations" to their African congregations, promoting philosophies they believed would uplift Black lives by steering them away from indigenous knowledge, resources and beliefs toward a "better future" aligned with Christian salvation. It is important to note that the argument that homosexuality "came with Christianity" is less about the existence of same-sex relationships, which have long been part of African history, and more about the introduction and imposition of Christian moral codes that condemned such relationships, thereby shaping modern African views on homosexuality.

In conclusion, the7 participants believed that same-sex relationships have existed for centuries; Christian missionaries came to Africa and changed the way Africa was living diverse, free to engage with the same sex freely. These participants argue that Christian missionaries came and changed things, which led to the mistreatment of queer individuals in Africa. While the 2 participants argued that same-sex relationships existed, however were not popular, therefore the Christian missionaries actually promoted such relationships by speaking about them. The findings of this theme also demonstrate that Christian missionary and colonial moral codes have played a pivotal role in suppressing indigenous sexual and gender diversity across African societies, particularly among the isiZulu communities, whose cultures historically embraced

complex and diverse expressions of gender and sexuality (Epprecht, 2013; Tamale, 2011). These rich traditions and social roles were systematically erased through the imposition of European Christian values during colonialism and apartheid, which criminalised and stigmatised non-heteronormative practices (Khuzwayo Mangwaza, 2021). As a result, contemporary South African cultural identities around sexuality reflect a mixture combining indigenous traditions with deeply ingrained Christian-colonial moral frameworks (Epprecht, 2019).

Recognising this mixture is essential for a nuanced understanding of present-day views on homosexuality and gender diversity, as it reveals how colonial legacies continue to silence and transform indigenous knowledge systems. At the same time, this perspective highlights the importance of reclaiming and celebrating African queer histories and identities, while emphasising the need to Centre indigenous epistemologies in ongoing discussions on gender and sexuality. Scholars such as Rudwick and Ntuli (2008) have argued that same-sex relationship behaviours were known and, in some contexts, accepted in pre-colonial African societies, including the isiZulu communities. In summary, the majority of the isiZulu scholars recognise the existence of same-sex relationships historically and contemporarily within isiZulu religious communities. However, these relationships are often hidden or stigmatised due to social, cultural, and religious factors. The scholarship emphasises the need to understand these identities within their specific cultural and linguistic contexts rather than through imposed heteronormative frameworks. The pattern highlighted above shows that gender has never been fixed. However, it has been evolving, with the Western influence that affected the way gender and sexuality are now perceived among the isiZulu communities. Queer theory also supports the view that gender is not fixed, and it has helped this study to uncover the erased history about the diversity of gender in Africa.

5.2.1 Gender diversity

Although gender and sexuality have been closely linked to the isiZulu traditional rites/customs, the same cannot be said for gender diversity. Three participants believed that gender diversity is not visible nor understood within the isiZulu religious communities; these participants explained the following when asked about gender diversity: "Gender diversity is associated with shameful behaviour back at home; therefore, it does not exist. I doubt that it is even discussed in that manner." "I do not think that terminology exists within the isiZulu religious vocabulary, or rather, there is no fixed understanding of it." "Gender diversity only exists in movies and drama soapies. I do not think that such practice exists among our religion, even

though we are exposed to traditional leaders who claim to be bisexual." Therefore, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Netshandama (2013) argue that gender and sexual diversity have fallen into this category of the "other", resulting in discrimination, violence, and even death directed at gender and sexually non-conforming individuals.

Khuzwayo-Mangwaza (2012) argues that this intolerance can be traced back to the exclusionary policies of apartheid, which emphasised social differences rather than encouring the acceptance of diversity and promoting peaceful coexistence. Queer analysis shows that set gender and sexuality norms in isiZulu religious communities serve to exclude and silence gender-diverse individuals, by claiming that they do not have any role in the community, reflecting colonial and apartheid-era power structures. These norms enforce social control by labelling non-conforming identities as shameful or non-existent, leading to discrimination and violence. The dominant heteronormative framework maintains power by marginalising difference, but queer theory calls for challenging these imposed narratives to create acceptance for gender and sexual diversity.

South Africa stands out as a global leader in protecting rights related to gender and sexual orientation. Following apartheid, its constitution was transformed into one of the world's most progressive, explicitly banning discrimination based on gender, sex, and sexual orientation. This constitutional protection, enshrined in the Bill of Rights, is the foundation for all laws governing career development and workplace behaviour. Furthermore, key legislation, such as the Employment Equity Act (1998) and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000), reinforces these protections, ensuring a robust legal framework against workplace discrimination. Hence, some participants can advocate for the slow progression.

The other 3 participants believe that change is slowly progressing with time:"It is evolving", one said. Another shared, "A shift of understanding and slight visibility of diversity amongst some isiZulu communities, as well as the media, has played a major role in attempting to educate people. However, religiously and traditionally, it will take another generation to start". The third commented, "The understanding of diversity is slowly starting to progress, but generally, it does not exist because, in our communities, only men and women are recognised." Large-scale national surveys suggest that attitudes toward transgender people are improving and that people are increasingly perceiving discrimination against transgender people as problematic (Tate, 201; Flores, 2016).

Tintswalo-Thani (2016) argues that diversity in South Africa encompasses various racial groups, genders, sexualities, religions, ethnicities, and classes. Such diversity often leads to conflicts, primarily from ignorance of the "other" (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Netshandama, 2013). Three participants stated that gender diversity is only visible in the isiZulu modern societies and is mostly accepted and understood by the youth, "gender diversity is only visible and accepted in modern societies, in the rural areas one could even lose their life because of their sexuality." I believe that gender diversity is only visible amongst the youth and more likely in townships and suburbs, not so much in the deep rural areas." "In most communities, it is only the younger generations that are more likely to engage in conversations about gender fluidity and non-binary gender identities."

In conclusion, the recognition and understanding of gender diversity within traditional isiZulu religious contexts remain limited and often viewed negatively, particularly in rural areas where traditional norms are deeply rooted. While urban environments and younger generations show greater openness, widespread acceptance is still hindered by cultural unfamiliarity and the absence of established terminology within the isiZulu religious framework. Although modern influences, such as media and LGBTQ+ advocacy, have gradually created awareness, meaningful cultural integration of gender diversity will require time and continued education to bridge the gap between tradition and evolving social perspectives. Tate (2013) states that gender diversity refers to people with gender identities that do not coincide with their birth-assigned sex. Gender diversity refers to the recognition and inclusion of a range of gender identities beyond the traditional binary categories of male and female, as it encompasses people whose gender identities do not align with their sex assigned at birth, including transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming individuals (Harrison & Michelson, 2019).

The data collected show that within isiZulu religious communities, the term “gender diversity” is not widely used, as most AmaZulu individuals are familiar only with two genders. It can be argued that, this stems primarily from limited education, and in some cases, ignorance or lack of understanding. Therefore, this project advocates for education on gender diversity, and community members must be educated about gender diversity through traditional rites of passage. Gender diversity acknowledges that gender is a social construct, encompassing behaviours, identities, and expressions that vary across cultures and individuals, rather than being strictly biologically determined (Perez-Brumer, 2015). Stern and Rule (2012) state that this concept emphasises the importance of respecting and validating diverse gender experiences

and expressions that fall outside conventional norms. In organisational and social contexts, gender diversity often refers to the representation and inclusion of different genders, which has been linked to enhanced creativity, improved decision-making, and better performance. This current study argues that gender diversities have been erased and suppressed by convincing religious communities that same-sex relationships have never existed in Africa and by further prohibiting those relationships, through traditional rites and customs, which themselves reinforce only heteronormative relationships.

5.2.2 Views on non-binary and transgender identities

When questioned about how isiZulu religious communities recognise or accommodate non-binary identities, all participants agreed that the isiZulu religion and traditional customs do not acknowledge or make space for non-binary and transgender identities. Participant 2 stated, "Based on the teachings I received at home, our religion does not accommodate non-binary individuals such as lesbians and gays. From passed-down traditional generations to the teachings, the LGBTQ community is not included." While their reasons varied slightly, most participants emphasised that non-binary identities are irrelevant to preserving traditional customs. They argued that these individuals challenge the established gender roles and expectations assigned to men and women. Overall, participants linked the exclusion of non-binary identities to the deeply ingrained binary gender roles tied to spiritual and cultural practices. However, some communities show signs of gradual adaptation and acceptance.

An interesting analogy was made by Participant 9, who explained that during family ceremonies at home, such as weddings, *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony), and funerals, men are typically responsible for slaughtering and preparing the fire, while the women and young girls are in the kitchen cooking and cleaning. This participant questioned, “Where would a non-binary individual fit within this structure?” Participant 9 further argued that “Modern views are now clashing with traditional views, which is problematic because we are forced to find loopholes to accommodate everyone in the name of equality.”

Makhaye (2024) argues that religious and cultural arguments are frequently employed to deny the existence of homosexuality and to justify violence and discrimination against the LGBTQ community. In South Africa, one such argument is that homosexuality is "un-African", immoral, and contrary to African culture, religion, and laws (Awondo & Reid, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013). Due to hate crimes and related societal pressures, queer individuals are at an increased risk for adverse health and mental health outcomes. They are more likely to

experience suicidal thoughts, drop out of school, face homelessness, and engage in substance abuse (Garnets, Herek & Levy, 1990; see also Willis, 2004). These challenges can also lead to anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation (Jewkes et al., 2009; Ludsin & Vetten, 2005; Sadock et al., 2015).

All religious participants have clarified that their faiths do not accommodate non-binary identities. It was also interesting to analyse how some families and community members attempt to accommodate these individuals, often doing so secretly and in solidarity. Participant 1 stated that "Even though it does not fully accommodate, some communities and African churches have accommodated and acknowledged queer people within the religious space; I saw it with my cousin. We all knew her sexuality at Church, but she was never chased away."

5.3 Conclusion

Traditional isiZulu religion and communities generally do not accommodate non-binary and transgender identities, often lacking defined roles for these individuals within their cultural structures. This has led to stigma and rejection, with non-binary and transgender people frequently facing ignorance, marginalisation, and even being labelled as "demonic," as traditional beliefs are sometimes used to justify such exclusion. However, there are signs of emerging acceptance, particularly in urban areas like Emlazi, among younger generations, and within some African churches, indicating a potential shift in attitudes. This evolving dynamic highlights an apparent tension between modern understandings of gender diversity and traditional isiZulu norms, highlighting the need to find ways to reconcile these differing perspectives. It can be argued that homophobic views, such as those expressed by former South African President Jacob Zuma, have shaped public opinion, portraying homosexual behaviour as “un-African” and “unnatural”. In 2006, Zuma strongly associated heterosexuality with African values and publicly condemned homosexual sexual behaviour as "a disgrace to the nation and God" (Mail and Guardian, 2006, 26 September, cited in Beresford, Schneider, Sember, 2020). Adding support to this perspective, various religious and community leaders in South Africa argue that God and the ancestors oppose *Ubutabane* (homosexuality), claiming that it is immoral and un-African.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how gender and sexuality are understood and constructed within isiZulu religious communities, practices and beliefs. It sought to determine whether the understanding of gender and sexuality within the isiZulu religion can be queered or expanded to promote gender inclusivity, acceptance and justice for LGBTQ persons. The majority of African scholars who have investigated and explored this field have made significant contributions to the subject, representing a notable advancement of the isiZulu traditional and cultural knowledge. The research was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, specifically in the Durban/*Umlazi* area, among the isiZulu communities, where the majority of individuals continue to uphold their traditions while adapting to the urban environment.

6.2 Summary of the paper

This study has revealed that traditional isiZulu gender constructions are deeply embedded in traditional and cultural rituals and rites, such as *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance), *ukuhlolwa* (virginity testing), *uMemulo* (coming-of-age ritual), and *ukulusa* (cattle herding). These rituals uphold gender roles by encouraging women to maintain their purity while linking them to fertility, marriage and household responsibilities, and in contrast, connecting men to leadership roles, protection and provision. This study has shown that these roles reinforce patriarchal authority, where men hold decision-making power within households and communities, preserving social order and well-being through adherence to tradition. These isiZulu rites conform to Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, which resonates with the idea that gender is continuously enacted and naturalised within these practices.

Furthermore, this study has also uncovered the marginalisation of gender and sexual identities outside of these normative frameworks. Non-heterosexual individuals are often ignored, stigmatised, and not recognised within the isiZulu communities because it is believed that they do not have any role in the traditional households, primarily due to entrenched patriarchal and heteronormative values reinforced by both traditional customs and colonial Christian influences. These beliefs have become a norm within the isiZulu religion and communities, as they are repeated by Kings, Presidents, and the majority of members. While there is historical evidence and scholarly support for the presence of diverse sexualities and gender expressions in pre-colonial African contexts, including isiZulu culture, the colonial and missionary interventions have influenced and suppressed these expressions by branding them as immoral

and un-African. Therefore, the colonial mentality and legacy have persisted in contemporary mindsets and beliefs of umuntu ongumZulu (isiZulu individuals), which has led to the exclusion of non-heterosexual individuals, and has also led to hate crimes.

6.3 Findings

Despite these challenges, the study finds emerging shifts among the younger generations of a*maZulu* and in urban settings, where exposure to media and progressive legal frameworks in South Africa is developing greater awareness and slow acceptance of gender diversity. Nonetheless, traditional *isiZulu* religious communities still largely lack formal recognition or vocabulary for non-binary and transgender identities, and these individuals have faced discrimination because of their sexuality within religious and public spaces.

The findings emphasis the role of oral history, which plays a significant role within the *isiZulu* households because as *Zulu* people, we learn about our religion and beliefs from our elders; they play a significant role in our lives by informing and teaching us about how to keep the family belief and how to communicate with our ancestors. Therefore, this study suggests that the change must start with the young generation; the youth must be well informed about gender diversity and gender inclusivity so this can be passed down to the next generation. By implementing youth-led workshops that educate young people on gender diversity alongside core values of purity and respect, these lessons can be integrated into major isiZulu rituals such as *Ukuhlolwa* (virginity testing), *uMemulo* (coming of age ceremony), *Ukucwala* (male initiation) and *uMkhosi woMhlanga* (reed dance).

The findings also highlight the importance of the community elders and traditional healers in shaping gender and sexuality knowledge among the community. There is a significant gap in inclusive education through these traditional channels that can promote the understanding of safe sex and gender diversity. Queer theoretical perspectives are critical in uncovering the silenced histories and challenging the dominant heteronormative narratives, they advocate for a more inclusive future that respects indigenous knowledge while addressing the harms of patriarchy and colonial legacies. Scholars such as Khuzwayo-Mangwaza (2012) and Matebene (2018) have paved the way; we must all continue to do the work in our respective communities.

Limitations of the Study

The study is centred around amaZulu who are located in Umlazi, Durban therefore this has made it hard to apply the findings to all isiZulu communities, however the majority of the participants have lived and experienced the rural life style and culture. The study primarily

draws on the isZulu oral histories from elders that has been passed throught from generations to generations. It does not use numbers from surveys or reports to show how common discrimination or hate crimes are. It focuses on rituals like uMkhosi woMhlanga and uMemulo, using Butler's idea of gender as performance. Yet it misses links to class, disability, or money issues in city homes.

Future Projections

Young amaZulu people in cities are starting to accept gender diversity more, with the help of social media and South Africa's fair laws. This could slowly change traditional isiZulu views on gender and sexuality. In the future, workshops led by youth could teach about gender inclusivity during rituals like ukuhlolwa, uMemulo, ukucwala, and uMkhosi woMhlanga. Young people who learn this can pass it on through family stories. Elders and healers could teach about safe sex and diverse identities. This builds on ideas from scholars like Khuzwayo-Mangwaza (2012) and Matebene (2018). Over time, communities may officially accept LGBTQ roles in families. As this would fight old colonial biases and reduce stigma, while keeping Zulu knowledge strong.

6.4 Conclusion

The *isiZulu* gender and sexuality constructions contain a powerful cultural force, intertwined with identity, spirituality, and social order that has existed for decades. This has resulted in the formation of the *Zulu* kingdom, which is globally recognised. Although both gender and sexuality have maintained cohension within the communities, it has also excluded gender dirversity, resulting in tension between preserving traditional gender beliefs and embracing ontemporary gender and sexuality pluralism. This study urgues that AmaZulu recognize the tension that exist within our communities and to make deliberate efforts to educate, include and respect the full spectrum of identities within our Zulu communities.

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Appendices

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

HIGHER DEGREES DISSERTATION/THESIS PROPOSAL REPORT FOR RESEARCH MASTERS AND PhD STUDENTS

DATE OF ORAL PRESENTATION:

NAMES OF CHAIRPERSON AND PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair: Prof B Okyere-Manu

Members: Prof H Moyo, Prof L Siwila, Sam T

STUDENT NAME: Sanelisiwe Khanyile

STUDENT NUMBER: 217078702

DEGREE: Masters of Religion

DISCIPLINE: Religion

SHORT DESCRIPTIVE TITLE: Queering the understanding of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religion.

SUPERVISOR/S: Rev Lauren Matthew

The general impression of the potential study as an original contribution to the field:

The panel congratulates the student for a well-structured and clear proposal. The student understood the research topic well and presented a coherent argument. She has made a solid start. However, the research is more of an advocacy than a theoretical research.

Recommendations

1. **Title:** the panel suggested rephrasing the title to include "Investigation" instead of exploration" to better reflect the research intent**.** They also raised several questions for the students to think about. Is there a religion among the Zulus? There is a need to demonstrate an awareness of the debate on African Religion. Do we have the religious leaders in the Zulu religion?
2. **Literature Review:** locate your work in existing literature

3. **Research Questions**: The panel suggests that the research questions must be open-ended. The sub-questions must be equal to the sub-objective. Basically, the questions must be changed to statements as the objective.

The panel encourages the student to address these areas to the satisfaction of the Supervisor.

Decision - The proposal is:

☐	☐ ✖	☐	☐
Accepted, without any corrections or revisions.	**Accepted**, **provided corrections and revisions/ extensions** are carried out to the satisfaction of the supervisor.	Should **not be accepted**, but should be returned to the candidate for substantive revision / extension. The student will complete a schedule of revisions indicating the changes made. The revised proposal must then be resubmitted to be read by the review panel.	Should be **rejected** outright.

Name of Chairperson: Prof B Okyere-Manu

Signature: 

Date: 15/08/2024

Name of Academic Leader for Research: Prof Herbert Moyo

Signature: 

Date: 19/08/2024

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Informed Consent Document

Dear Participant,

My name is Sanelisiwe Khanyile (217078702). I am a Honours / Masters / PhD candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College / Pietermaritzburg Campus. The title of my research is: Investigating the understanding of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religion. The aim of the study is to determine the understanding of gender and sexuality within isiZulu religion can be queered or expanded to promote gender inclusivity, acceptance, and justice for LGBTIAQ persons. I am interested in interviewing you to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about 10-15 minutes.
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg. / Howard College Campus, Durban. Email: 217078702@stu.ukzn.ac.za
Cell: [redacted]

My supervisor is Lauren Mathews who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Pietermaritzburg Campus / Howard College Campus, Durban of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email [redacted] Phone number: [redacted]

My co-supervisor is …….. who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Howard College Campus/ Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email …… Phone number: ……..
The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Ms Phumelele Ximba, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email:

ximbap@ukzn.ac.za,Phone number +27312603587.

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

DECLARATION

I…… *(full names of participant*) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire. I understand the intention of the research. I hereby agree to participate.

I consent / do not consent to have this interview recorded (if applicable)

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT DATE

……

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