

***Isitabane of faith: An Auto-ethnographic Exploration of Isitabane  
lived reality in the Shembe Faith Tradition***

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## Declaration

In electronically submitting this thesis, I declare that the entire work herein is my own and that I am the authorship owner, except openly stated or quoted. I have not submitted it previously for any qualification procurement.

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Date: 5 October 2021.....

### **Certification**

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## Abstract

*Izitabane* (queer people) experience discrimination, isolation, exclusion and homophobic attacks due to their sexual orientation and gender identity in the South African contexts. LGBTIQ+ voices are made invisible and silenced through the use of Bible scriptures, culture, and tradition embedded in patriarchal systems.

The aim of this study is to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* within the independent Shembe faith tradition, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This study looks at the embodied experience of a queer persons within the African Independent Church (the Nazareth Baptist Church) through narrative and explores the experience of participants who witnessed her navigating her journey as a queer individual in the hetero-patriarchal church in KwaZulu-Natal. The researcher shares her experience and tells how she came to understand herself as a queer within this church, and how faith people responded to this identity. The study focuses on six snapshot themes and extracts six dominant themes (understanding lesbian sexuality as rejection of men rather than women attraction, a link between male violence and lesbian sexuality, a link between faith-heterosexuality and reproduction, *a human being cannot be ditched*, queer bodies and dress, and naming) from these snapshot themes and interview discussions, which form a significant part of the lived reality or embodied experience of *isitabane* identity within the independent Shembe faith tradition.

Queer theory was used in this study, which took a phenomenological approach to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* within the independent Shembe faith tradition. The findings of this study challenge the essentialist perspective of ideological notions of gender and sexuality in association with sex assigned at birth. Findings suggest that the independent Shembe faith tradition and other African Independent Churches ought to be engaged in a contextual bible study, which may assist the church in reworking its vocabulary, policies, and related theories, in order to enable it to collectively engage and negotiate gender and sexual identities, as well as issues pertaining gender and sexuality in a life-affirming way. This will assist many silenced queer voices to be heard.

Participants emphasise the oppression, isolation, discrimination, hate crime, hate speech, and homophobic attacks experienced by queer people within South African contexts, especially within its religious landscape, due to their gender identity and sexual orientation.

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**Dedication**

To all my participants who agreed to partake in this study and other fellow queers struggling for their freedom and visibility in home settings, African religious institutions and communities. To all LGBTIQ+ activists, advocates, researchers, and lecturers engaging on issues pertaining gender and sexuality, and gender identities, we are in this together! The struggle continues, victory is certain!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION CHAPTER

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the background of the study, as well as its location; also highlighting the main research problem of the study. I introduce the proposed study and the lived reality (experience) of *isitabane* (queer), through which the Shembe faith traditional beliefs and ideologies pertaining homosexuality are concerned. At the end of this chapter, I indicate the research question, as well as objectives of this research study. This chapter stipulates the outline and orientation of this research study.

#### 1.1 Background and location of the study

Silence within the Shembe church (African traditional religion) about issues of sex, sexuality, and gender motivate or forms the background of this study. *Isitabane* is a derogatory Zulu term or word which collectively refers to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans-persons, and intersex (LGBTI) people (Van der Walt, Davids, Sithole and Matyila, 2019: 8). It is mostly used in communal spaces, with the intention to “discriminate, undermine and shame LGBTI people” (Van der Walt et al., 2019:12). Generally, this term *isitabane* applies to both gender non-conformism, as well as same-sex desire. It is usually used interchangeably with other derogatory terms like ‘*inkonkoni* (gnu), *ungqingili* (homosexual), *sisi-bhuti*’ (female-male). Historically, the term *isitabane* originates from “conceptual engagements with intersexuality and articulates something of intersex people who possess both sexual organs traditionally associated with being male or female” (Van der Walt et al., 2019 :10), which is the starting point that creates gender binaries. The term is frequently applied to LGBTI individuals, and implies that an individual has both genitals, and someone who does not conform to heteronormative orientation and gender identity.

Every year, millions of people across the country suffer physical, sexual, and psychological abuse and violence on account of their real or perceived sexual orientation (Equal Eyes Organisation, 17 April 2020). Some common examples include murder, mutilation, torture, physical and sexual assault, threats of violence, arson and maliciousness, and destruction of property. Longer-term trends reveal that the police-recorded anti-LGBT hate crimes have risen more than 300 percent since 2011, while anti-trans crimes have risen more than 700 percent

(Gitari, 2020). The *Love Not Hate* campaign during their march in 2020 called for the fight against homophobia to become the priority of the nation. Among the results released for 2015 “14 percent of people from Gauteng agreed that it is acceptable to be violent towards gay and lesbian people” (Hate crimes Against Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People, 2016: out.org.za). This represents the “1.2 million people in the province and reflects an increase of 13 percent”. The calculations have reflected that “South Africa experiences ongoing incidents of gender-based violence (GBV) as well as hate crimes towards LGBTI persons, along with growing anti-LGBTI intolerance and hate speech on social media” (Hate crimes Against Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People, 2016: out.org.za). The Other Foundation Empirical reports that in Gauteng Province, “56% of respondents believed that gay and lesbians deserve equal rights” (The Other Foundation Empirical reports 2016). “Yet as the country (rightly) speaks out against racism, it appears that these increasing levels of homophobia are not being addressed at a societal level with the same passion and energy” (Hate crimes Against Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People, 2016: out.org.za). Likewise, these latest statistics have barely reported by the mainstream media (OUT, 2016: Hate crimes Against Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People, 2016: out.org.za).

These statistics are distressing, as they reveal how vulnerable we are as an LGBTI community in our own communities, simply for who we are, and who we love. This also evidences that there is still a lot of work to be done with regards to tackling discrimination and hate crimes against LGBTI people. The Other foundation Progressive prudes report suggest that South Africa in general is a highly homophobic nation, and this might be because people have limited or no information about human sexuality, gender, and sexual minorities, however this is gradually changing.

This study explores the lived reality of *isitabane* (queer people within the Shembe faith tradition, engaging the intersections of religion, culture, gender, and sexuality. Gnanadason (2012: 242) shows the effort that had been made by certain religious organisations, such as World Council of Churches, to address issues of, or “speak out” against GBV, and break the silence against the issues of gender and sexuality and propose the life-affirming spaces that would enable the engagement of issues of concerning gender and sexual diversity within faith landscapes. The church bodies, such as the 2005 Tamar Campaign *on the Wings of the Dove* 25 November - 10 December 2004; *Ecumenical Decade of the Churches* in conjunction with *Women (1988-1998)*; the ongoing *Thursdays in Black Campaign* (in the Shembe Church they call it *Olwesine LoMama*, where women meet on Thursdays to worship and share their

problems they experience in their home/ families to come up with resolutions); and the most recent *October 2013 Anglican Synod Resolution*. These are the various campaigns speaking to issues of GBV and hate crimes experienced by women. However, Rackozy (2015: 18) argues that some churches for instance, the Shembe tradition, espouse a different theology on how they can enhance life-affirming spaces for sexual minorities in their faith community. They remain silent on the issues of GBV, gender, and sexual diversity. Silence is part of the identified problem (Sithole, 2018: 56), as he was exploring transgender identities in the Zion Churches.

Gender-based violence and hate crimes are an issue plaguing the South African landscape (Van der Walt and Terblanche, 2019: 8). Faith communities have campaigns, but they are limited in scope, reach and impact. However, some churches are doing something about this. In the Shembe tradition however, there is a lack of engagement with issues located within the intersection of sex, sexuality, and gender. Also, there is a lack of vocabulary to address these issues being considered a taboo and silences that need to be engaged.

The Shembe independent faith tradition do position itself against homosexuality and convey negative and harmful ideas about homosexuality, which affect queers who are navigating their African Independent Church, as discussed in the literature below (The Citizen, 23 November 2015; Mercury, 23 November 2015; Burchardt, 2013: 5). The church institution indicates inhumane and hatred against queer people (LGBTIQ+) within the institution of the church. The policies that address GBV, along with gender and sexual diversity in the church may simply provide politically appropriate records that make the church seem credible and earn credibility in the state of the society, yet uphold systemic and institutional forms of GBV, discrimination and hate towards LGBT community and or/ people with gender and sexual minorities (Boonzaaijer, Soko, Godagama and Awasthi, 23 November 2017). Boonzaaijer et al, 2017 state that the churches still maintain gender binaries. These communities, queer people, are silenced, and upon their bodies, in the Shembe faith tradition they apply physical and emotional harm upon them because of their homosexual orientation. Harmful terms are often used by the church leaders when referring to them to discourage LGBTI and make them feel like they are employing Western tradition for the way of living, that they are possessed and dirty by having sexual attraction for the same sex (Richardson, 2018: 32). For this reason, this study concerns the extent to which faith/ pastoral resources could be envisioned to assist *izitabane*, who navigate the African Independent faith tradition; and how auto-ethnographies could be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *isitabane* within a Shembe faith tradition.

Van der Walt, Kaoma and West (2017: 5) argue that “sexuality has become a new site of struggle and the 'old' theology does not fit, for it is founded on heteropatriarchy.” This heteropatriarchal theology create boundaries that maintain homophobia towards LGBTI in African societies, and across faith landscapes. This leads to physical, emotional, and psychological abuse and discrimination caused by hate crime and hate speech towards marginalised sexual minorities. Van der Walt et al. (2017: 7: 10) propose that persons with marginalised sexualities be involved in the dialogues to engage others in their experiences and assert that religious institutions can undertake their theology in a more life-affirming and inclusive way, to show more care and acceptance. This can be achieved through interrogating the toxic traditional ideologies and biblical texts that consistently oppress certain sexual minorities exist in the African Independent Churches, namely those rooted in culture, tradition.

They employ patriarchal ways of living and believing, which makes sexual minorities suffer negative experiences and oppression, exclusion, discrimination, hate crime, ‘corrective rape’, and, and they are often murdered. However, some African Independent Churches do accommodate homosexuals in their scope of worship, while others do not. I argue that it is the Biblical God whom we believe and worship is the same God who liberated, accompanied and led the oppressed people to freedom, and “Whom through the prophets protects God’s people from both external and internal possible oppression” (Van der Walt et al., 2017: 10); and in the fullest revelation of God: “the Son of God is born on the margins of a colonised and marginalised people” (Luke 2: 1). This proves that God always takes the side of the marginalised and oppressed. Taking this into account, the belief that God stands in contradiction to homosexuality seems to be opposed to Scripture itself. Van der Walt et al. (2017: 10) also proposes that doing theology on sexualities requires epistemological privilege be given to the lived reality of LGBTI Christians. This is due to the fact that, if we do not engage and or involve these realities, we would not be doing theology in an inclusive manner. We need to engage and involve these realities.

The constitutional state in the South African context is well-known for its progressive stance concerning gender and sexual diversity that finds relevant manifestation in the Bill of Rights. However, despite all that, *izitabane* in South Africa experience sexual discrimination and prejudice based on their gender and sexuality. There is always troubling news on LGBTI being brutally killed and raped under the affectation of ‘correcting’ their sexuality in order to conform to the heteronormative ideologies (ideas). This is the abuse which targets *izitabane* in the South African contexts. People against homosexuality use corrective rape to control the

sexualities of non-conforming individuals, in a patriarchal system that oppresses and control sexual minorities. Gender norms coerce conformism to societal expectations of suitable masculine and feminine performance. These societal ideologies of masculinity and femininity “enforce heteronormativity by claiming that sexuality runs naturally from gender, which in turns runs naturally to the sex that one was allocated at birth” (Sithole, 2018: 28). However, many feminists, queer and gender theorists have challenged these ideas of naturalised sex, gender, and sexuality. Most frequently, in churches, gender, sex, and sexuality are addressed in association with procreation, that’s conforming to hetero performativity understanding, however, if not, they discriminate against homosexuality. Homophobia and ongoing hate crime against homosexual people have made me and fellow queers fear talking and coming out of our closets about our sexual orientation.

*Isitabane* is a derogatory isiZulu term, used to refer to gay men (Moletsane, Mitchel and Smith, 2012: 255). However, as for most derogatory terms, the term *isitabane* does not consist of a direct meaning but is related to disgust and hatred for queer people. This word is also used for lesbian, bisexual, trans people, and intersex individuals. Roderik Brown (2012: 46) argues that the reflection of South African social and cultural values and perceives LGBTI individuals as unnatural and claim that they need to be ‘cured’. This is evidenced by the fact that the corrective rape perpetrators are among those who have the belief that it is intentional. Brown (2012: 46) in his findings illustrates that victims of most forms of rape do not reportit because police do not act in response to the reported hate crime (corrective rape, threats of crimes or any other discriminatory acts against LGBTI people). The social, cultural values, as well as religion results to hate crimes that are dreadful as corrective rape demonstrates the particular vulnerability of LGBTI people in South Africa and around the world (Brown, 2012: 46). Corrective rape is among many the crimes against which LGBTI people are suffering due to the lack of knowledge, understanding and acceptance by the majority population in South Africa and other African countries. Provided the harshness, however, of such cruelty and the willingness of the community to condone or discard it, the corrective rape threatens a continuance of human rights. It follows that the existence of corrective rape calls for domestic legal remedies and international intervention as well. The views of the culture, religion and society about homosexuality is what leads most people to harbour misconceptions about LGBTI people. Some churches are getting involved, but not the Shembe faith tradition.

Embarking on this research, I engage my embodied experience with regards to my gender and sexuality. I also engage my mother’s embodiment story to narrate my embodiment on how I

came to understand myself as a queer person within the African Independent Church (Shembe faith tradition). I call upon persons close to me involvement, as located in the African Independent Church (Shemberites). In African faith communities (Van Klinken, 2015: 18; Jobson, 2012: 4), sexual minorities as usual are always silenced as if they do not exist (to be invisible and inaudible). This research study aims to contribute to the fact and reality that queers do exist and need to be audible in African self-governing Churches (African faith communities) with their diverse gender and sexualities.

South Africa seems to be showing acceptance in its constitutional laws, which clearly support lesbian, gays, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, questioning and asexual (LGBTIQA+ people's rights; however, the reality proves that it is still ominous to identify as an LGBTIQA\_ person in South Africa. The voices of LGBTI people are silenced by the homophobic churches and society. Homophobia in Africa is understood to be in disagreement with cultural, traditional and religious values (Msibi, 2011; Van Klinken, 2019; and Gunda, 2010) addresses. Gunda et al. (2010: 54-55) note that the opposition as well as the disapproval of homosexual relations originates from, generally, prominent African leaders to African church leaders. Msibi (2011: 55) states that "the effort to claim homosexuality as 'un-African' signifies a pretence, which hides neo-conservatism and rebirth of patriarchy covered in the constructs of religion, nationalism, and law". The dominant trends of homosexuality in our society are frequently challenged by the identities of LGBTIQA+ people, and this demonstrates that gender is not fixed, but rather fluid; and thus, challenges the liberalism, as well as the essentialist perspective that gender and sexuality is fixed. Sithole (2018: 12) states that political and religious leaders often use culture and the bible to claim that homosexuality and all homosexual relations are 'un-African and un-Biblical'.

Gunda (2020:20) states that "Christians with the consent of politicians and traditional leaders have invoked the bible in labelling homosexual practice as sin roundly condemned by the 'Word of God', the Bible". These homophobic religious and political dynamics exacerbate the hate against queer people in Africa. As mentioned above, that South Africa seems to be leading in passing constructional laws that support LGBTI people, but there are rising statistics and reports showing the reality that the rate of hate crime inflicted on queers is very high and unignorable. These hate crimes include corrective rape- which is the most common and committed against lesbian and transgender man, with the harmful and negative belief that they are showing the victim that they are not 'real men' but woman. Corrective rape, referring to "a stance when a woman is raped to cure her of lesbianism" (Koraan, 2015: 1931).

## 1.2 Background of the study

“The *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* (Nazarites) is one of the biggest and ‘most-studied’ African Independent Churches in Southern Africa” (Morton, 2014: 71). The Shembe Church was founded by Prophet Isaiah Shembe in 1913, believing that God sent him to the *amaZulu* nation. Morton (2014: 71; Ganner, 1987: 92) argues that Shembe (Isaiah) absorbed the apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) rhetorical style, which emphasised prophecies and direct revelations. Members of the Shembe church wear white robes that differ according to gender and leadership positions (Brown, 1996: 52). They are rooted in patriarchal *amaZulu* culture and tradition (the Zulu patriarchal systems).

In this study, I use a combined method of autoethnography, where I tell my own story through a series of vignettes, together with two interviews from persons close to me. I narrate my story and interview two people for validity, nuance, argument and texture, affirming collective identity formation process (construction of identity). As I grew up in the Shembe faith tradition, and there are a lot of harmful ideologies of homosexuality that they hold as a church. The relevance of this study is that I want to make visible that which is considered not to exist. Secondly, to contribute to a process that will normalise queer people of faith and will, therefore, challenge toxic spaces and rather open affirming and inclusive space. In this way, gender and sexual diversity within the faith landscapes would be embraced and respected. I am, therefore, doing this work in order to endeavour towards the flourishing of all people within the Shembe faith tradition. For *izitabane*, this would mean easily coming out of closets and claiming their rights within the church and communities at large, living under homophobia and hate crimes that people inflict on them as marginalised LGBTI groups.

## 1.3 Motivation

The research study emerges from my own embodied experience. I grew up in a home setting where patriarchy and gender binaries prevailed. I was raised in extremely poor living conditions, where my parents were unemployed, and my father was extremely abusive towards mother. I grew up as a girl with hatred for men, though I used to hide it. This was due to the abuse that was happening at home, inflicted by my father towards my mother. Due to the hatred the church had for *izitabane* and their deviant ways of dealing or addressing it, I would perform like a girl. During my high school years, I knew how I felt for other girls, but it did not bother

me much because we were not allowed to 'date', and I hid it because homosexuality lies outside of what the Shembe faith community considers to be normal and traditionally appropriate for sexual relations. However, we heard that there were married mothers who held positions in the church and were found intimate with each other, and that this had led to deleterious consequences. It was said that they 'dealt' with them, though we were never told the way in which this was done. That made me feel at ease with my sexuality, knowing that there are fellow Shembe members who felt the same way in this traditional faith space, which is why I remained in the Shembe church, despite being faced with such extreme prejudice as a queer youth.

However, knowing that people had been 'dealt' with for their sexual orientation scared me. This inspired me to engage in this study and narrate my story to flourish fellow queers who navigate African Independent Churches, so as to acknowledge that queers exist in African self-governing churches. What these churches need to do is to change and find inclusive methods to address and engage issues pertaining sexual orientation, gender and identity expression, particularly in the Shembe faith. The church can be silent on the issues of sex, gender, and sexuality; however, they show that they are against homosexuality and that a homosexual individual is possessed and causes bad luck.

Historically, in African contexts, intersex children were killed or hidden from the public due to the belief that they were a shame and a curse (Mkasi, 2013: 27; Epprecht, 2008: 32). This practice violates human rights in general, and within some African churches. The harmful and dangerous ideologies, principles and assumptions pertaining to homosexuality promote silence pertaining to the issues of sexual diversity and gender, and *izitabane* in particular. This also promotes hatred for queer people in the public, and on the part of the Church specifically. *Izitabane* within the African independent churches exist at the complex intersection of gender, religion, sexuality, and culture. As mentioned above, African traditional religion is homophobic, since it regards same-sex practices as 'un-Biblical'; the culture is likewise homophobic because it asserts that homosexuality is 'un-African', and that it is a Western practice or predict Western agenda for cultural imperialism. Therefore, culture and religion are instruments that are used to exacerbate homophobia in African contexts. Consequently, African independent churches or Africa faith communities perceives it complex and challenging to engaging issues gender identities and sexuality. This study showcases the embodied narrative of a queer person within the Africa faith tradition in the intersection of gender, religion,

sexuality, and culture. This study also involves two interviewees on how they know the researcher regarding her sexuality within the faith tradition of Shembe.

#### **1.4 Research Design**

In engaging the multifaceted intersection of gender, religion, culture, and sexuality as noted above, the research study employed empirical research, in an auto-ethnographical exploratory study, according to a qualitative research paradigm. This study aims to explore the embodied lived reality of *isitabane* of faith within the Shembe faith tradition in KwaZulu-Natal. This study concentrates on the six snapshot themes from my life that form part of the reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition. These snapshot themes are:

1. being born a girl child (I reflect on my own narrative of growing up and experiences of poverty and domestic violence within a family setting);
2. my father's violence, my mother's vulnerability (I reflect on my mother's vulnerability due to my father's violence towards her and how it impacted my sexuality);
3. learning what it means to be a Shembe believer (where I reflect on the tradition, patriarchy and culture of the Shembe faith tradition and its negative impact on towards homosexuality);
4. my feelings for other girls (I engage my experience and narrative of having a sexual attraction to other girls and why and how I kept it a secret endeavour);
5. being called *isitabane* (I reflect on and engage the negative usage of these terms to refer to queer (LGBTI) people and how our communities and societies tend to treat *izitabane* once you are known to be one); and,
6. having bad spirits-*izitabane* and faith (I reflect on the hatred (hate speech, hate crime) that faith spaces and leaders have towards homosexuality and how badly they stand to be seen, such as being accused of being possessed by bad spirits, standing accused of natural disasters and diseases).

As this research study is a form of auto-ethnography, Mendez (2003: 277) notes that “auto-ethnography is a useful qualitative research method to analyse people's lives”, a tool that Ellis and Bochner (2000: 739) describe as an “autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.”

## **1.5 Sampling**

For this research study, I use purposive sampling technique, which is a non-probability sampling method to choose appropriate participants to this study. As this is an auto-ethnographical study, I am also a subject in this study. I also interview two informants as members of the Shembe faith tradition in KwaZulu-Natal, who enrich my study with the information of which I was not aware. I work with Uthingo Network, owing to the sensitive nature of this research study, for debriefing and counselling. I am also working with the services of student support from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in receiving counselling.

## **1.6 Research Instruments**

For the interviews, I employ the use of tape recordings with study participants. I also took field notes on a notebook to jot down possible facial expressions and emotions that I detect/ observe during the interview session. Informed consent was signed by participants agreeing to partaking voluntarily to be interviewed.

## **1.7 Key research question**

What is the lived reality (embodied experience) of *isitabane* in the independent Shembe faith tradition (Church)?

## **1.8 Research sub-questions**

1. What constitutes the faith, gender, and sexuality intersection within the Shembe church?
2. How could an auto-ethnographical exploration be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *Isitabane* in the Shembe faith tradition?
3. How could embodied life stories/personal narratives contribute to enhances the capacity for the African independent faith traditions to navigate sexual diversity.

## **1.9 Objectives of the study**

1. To explore what constitutes the faith, gender, and sexuality intersection within the Shembe Church and what is the position of the Church on Sexual Reproduction Health and Rights (SRHR) related matters.
2. To discover how could an auto-ethnographical exploration be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *isitabane* in the Shembe faith tradition.
3. To investigate what faith resources could be envisioned to assist *izitabane*, who navigate African Independent faith tradition.

## **1.10 Limitations of the study**

For queers within the Shembe faith tradition, it is difficult sharing stories related to the issues of gender and sexuality, especially sexual orientation. The focus of the study is also the possible limitation as this is the auto-ethnographical study, which makes the researcher the subject of the study and is located in the self and persons closer to the researcher, who went to the same church and know me better. I note and acknowledge that not most queers in this tradition can be public and freely participate in such a context study. Hence the area of focus limits the study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews are conducted telephonically.

## **1.11 Structure of the study**

To engage the research questions procedure, I develop my argument in seven sectioned chapters, which are as follows: Chapter 1 plans out research design of this thesis and outlined to discuss the research objectives, questions, and aims of the study detail. Chapter 2 of this thesis provides literature review in broad terms, on: engaging sexual diversity in African landscapes; particularly engaging and discussing literature on the issues of gender and sexual diversity in the Shembe tradition; further engaging literature on queer in the African context-*isitabane* and faith; and, finally looking at faith and embodied research - drawing on own narrative-embodied research. In Chapter 3, I draw out the theoretical framework in detail, on how queer theory and queer theology gets utilised as a tool of analysis of knowledge or data on religious-cultural landscape of queer identities in African Independent Churches (Shembe tradition), KwaZulu-Natal. Chapter 4 outlines the research design (methodology) of the study

in detail. This is an auto-ethnographical empirical study, located in the qualitative paradigm. Chapter 5 presents data drawing from my own narrative and from insights gathered those I consulted. However, the primary data source is my own story, and this will be augmented by the interview data of two participants. Chapter 6 discusses the study findings to propose new understanding, as well as demonstration in the manner that challenges and stipulates new views on African Independent Churches literature, gender identity, sexuality, and sex within the South African landscape. Chapter 7 provides a brief summary of this thesis. It also gives future research recommendations.

## 1.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter highlighted queer people's voices as being silenced about their experiences, as if they do not exist within the African independent churches, Shembe faith. They are the population that is denied their voice concerning their embodied experiences in a South African faith landscape. Though the literature of this research study confirms that South Africa is leading with passing laws for LGBTIQ+ community, queer people still suffer homophobic assaults in this country due to their gender and sexual identities. The hate crime and homophobic attacks against LGBTIQ+ shows that the prominent African leaders and church leaders instill, sustain/ maintain and exacerbate homophobia in their claiming that same-sex relationships are 'un-African' and 'un-Biblical' – that God is against it. The religious-cultural ideas about homophobia are the underlying contributory factors that threaten to mute the voices of African LGBTIQ+ humans.

Queers in African independent churches highlight the complexity as well as the intricacy in the connection of gender, religion, culture, and sexuality.. This study engages in the telling of the story of '*isitabane*' of faith embodied in the connection of gender, religion, sexuality, and culture. The following chapter gives a detailed literature on the studies that has been done on homosexuality within African context in the involvement of LGBTIQ+: engaging gender and sexual diversity in an African faith landscape; engaging gender and sexuality in the Shembe tradition; engaging queer in Africa- *isitabane* and faith; and, looking at Faith and embodied research, while drawing on own narrative-embodied research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on literature around LGBTIQ+ persons and faith communities in South Africa with the focus on *isitabane* and African initiated churches. I divide this review in subsections as follows: engaging sexual diversity in African faith landscapes; sexuality and gender in the Shembe tradition; queer in Africa- *isitabane* and faith; and faith and embodied research - drawing on own narrative-embodied research. I focus on the importance of embodied research and queer storytelling. This chapter mainly focuses on African queers engaging on narrating their realities and experiences with African faith communities. The constitution support rights but that the lived reality of queer people is still precarious, and churches are at a loss as to how to deal with queer people. However, there are some inclusive churches in KZN such as Dutch Reformed Church, some of Zion churches. The literature below highlights how African faith communities have been engaging with LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa, with specific focus on the South African context.

##### 2.1.1 Engaging sexual diversity in African faith landscapes

Sandfort and Reddy (2013: 4) reveal that same-sex relationships in African countries exist but less accepted; however, numerous unpleasant reports express great homophobia in most African countries (for instance, Nigeria and Uganda). These trends of news report show that same-sex relations in African landscapes exist; however, “discussions about same-sex sexuality being ‘un-African’ would be moot if African people do not engage in them” (Sandfort and Reddy, 2013: 1). Sandfort and Reddy (2013: 1) also report that “as much as there is hate inflicted on same-sex people, there are supportive news report such as the traditional African gay public weddings”. In African countries, when compared with other countries from other continents, homosexuality and same-sex relations are less accepted, and are illegal. However, South Africa is among first countries in Africa to legalise homosexuality (Mark and Cameron, 1995: 62). Despite legal changes that endorse equality of LGBTI persons, the violence perpetrated against gay, and lesbians (especially in Black communities) still needs to be addressed (Sandfort and Reddy, 2013: 2) because there is a huge gap between what has been

legally achieved and lived reality. Sandford and Reddy (2013: 3) report from their study that while religion is the most reinforcement of a lack of acceptance of same-sex sexuality and sexual relations in Africa, however there are religious institutions which overtly provision sexual expressions and lifestyles of same-sex relations; and “religion remain having stronger impact on the lives of African LGBT persons”. Sandford and Reddy (2013: 3) point to the role that history plays on the rejection of homosexuality and same-sex relations. These traditional African values Africans believe need to be maintained and promoted. Ugandan transnational evangelism had established a robust homophobic act and reaction (Anti- Homosexual Act, AHA, 2009-2014: 7) against LGBTI people, rejecting homosexuality and referring to it as un-African and need not to commit crime or insult to their culture, implying that it is an influence of Western evangelism (Amar Wahab, 2016: 687).

As mentioned above, the pervading of religion in many Black African individuals’ clouds those identify as LGBTI, where navigating these contexts still experience exclusion in these contexts. The resulting of dilemma, anxiety, and trauma from "reconciling religion and sexual orientation is convincingly analysed”, Mbetho, Reddy and Standford (2013: 4) from their study assert that religious attitudes make LGBTI persons to feel forced to make choices between their sexuality and their religion, making their spiritual fulfilment more problematic “withholding an important source of support and the LGBTI persons to cope with their HIV statuses (to those with positive HIV statuses)”. Van der Walt (2019: 18 September 2019) also gives her input on the matter in a Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary NPC, mentioning that “the jury is still very much out when it comes to faith communities and their engagement with issues of sexual diversity”. Van der Walt (2019: 5) states that “there is still a landscape of African communities that do not consider people representing sexual diversity as human beings.”

These African faith communities do not believe that homosexual people deserve the love of God, nor that they are humans, and believe that they deserve not to be included in faith communities, perpetuating the hate crime and violence against them. This resonates with what the Shembe leader said in Ebuhleni church faction that droughts occurred in the year 2015 were an act of God vengeance against queer people. Van der Walt’s words give the relevance of persuading religious institutions to take up a stance of “justice, inclusion and care” (Van Der Walt, 18 September 2019). Van der Walt (2019) asserts that we should challenge the religious institutions on the role that they should be playing in constructing gender and sexuality in the faith communities of Africa; interrogate the toxic theologies that inform the realities of

homophobia, GBV pandemic and hate crimes; and acknowledge the fact that the bible has been used in a way that it is the tool to “oppress, exclude and silence”; whereas, it is the most essential tool to liberate people in African contexts. Additionally, Gerald West (2019: 7; Sande, 2016: 32) proposes that if the bible could be used in its own terms and not in a more theologically overdetermined manner (especially those biblical texts that are used to condemn sexual diversity, the consistent use the Sodom and Gomorrah), then it can be a tool of liberation.

On the other side, Sande (2016: 33) argues that the dark space such as the interplay between sexual diversity, Christian faith and HIV/AIDS, remains in some African religious landscapes, such as Zimbabwe. Sande (2016: 33) asserts that due to numerous different perceptions concerning sexuality and especially homosexuality, some religious leaders remain to address the issues surrounding sexual diversity and provide their stance. They believed that homosexuality is considered to be a central issue in the spread of HIV/AIDS, however LGBTIQ+ activists have fought that association of LGBTIQ+ persons as the source of the virus and its spread. Sande also states that “religious people viewed those with HIV and homosexuals with suspicion within their religious landscape” (Sande, 2016: 4). What remains the huge challenge is to recognise the extent to which the practices, the rituals, and African Independent Churches can dialogue with LGBTIQ+ people in all contexts, especially in the context of HIV/AIDS and gender inequality. Sallar (2011, in Sande, 2016: 34) emphasises the existence of extreme hate crime and violence towards homosexual people in other African countries. Some injustices or laws prohibit, imprison, fine or sentences lesbian, gay and bisexual people to death if ever it gets confirmed that one is indeed homosexual. For example, in Zimbabwe, when homosexuality has been proven, one serves a one-year imprisonment penalty plus a fine. This is because homosexuality is perceived as a crime or offense in this country. There are many African countries that punish homosexuality with imprisonment to death penalty for ‘unnatural acts’ (Africa, 2019), such as Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Malawi, Mauritania, Sudan and others.

Tamale (2014: 158) states that “it is invaluable in facilitating our critical rethinking of how African people become subjects when we assume the gendered sexualised identities that are constructed for us within the three power structures under scrutiny”. Historically speaking, Tamale (2014: 158) argues that in Africa, the ‘truth regime’ regarding sexualities, are mostly confined by the nib of legislation, custom and religion- the ‘master frames’/ scripts of sexuality that law, culture and religion construct for African people result many of those non-conforming

to the very margins of society (such as sex workers, rape survivors the youth, homosexuals or queer people, people living with HIV and so forth). Their bodies become sites for political inscription even as their constituted as their sexual 'other'. Making an example by the use of the 'corrective/curative rape' to label describe the sexual violence inflicted on African lesbians, so as to coerce them into heterosexuality. This speaks that one's sexual orientation needs to be corrected and that in some circumstances rape can be warranted. 'Corrective rape' is an extreme toxic term and in this case, I propose the change of discourse and use of 'homophobic rape', emphasising the disciplinary and vile elements of the crime. Roehr 2010: 1166 and Mark Gevissier, 2002) reports that religion drives the backlash against people who are gay in African countries, more notably evangelical Christian leaders or pastors. Churches in Africa also supported the patriarchal systems in Malawi, where gay marriage of two gay men were sentenced to 14 years in jail before the Ugandan parliament imposed for a death sentence to people in same sex relationships, families, colleagues, and health workers as well, for not reporting any suspicions of people they might happen to think that were homosexual. This clearly shows that other African countries still have laws that prohibit and criminalise homosexuality and have violence towards it. This also increases the risk and vulnerability of those identifying as sexual and gender diverse, often referred to as sexual minorities.

Quin, Dickson-Gomez, and Young (2016: 1) argue that the Church has been known to be a focal point for the communities and for a very long time, because it reaches beyond being a place of worship and spiritual guidance. It is used as centres for political activity, social activism, and health promotion (Coleman et al. 2012: 23). These churches have been the most important source of support and strength for black communities. However, although religious institutions are related to many positive mental and physical health outcomes, homophobia and stigma still exists in religious spaces. This may reduce the health benefits for LGBTI individuals. Typically, homo-negativity is overstated within churches, where religious doctrines and beliefs condemn homosexuality (Quin et al., 2016: 2), which aggravate homophobia. Quin et al. (2016: 1) and Foster, Arnold et al. (2011:12) asserts that although cruel discrimination and criticism of homosexuality from the church pulpit remain evident in most churches, the quiet disapproval of homosexuality and microaggression towards LGBTI individuals is more common and damaging. LGBTI individuals tend to internalise these harmful discriminations and micro-transgressions and become the significant source of their stresses.

(Quin et al., 2016: 7) argue that Church leaders in African countries overpoweringly hold perceptions of homosexuality that could be perceived as toxic, hurtful, or stigmatising and discriminating to LGBT people, and many church leaders reflect on homosexuality as to be a lifestyle and or a choice. One pastor responded by stating that “It is difficult, and it is challenging because homosexuality is a sin, but it’s so basic to who that individual believes they are” (Quin et al., 2016: 12). This response highlights the dominant disagreements between homosexuality and religion. Many gay individuals, and increasingly, society, consider sexuality to be fundamentally part of who they are, hitherto, the Church unrepentantly convicts that aspect of one’s identity and they believe that in order for church leaders to consider homosexuality sinful, it must be comprehended to be a personal choice, instead of that God created someone to be homosexual.

Sithole (2018: 17) shows that queer Christians tend to see that there is a need to look for other faith spaces to fellowship, where they may feel accepted and not discriminated against because of their homosexual identities, and without having to conceal their homosexual identities. This is due to the fact that Christianity and African independent churches in particular have displayed tendencies of exclusion and discrimination, and they hold toxic hetero-patriarchal views on sex, sexuality, and gender. These views are very much dangerous to the LGBTIQ+ community and they may perpetuate and fuel hate crimes towards LGBTQIA people. Over the years, LGBTQIA+ people have been blamed for disasters, both natural and manmade, and stand accused by the religious figures for the Covid-19 (coronavirus) epidemic (Straits Times Newspaper, 28 March 2020). Van Klinken and Gunda (2012: 121) argue that in contemporary African societies, homosexuality raises much controversy. In African public debates, homosexuality often is rejected with reference to tradition and/ or culture -referring to homosexuality as an offense or insult to African cultures. In Malawi, their president pardoned two men claiming that “they committed a crime against our culture, religion, and laws” (Gunda and Van Klinken, 2012: 121). Van Klinken and Phiri (2015: 14) argue that the increased public manifestation of homophobic or anti-homosexual rhetoric and politics in many African societies goes hand-in-hand with increased public visibility of communities organised around LGBTI or otherwise queer identities and the struggle from their rights. They are stating that all people, despite their colour, race, ethnicity, and gender, were created in God’s image (Phiri and Van Klinken, 2015: 14).

Van Klinken and Phiri (2015: 10) continue to state that in Zambia, same-sex practices have been prohibited in the country, since the introduction of anti-sodomy laws during the colonial period, however, only in recent years issues of homosexuality and LGBTI rights have become subject of heated public and political debates. “There is no room for gays,” said the Minister of Justice in Zambia, claiming that they are a Christian nation and therefore cannot allow ‘this’ non-Zambian culture (Van Klinken, 2015: 5). Van Klinken (2018: 18) argues that African theology can be developed (“not out of the blue”), however, with the present stories of African LGBTIQ+ people of faith. Van Klinken also suggests that queer storytelling is key to the development of grassroots and disrupts the silence and taboo surrounding sexual diversity in hegemonic African churches and or theologies. As I am engaging this thesis, I am hoping to fill this gap. The Shembe faith tradition holds fixed ideologies regarding gender and sexual diversity. They perceive homosexuality and queers as the cause of natural epidemics which indicates the hate towards homosexuality.

This sub-section engaged the complexity LGBTIQ+ face in the African faith communities. These are made public and knowledgeable by frequent numerous reports about homophobic hate crimes against homosexual people in the African contexts. In this sub-section, the gap and difference between what has been legally achieved and the lived reality on the ground has been highlighted. The religion stands out in the causality and maintenance of hate crimes and lower acceptance of LGBTI people, homosexuality, and same-sex relations. They are being coerced into choosing between religion and their sexual orientation, which oppresses them to live in proverbial ‘closets’. Some part of African traditional faith landscape still does not perceive people representing sexual diversity as human beings, and not deserving the love of God, which results in exclusion from faith communities, and can be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and/ or gender identity. This is why, as a queer person in this thesis, I challenge African faith communities to employ and take up a position of ‘justice, inclusion and care’ and their role to partake in deconstructing and yet reconstructing gender and sexuality in their respective faith spaces and using their pastoral care to challenge and interrogate toxic theologies and ideologies, thereby establishing and inclusive, accepting, caring, justice nation and generation.

### **2.1.2 Sexuality and gender in the Shembe tradition**

People and leaders in faith spaces have made it a norm to blame natural disasters on gay and lesbian people. In the newspaper *Mercury*, November 23, 2015, entitled *Blame Droughts on Gays: Shembe*, Shembe church leader (who happen to be the pastor in KZN Province) noted that as South Africans are convinced that the lack of rainfall that resulted to droughts in 2005 was an act of vengeance by God. The leader in the Shembe Church in *Ebuhleni* (the oral tradition gathering or conference) said that “gay people were responsible for the droughts that had been crippling the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal”, *The Mercury* (2015, 23 November 2015). In this report, the Shembe leader expressed his speech with anger towards the gay and lesbian community. This can be taken to indicate the positionality of the Shembe church (*Ebuhleni*) towards the LGBTIQ+ community. The Shembe church punished bisexual and lesbian women for being in the same-sex relationship (Roberto Igual, 2019, 28 February 2019) and set new homophobic rules to be cleansed and that would prevent them from getting married in future. They set a controversial policy, which was approved by senior pastors at *Ebuhleni* faction to penalise women who have been in relationships with gay men and other women. However, not all church members agreed to these rules and policies, nor human rights activists. In 2018, a 43-year-old man residing in Pietermaritzburg had been beaten by 50 Shembe church (*Ebuhleni*) members due to his sexuality. A 43-year-old man mentioned that he was suspended from the church and was ordered to pay a ‘damage’ fee for ‘shaming’ the institution. The church (*Ebuhleni* faction) split, because some members were not welcoming some of the homophobic rules and policy (Mamba Online 28 February 2018) and Sunday Times, Roberto Igual 28 February 2019

Shembe leader from *Ebuhleni* faction (one of KZN church branches) said that “droughts were the act of vengeance from God because people had ‘defied’ Him”, he said that men marrying men was an act of defiance, *The Citizen Newspaper*, 2015, 23 November 2015. Instead of pointing to El Niño, wasteful water usage, and or leaking infrastructure, he railed against those who ‘defied’ God, claiming that they had led to his vengeful response against South Africa. Again, in 2015 August, the mayor of Umzinyathi District in KZN South and pastors said that gay men were responsible for spreading HIV and ‘clamped down’ on homosexuality. The outbreak of Ebola in 2014, as well as fires in Cape Town, were said to be a punishment from God for that it is ‘the Gay City’. In 2019, during a flood, one prominent Shembe member said the occurrence of floods was the result of *izitabane*. This reflects the hate crime and their position against homosexuality. The church and community leaders’ perceptions of homosexuality exacerbate homophobia. This seems to support statements that have been made

in the past, such as the statement that was made by the King of the Zulu tribe in the year 2012, Goodwill Zwelithini Zulu, said that “people in the same-sex relationships are rotten no matter who they are” (Miya, 2012: 2).

Burchardt (2013: 18) conducted a study interviewing pastor in African churches, where the Shembe Church was part of the discussion. These interviews reveal the forms of isolationism in the Zionist Christian Church and the Shembe Church concerning the same-sex marriages that are largely similar to Pentecostal ones. Within their culturalist and nationalist argument, they forward assumptions that same-sex sexualities are un-African and represent notions of sin (Reid, 2010: 10). However, for the most part, when directly engaging the issues of same-sex marriages during their interviews, there was no mention made of the inherited marriage practices between “boy-wives” and men that Reddy (2005: 3) and Reid (2010: 12) found in certain African churches, in which a biologically male yet strongly effeminate person would serve as the wife. Other African Churches argued that as African church leader, there must be a question towards oneself that “does a soul has sexuality/gender? does it have a pigmentation?”, and if the answer is ‘no’, then we must understand that churches are no political organisation, hence they must not discriminate against gender and/ or sexual orientation (Reid, 2010:12). Therefore, churches will understand that there is no difference before God. Mkasi (2011: 33) argues that the controversy concerning same-sex relations in African societies and faith landscapes is typically based on African traditional religion and Christianity as well. According to these religions, same sex relationships are viewed as an immoral act, a sin, devilish behavior which is against African nature.

Mkasi reports that many parents with children show an interest in same-sex relationships would be taken to a *sangoma* (a traditional healer for traditional medicine) or to church to be prayed for to be healed. Additionally, some are given Vaseline from Kwa-Shembe church to apply because they have a ‘demon’ (Mkasi, 2011: 65). If there is no change after being prayed for, they are supposed to leave the church. Through these practices, the church is promoting the stigma that makes it hard for an individual with a homosexual orientation to remain in the church. For this reason, people with homosexual orientation undergo an internal struggle. Such individuals opt to destructive behavior, which includes alcohol abuse, and sometimes become a victim of rape, with the consequence of HIV infection. These are the signals that the church fails to express the unconditional love of Triune God Whom they preach.

Carlse (2012: 88) reports that throughout the colonial era, colonialists and European missionaries had an intense effect on the normative interpretations with regards to religion, culture, and sexuality. Christian religion and its ideologies were broadly spread and were extremely influential. This can be evidenced nowadays, with the prominence of different African Christian churches, such as Zionist Christian Church and Isiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church, which are hybrid of various African traditional beliefs and Christian dogma (Carlse, 2012). King (1995, in: Carlse, 2012: 7) argues that gender and religion are interconnected in an individuals' perceptions of themselves and others, and this connection is informed by and rooted in "culturally shared religious and philosophical heritage". In South Africa, this shared culture and religious heritage frequently tends to promote harmful attitudes towards homosexuality that still pervade certain ideologies, as people do not acknowledge the same-sex relationships as part of African culture and nature of their religion (i.e., Shembe Church). Due to the effect of Christianity, it is therefore regarded as 'sinful'. Also, there are differing ideas of morality and ethics within the African context, although shared themes do occur in scholarship concerning African thought and ancestors are habitually prioritised.

Mbiti 1975 in: Mbaya and Cezula, 2019: 10) state that:

"What lies behind the conception of moral 'good' or 'evil', is ultimately the nature of the relationship between individuals in a given community or society. There is almost no 'secret sin': something or someone is 'bad' or 'good' according to their outward conduct. A person is not inherently 'good' or 'evil', but he acts in ways which are 'good' when they conform to the customs and regulations of his community, or 'bad' when they do not".

This perception of African thought from Mbiti highlight the status one's stance and behaviour or lead within community engages. Conforming to the traditional customs and rules of a society has religious and moral importance. Since heterosexuality is often rooted as the cultural norm, homosexuals frequently are exposed to legal, social, cultural, and religious alienating (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy and Moletsane, 2010: 8). Muholi (2009: 10) explains this when she observes that within the African culture, especially Zulu tradition, expectations exist that women ought to marry and then produce children with a male partner, referred to as the "head of the family", thereby obeying specific constructions of femininity and masculinity. However, when self-identified lesbian women do not conform to this ideal, they are instead viewed as deviants, who

must be punished in order to make them into real or true African women, who are aware of their place within their community.

The spread of Christianity during the colonial era is also shown in most African Christian churches (ZCC and Shembe church), as well as in the political contexts and Zulu patriarchs and an adherent of evangelical Christianity. Therefore, assumptions regarding sexuality that facilitated colonial myths have now reinscribed by political leaders in the contemporary colonial landscape. Political leaders like South African former president Jacob Zuma often claimed to talk in the name of the collective when reinforcing images of heterosexual identities and institutions, thereby reinforcing a homogeneous African sexual identity that forms part of envisioning a unified nation. The way in which sexuality has been represented has therefore been central to the imagining and crafting of nationalism and authoritarian cultures (Lewis, 2011: 210). As discussed previously on 'ruling masculinity', when accused of rape in 2006, Zuma appealed to his Zulu culture, stating that he was obliged to have sex with Khwezi, because she was aroused. This appeal to Zulu culture tends to reiterate colonial discourses about African men that presented them as hypersexualised and prone to promiscuity. Simultaneously, however, Zuma's image is also used to positively reinforce contemporary representations of African masculinity that tend to support colonial views of African men.

The rape case against Zuma thus displayed a tendency to appeal "to so-called traditional and cultural values in order to restore a gender regime that: accepts men as being in dominant public positions within society, that continually allows violence against women and that prioritises 'traditional' systems of controlling women in the postcolonial nation-state" (Gunkel, 2010: 47). This appeal to 'traditional and cultural values' brings into question a possible return to religious fundamentalism, which presents a threat to the South Africa's liberal Constitution. Zuma's innocent verdict after the rape trial shows how influential religious and cultural frameworks are within South African society, while often engaging with embedded ideologies that tend to contradict the Constitution. This rape trial, combined with Zuma's later statements on Heritage Day 2006 accusing people in the same-sex relationships of being a disgrace to God, makes use of his cultural standing as a traditional god-fearing patriarch. Comments such as these, made by political, cultural, and religious authorities like Jacob Zuma, reinforce and encourage discrimination toward same-sex intimacy. For this reason, the authority of ruling masculinity combined with religious fundamentalist ideals, as possibly evidenced by Jacob Zuma, can

indeed be a problem in the face of sexual rights, particularly those of women and homosexual individual.

History of homosexuality shows that same-sex relations are not something new. Carlse (2012: 14) demonstrates that the same-sex relationships that existed in Africa were referred to as ‘mummy-baby’ relationships, ancestral wives, and female-husbands. These intimacies were placed within broader African traditional religious and cultural schemes that had been normalised in different parts of Africa. These types of relationships were often accepted and regulated within African religious and cultural imaginings and belief systems that appeared to be benefiting the community, and ordained by the higher powers, such as ancestors. However, differing contexts and influences come into play within these relationships. By way of example, when a female *sangoma* takes an ancestral wife to assist her in her duties as a traditional healer, it is not perceived as immoral, rather, it is ordained by the ancestor, who has chosen the wife for her (Reed and Morgan, 2003: 381; Nkabinde, 2009: 146). Hence it gets accepted and honoured. I think this would be worth exploring. However, in the main, sexual intimacy is also seen as taboo within these female relationships, as sexual intercourse is often understood as requiring a penis, but this of course does not mean that other forms of sexual encounters do not take place. This definition of sexual intercourse is one of the ways that female same-sex relationships have been rendered invisible, as these relationships cannot be defined as sexual from this point of reference. Female same-sex relationships have also predominantly existed in the private sphere, and are often not talked about, facilitating secrecy and a denial of their existence in contemporary settings. Added to this, many reductionist notions of culture exclude the complexity present in traditions of African sexuality, and rather highlight patriarchal approaches to sexuality, which further marginalises these forms of intimacy.

Forms of same-sex relationships that are not linked to cultural frameworks or confined to the private sphere, such as ‘lesbian’, may be looked down upon, and even punishable. This is because western concepts of homosexuality, such as lesbian identities, present sexual orientation as an important aspect of selfhood (Morgan and Reid, 2003: 382). Because selfhood within the African context is generally connected to the well-being of the community, this individualistic definition of same-sex practices does not translate well into the African context. Nkabinde notes that in many ways she is more protected than other lesbians in the township, because of her status as a *sangoma*, and the special connection she has with the ancestors and

her status in the community. In this way she is able to straddle both African and Western conceptions of same-sex intimacy (Nkabinde, 2009: 147).

This sub-section described the *Ibandla LamaNazaretha* (The Shembe Church) as an African independent church, rooted in the *amaZulu* tradition, founded by Isaiah Shembe in 1910. The Shembe church is public about its position in terms of sexual diversity, that is, it is against homosexuality, and employs negative and harmful methods of addressing same-sex relations. There are multiple reports where they show their ruthlessness against homosexuality, even against their own queer congregant fellows, and assume that natural disasters are the result of same sex relations. The church is not invested in providing evidence of its claims. Due to its claims, many queers remain in closets fearing to be assaulted and discriminated because of their sexuality. Even prominent political, traditional and religious leaders portray negative and homophobic perceptions of same-sex relations, which exacerbate homophobic hate crimes against homosexual people, and reinforce the conception that homosexuality is un-African and un-Biblical, or sinful. Although, there are some African independent church pastors who question these homophobic ideologies and maintain that there is no difference before God. The Churches' refusal to accept homosexuality and queer individuals results in negative effects such as alcohol abuse, which may lead to victim raping and HIV infection.

### **2.1.3 Queer in Africa – *Izitabane* and faith**

Patrick Cheng looks at queer theology as a radical love that destabilises the gender and sex binaries. Queer, according to Cheng (2011: 4), refers to an “umbrella term that refers collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning and other individuals who identify with non-normative sexualities and/ or gender identities”. “This term may also include the allies who may not themselves identify as LGBTQIA group but stands in solidarity with their queer sisters and brothers in seeking a more just world concerning sexuality and gender identity” (Cheng, 2011: 4). Milani (2014: 76) represents the way in which the gender binary that distinguishes between males and females as complementary and desirable opposites, is continuously reproduced throughout every day (banal, and practices). Megan Robertson (2020) supports the above discussion about queer people in African faith landscapes. In Robertson's recently completed PhD study, the author asserts that “African anti-queer attitudes are propped up by religious, moral claims and by strong assertions that queer sexualities are un-African and a secular Western import” (Robertson (2019: 2).

Van Klinken (2019: 16) has asserted that queer African Christians tend to find a sense of belonging even within these contexts, that are seen to be Christian and homophobic. Queer people tend to experience marginalisation and exclusion from the spaces they once referred to as their spiritual homes, as in my own experience. Van der Walt et al. (2019: 9), argue a degree of visible and tangible progress in examining justice for the LGBTI people within the African faith landscape. In this paper, they propose that the use of “*izitabane zingabantu*, Ubuntu theology” could be applied to liberate *izitabane* from hate crime (homophobia) in African contexts to a more life-affirming faith space. Moreover, West et al. (2017: 18) reflect on work that has been done by other scholars over a long time in other African contexts, along the continent-wide network. These authors show that the violence that is experienced by LGBTI people within faith landscapes is nothing new, however it was not talked about.

Goss (1999: 50) argues that heteronormative theological recognition incorporated, rendered inviable LGBT voices and stigmatised them. Xavier (2014: 21) states that the same-sex marriage practice is known to be against the most of African beliefs, customs, culture and tradition and traditional leaders are obviously against the practice of same-sex marriage. Traditional leaders believe that this is a Western practice, and by being against it, they are protecting their African cultures. Former President Jacob Zuma states that “when I was growing up an *ungqingili* (a gay) would not have stood in front of me, I would knock him out”. As an influential and respected figure, this spread the hate towards gay men and or homosexuals. As we are in the post-apartheid Africa, television seeks to play a role in building a nation and re-construction a liberal, tolerant, progressive country by depicting black queer characters. This serves to ensure that all people from various backgrounds live together in harmony, as the African Zulu say state that “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (Mbiti), as Mbiti phrases this African idiom beautifully when he says, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. This is a true part definition of *ubuntu*. I argue that homosexuality is African, but homophobia is not, since it does not fit the equation or definition of *ubuntu*. In a study by Xavier (2014: 4) that he conducted based on the *Yizo Yizo* television show, the show proved ground-breaking in that it provided the first popular depiction of same-sex intimacy between black cultural communities (men and or women) and queerness that exists.

The idea that homosexuality is un-Africa and alien to African traditional culture is exactly what haunts queer people in African contexts. Xavier (2014: 10) continues to state that if tradition

is represented as that which is authentically and un-problematically African, then same-sex sexuality is its direct opposite – its constitutive outside.” Therefore, it is impossible that African queers can exist as part of African cultural practice represented but tradition. This means that queer people can only exist to be excluded, just as the quote from Zuma had indicated and subjected to forms of bodily violence at worst. Tradition, as well as religion, have been selectively put to use to particularly reinforce heteropatriarchy. Milani (2013: 77), in the study he conducted, asked whether or not “queers are really queer”, revealed that it perhaps never mattered which identity categories gay men on *meet market*<sup>1</sup> reproduce or contest. The study shows that they are, rather, “defiant” in their publicly acts, putting words to the domain of the erotic, domain which remain untold in any type of legislation sexual rights. Milani (2013: 82) states that the praising of the penis and other body parts of same-sex desires makes gay men ‘deviant’ and hence ‘queer’, where huge segments of South African population, despite its liberal Constitution, remains quite homophobic.

Kretz (2013: 208) shows the sad reality of the queer people in parts of Africa with regards to legislation and constitutional rights. In Uganda, homosexual people used to be killed and said they committed a crime (Bhala, 2019: 10 October 2019). On the other hand, Malawi’s president Joyce Banda has endeavored to suspend and gradually cancel out its colonial-era ban on the same-sex sexual activities (Joseph Kayira, 21 May 2012). Part of Zimbabwe and its sexual minorities and LGBTQIA individuals have pushed to protect the rights of LGBT people in its new Constitution, which had the effect of strengthening the country's anti-homosexuality laws (Zimbabwe Home Office, 22 January 2019). Their study also revealed that there were political gains or benefits that came along with opposing LGBTQIA rights. This deprived LGBTI individuals of their lives, rights, and basic freedom. The Malawian model later presented hope for those who were seeking a positive legislation for LGBTI people (Mwakasungula, 2016: 361); however, the ongoing discrimination, injustice, killing, and hate crime towards the LGBTI community still reflects the reality that the rights of LGBTI persons only exist in paper and not practice or reality. The political infrastructure on this issue causes severe harm to LGBT individuals, who are already marginalized by the government and populace.

Van Klinken (2013: 82) argues that the need for the recognition of the homosexual rights made Zambians believe that it symbolized the sign of the ‘end times’. This led to public

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<sup>1</sup> A South African online community where men were looking for other men to form relationships.

controversies, where it was claimed to be demonic (associated with the Devil). This claim was made when Ban Ki-Moon visited Zambia to appeal for the rights of homosexual people in African countries. Ki-Moon was said to be the Anti-Christ and had an association with the Devil. Zambians believed that he came from the United States to African countries with cosmic conspiracy to impose a devilish agenda in Zambia and other African countries. Therefore, in his discourse, the issues of homosexuality are perceived from a religious worldview as part of a struggle between God and the Devil. This shows that although much had been done to deal with the issue of homosexuality in Africa, the acceptance of homosexuality “is a major schism between Africa, as always associated with traditionalism and backwardness and the liberal and modern West” (Mbembe, 2001:5). Surrounding the controversies about homosexuality in Africa, religion is often mentioned in media reports. Evidently, faith communities are inherently homophobic.

Moreover, it is vital to note that all Ghanaians appreciated the sexual freedom of homosexual people. For instance, Kwame and Aderinto (2009: 129) assert that “the college students were hesitant to subscribe to the idea of addressing homosexual peoples’ sexual behavior”. They believed that repressing same-sex relationships would contradict their country’s principles, its rich history rooted in Pan-Africanism, and the fight against colonial repression. Homosexuals and their supporters always tended to be contained by the use of print and electronic media as a means of intimidation. This is always done by the opponents of same-sex relationships, where hate speech and hate crime is discussed. Most African countries, including Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, as well as faith communities, view homosexuality as another form of Western cultural infiltration and imperialism, and they demand heterosexuality as the only form of sexuality in Africa, while they intensify the implications of same-sex relationships on the conventional family and marriage system, according to generational continuity and religious values. Amadiume (1986: 72) argues that in African history, a woman would get married (black lesbianism) to another woman in Africa simply for the purposes of cooperation between women. Accordingly, same-sex relationships opposers should be careful not to conflate Western influence with established African norms, especially when it comes to study of women and gender.

The LGBTIQ+ rights have created enormous controversy in Africa. There are numerous reports about the rights of LGBTI people in African countries, including South Africa. After a

long fight, South Africa became the first country to include the rights of homosexual orientation in their Constitution. De Vos (2013: 28) argues intensely for the rights of homosexual people and for the proposed the law/Constitution as a tool to be used by LGBTI people to gain legal equality in African countries. This thesis agrees with this approach. However, others have focused on religion and queers. Therefore, in this thesis, the main aim is to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* within the traditional faith landscape. This will be done through auto-ethnography of this study, employing queer theory. To my knowledge, when it comes to the existing literature on Queers in Africa, little work has been done specifically with the Shembe church and its queer people. This study furthers the exploration of the lived reality of *isitabane* within the traditional African faith landscape using the method of auto-ethnography. Van der Walt et al. (2019: 12) in their informative work, propose an ‘*izitabane zingabantu ubuntu* theology’, which provides impetus for this study, where there is a significant need for a work that is done by African queers from their own embodied experiences. To support queers in Africa, LGBTIQA+ people need to be included when doing a theological work that concerns them, that will be done from African embodied understanding of *ubuntu* and their experiences. Homosexuality is African, but homophobia is not, because it does not fit the definition of *ubuntu*. Lefa (2015: 49) explains *ubuntu* as “a quality that includes the essential human virtues; compassion and humanity”. There is a need for understanding not vengeance, where *ubuntu* fundamentally precludes victimization.

This subsection engaged the complexity of queers in Africa (*isitabane* and faith). African queers tend to find a sense of belonging within these Christian and homophobic contexts. Queers experience marginalisation and exclusion from those faith spaces they once referred to as spiritual homes. *Izitabane zingabantu ubuntu* theology is engaged in this subsection and entire thesis as a tool that can be used to liberate *izitabane* in African contexts and faith, specifically to lead to a more life-affirming place of worship for all, regardless of their sexuality and gender, and embrace sexual diversity, as proposed by Van der Walt (2019: 9). African traditional leaders who believe that homosexuality is a Western cultural tendency, claiming to be protecting African culture in persecuting homosexuals. This derails the efforts made by queer activists to liberate fellow queers. For this reason, there is a need for the reconsideration of the rights of queers in Africa. This study forms part of the work of African queers to speak from their own embodied experiences. Homophobia defies the categorical imperatives of *ubuntu*.

#### **2.1.4 Faith and embodied research drawing on own narrative- embodied research**

Van Klinken also suggests that queer storytelling is key to the development of grassroots and disrupts the silence and taboo surrounding sexual diversity in hegemonic African Churches and or theologies. West et al. (2017: 24) also note that this when calling for theology being done from a queer perspective. As autoethnography constitutes auto (self), ethno (culture) and graphy (writing), it is a process that combines research and personal narrative, so as to characterise and analyse experience in the interest of understanding culture. In this case, it involves understanding the intersection of faith tradition and sexuality. Cote (2017: 26) asserts the importance of storytelling as a robust healing process and encourages others to have their voices heard through storytelling. Ronai (1996: 88), in her many autoethnographies, discussed the controversial topic of child sex abuse in the context of her own experience and research. This gives an indication that this method enables the surfacing of taboo topics that others may not be ready to talk about.

For this reason, in this study, autoethnography is the medium authors and researchers use to explore societal taboos. I am engaging my experience within the intersection of sexuality, gender, religion/ faith tradition and gender-based violence, and I am doing so for others envisioning their sexualities within faith traditional spaces. People who witness or read my narrative will read the pain put on paper, if not into spoken words, which will help them to understand queer people in ways they never had before. Park-Fuller (2017: 44) asserts that in autobiographical narrative performances, the performer often speaks about acts of social transgression. In doing so, the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act, or a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced “an act of reverse discourse that struggles with the preconceptions borne in the air of dominant politics” (p. 191). I am anticipating filling this gap by using my own embodied narrative, and I am using autoethnography for this.

Vivienne (2015: 170) conducted their digital storytelling case study in which they desired to have an impact on social attitudes with regards to gender and sexuality, including in their personal province of friends, family, and public spheres comprised of unknown or invisible audiences. The aim of the stories is communication and for numerous marginalized minority groups and to reach various audiences in all spheres and/ or contexts in which embodied experiences and issues are shared. The significant importance of autobiographies addresses the identified embodied reality of marginalized minorities, their issues, and hoping to reach out for

the community engagement. Vivienne (2015: 173) reveals that there is a need for numerous narratives to reach the social stage and be seen by many audiences. Limited access to storytelling processes (means of storytelling) reduces the likeliness of social impact. The struggle between personal vulnerability and the desire to communicate to a wide audience is not one that is experienced exclusively by queer storytellers.

However, it is a theoretical problem that Foucault explored in a series of six lectures delivered at the University of California (Berkeley, 2011: 42) in which he investigated the concept of “parrhesia” (or fearless speech) as it was used in Greek literature. He characterises parrhesia as “a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth and risks his life because he recognizes [sic] truth-telling as a duty to improve or in order to help other people (as well as himself)” (Foucault, 1972, In: Peters, 2003: 182). He outlines the qualities in the parrhesiaste, that is, the message must constitute the speaker’s own opinion and also be expressed in a way that makes no rhetorical effort to veil what he or she thinks (alignment between belief and truth). Many queer people prefer to remain silent so as to maintain safety because sometimes truth-telling can be a risky activity. However, in relation to Foucault’s observation, these stories expose the hidden skeletons in the family closet as well as larger contexts, even more unpleasant, social truths. It can also be argued that, beside the risks of narrating and sharing of stories, there are also numerous cases of unforeseen benefits, which include motivation for the ongoing therapeutic conversations and mutual support (which is proved to be an affirming and empowering experience) with the friends and or/ family members who, as Vivienne (2015: 180) notes, as a direct consequence of the storytelling process, have been confronted with issues that may have been previously ignored. I engage my embodied experience (narrative) in this study, believing that it might help ‘open the eyes to our reality’ as queer people existing in the African society, and the African faith landscape. This, I believe, is a tactful method to communicate or speak to a divergent range of powerful audiences.

Moreover, Msibi (2017: 515) also reports that queer learners in South Africa, due to deeply established ideologies of patriarchy, together with ignorance, have been rendered invisible, and are silenced, and they experience discrimination and exclusion. In his paper, Msibi (2017: 516) claims that using narratives (embodied experiences) from the queer learners, silence is challenged and broken. Narratives are also used to present the reality of queer people within the South African context. Morrell (2002: 29) describes these learners as living “at a knife’s edge” because of the violence perpetrated around and against them. South Africa largely

remains poor and black with toxic ideas around masculinities controlling sexuality (Selikow, Zulu and Cedra, 2002: 24). These harmful masculinities completely support, maintain and sustain 'compulsory' heterosexuality. The telling of queer narratives of embodied experiences stands as a tool that tends to deconstruct some of the long-standing assumptions about homosexuality within the African landscapes, unlike the recognised and dominant narratives from African leaders that seek to silence the lives and existence of queer people in Africa by rendering them invisible (see Msibi, 2009; Epprecht, 2004).

Young girls in Africa often experience significant boundaries concerning their sexuality with an emphasis on promoting modest behaviour, that is protecting their virginity and preventing sexual relations. Whereas, young South African males show their power in different and violent manner, which includes violence, sexual assault, and rape, as well as pursuing multiple sexual partners. For this reason, schools in the South African landscape are observed not to be a life-affirming space for young girls envisioning their queer identities but cause root of hetero- masculinity which puts both at risk (Bhana, 2005: 182; Leach and Humphreys, 2007: 122, Bhana and Pattman, 2009: 24). Connell (1995) notes that townships themselves are generally the violent place where GBV is pervasive and ascribes this to poverty, marginalisation, as well as discriminatory and patriarchal systems that exist within these contexts, resulting in men employing violence and coercion to defend their toxic power. Additionally, violence around these landscapes is also deeply rooted in culture and religion. Bhana, De Lange, and Mitchelle (2009: 49) write that "dominant cultural norms establish an environment in which the engagement in violent and coercive sexual relations is encouraged for 'real men'." In terms of sexuality, compulsory heterosexuality is, therefore, promoted, with homosexual behaviour often viewed as an illegitimate expression of desire (Mitchell and Smith 2003; Francis and Msibi 2011: 73).

Language is a powerful tool by means of which homophobia and heterosexism are established. This is frequently coercive and upheld through hegemony and collusion (known as internalisation) (Morrow and Torres, 1995, cited in Msibi, 2017: 73). Msibi (2017: 24), in his study conducted based on queer narratives from school learners, concluded that religion, culture, and gender has a significant interplay in enforcing homophobia and sexism. Homophobia is thus a weapon for sexism. From the report of queer narratives, there is an apparent lack of understanding and misinformation concerning homosexuality, which constitute the key elements driving homophobia in South African township schools. We need

to significant others from all settings or spheres on queer issues. In this way, audiences can become change agents in their settings.

Cavanaugh (2016: 8) states that “one issue with the queer-safe model is that it unintentionally tokenises LGBTQ people and their experiences, which invisibilises them”. Same as in our society at large, schools are heteronormative and cisnormative spaces; therefore, queer people are made invisible in school settings (Toomey, McGuire and Russell, 2002: 21). Cavanaugh (2016: 17) concludes “...stories can be a great tool for teachers and audiences in general to initiate conversations about gender and diversity in their contexts, and that ongoing integration of LGBTQIA plus content in these respective settings will make for more sustained inclusivity from inner or smaller contexts to schools and society at large.”

Through fostering narratives, society can acknowledge, challenge and educate audiences. Through narratives of difference and vulnerability, people come to understand gender and sexual diversity, and right then, may independently engage to affirm queerness in their contexts. However, while the telling of stories in no way completely wins the battle of gathering full visibility for queer people in schools, families, and society at large, but it does establish a space where visibility for queer people is even more possible (Cavanaugh, 2016: 13). Through the personal narrative that I am engaging in this thesis, I believe that if people/ audiences are exposed to personal stories and get taught to respectfully share and listen to difference, and gender and sexual diversity in particular, they are equally engaged in a process of reflection on how to be more accepting of difference in their contexts and day-to-day life. I also believe that if we can share stories of difference and vulnerability, we can queer our respective settings or contexts: making them spaces where difference is our commonality, taking care not to produce normalcy as an aim. Msibi (2017: 12) agrees with Cavanaugh (2016: 3) on the fact that there is an importance for people (from all spheres) to establish communities of difference-making rooms for personal stories, sharing of own stories of difference and vulnerability, and enabling opportunities for others to do the same. If we can create opportunities for schoolers, queers within faiths, community members, and ourselves to come out about how we are all different (queer), maybe can be as little as less lonely, discriminated against, excluded and exposed to all unnecessary forms of harm and violence, and we can come into a more inclusive space.

Van Klinken (2018: 26) in his article, addressed a question regarding how African queer theology might be developed, as a theology that interrogates and counter-balances prevalent

representations of the sexuality of queer people as ‘un-African’ and ‘un-African’. To answer this question, they engaged in a storytelling work that is socially, politically empowering and theologically significant (Van Klinken, 2018: 26). African feminist theologians use ‘her-stories’ to develop ‘her-theologies’. This thesis also employs the use of similar methodological technique, as queer auto-ethnographical storytelling can be a basis for developing queer theologies in traditional African faith communities. This paper relates this method to the Kenyan queer anthology *Stories of Our Lives* (2015, 10 April 2015), which is a collection of autobiographical stories narrated by individuals identifying as LGBTI or as queer in Kenya. The *Stories of Our Lives* project was inspired by the notion well-developed in postcolonial, feminist, and queer studies, that storytelling is a way to “reclaim the agencies of people who have been excluded from cultural and political centres and for whom epistemic and political agency remains a struggle” (Stories of Our Lives, 2015, 10 April 2015). Clearly, the latter relates to LGBTIQ+ community in African countries (i.e., Kenya) as pointed out in the preface to the *Stories of Our Lives*, are easily deprived existence or are caricatured in popular representation. So, for them, telling their embodied stories enables them to claim conscious authority, and to counter the objectified, dehumanised representations of them circulated by others.

Certainly, narratives provide insight into the social, material, emotional, sexual, and spiritual lives of queer people in Africa, their hopes and fears, pleasure and desires, frustrations and expectations. Indeed, a vast difference of experiences people share cannot be reduced to a narrative of Kenyan queer victimhood (Van Klinken, 2018: 12); however, on the contrary, the stories prove in various ways the agency and creativity found in Kenyan lives. The stories give understanding in the many ways in which people negotiate their sexual and religious identities, the various embodied realities (experiences) they have with faith communities and religious leaders, and the ways in which they understand themselves in relation to God.

Van Klinken (2018: 4) also hints at the importance of storytelling that it is a methodology that African theologians have adopted to develop socially and culturally applicable theology, enthused by the robust narrative and oral traditions of African cultures. Storytelling is not only a technique for establishing a culturally relevant theology, but it is also politically significant as it allows foregrounding the viewpoints and experiences of people and communities who otherwise do not become part of the theological discourse, granting them epistemological privilege. Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole argues that “African theology should take

the narratives of ordinary Africans” as a starting point to write a “theology from below” (Van Klinken, 2018: 18). In the telling of the stories, African women theologians have brought women’s experiences and perspectives into the theological controversy and have addressed the significant issues of gender and sexuality in African cultures and societies. In a contemporary setting, some theologians have started to address issues of homosexuality; however, this task is still at an early stage (Van Klinken, 2018: 10). Stories of queer people remain commonly untold and queer voices remain largely muted in African theology, in the same way as women’s voices continue to be muted. Against this background, I employ the methodology of auto-ethnography, as *Stories of Our Lives* (2015) note that it is an important text, as the stories provide steppingstones towards developing an African narrative queer theology.

This subsection engaged the importance of queer storytelling as it disrupts the silence and taboo around sexual diversity (homosexuality) in hegemonic African churches and theologies and gives them affirmation that their voices are heard. Queer scholars and theologians collectively call for a theology done from the perspectives of queers. Telling of queer stories encourages other fellow queers and victims of GBV to feel free to talk about their experiences and reclaim their existence and embrace their sexual identities and gender, letting their voices be heard. Also, the significance of storytelling results in a healing process. Queer storytelling makes people realise and understand queers in ways they have never imagined. The use of narratives unearths the reality of queer people within the South African contexts.

## **2.2 CONCLUSION**

The social phenomenon of sexuality and gender is a complex one to deal with. This chapter revealed that homosexuality has and always existed in African societies, however, community leaders used to hide it. The literature shows that same-sex sexualities exist in African countries, but less accepted due to the harmful ideologies and perceptions surrounding patriarchy, culture, and religion. This leads to negative experiences for LGBTIQ+ individuals. African independent churches are exposed on their positionality that excludes realities of same-sex relationships. as shown in the literature, though there has been applied law to support and protect marginalised sexualities in Africa. However, the African faith communities are less accepting of gender and sexual diversity in their undertaking of theology. African societies are also against homosexuality, as revealed on the hate speech and hate crime that occurs in communal spaces. Anything from GBV, HIV, and even the current pandemic of Covid-19, as

well as natural disasters is blamed on homosexuals, whereas these realities are primarily formed by culture, religion, and larger forces. This shows the ongoing hate, exclusion, discrimination, lack of acceptance, and injustice on LGBTIQ+ community. The literature also shines a light on the struggle queers fight within the Shembe faith as they are consistently blamed for natural disasters, where even prominent political and religious leaders show hatred, they have for homosexual individuals and tend to hide behind cultural values to control and drive gender and sexual identities to heteropatriarchy and heteronormative sexual performances. The scholars engaged in narratives shows the relevance of embodied story telling as a tool of voicing and revealing what has and had been silenced and hidden. Language is a powerful tool by means of which homophobia and heterosexism are established in our society and faith.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter showcased scholarly work engaging the embodied lived reality of LGBTIQ+ people. The main focus was to engage sexual diversity in African faith landscapes, sexuality and gender in the Shembe faith tradition, queer in Africa, *isitabane*, and faith. This thesis draws from the tools of queer theory which challenges sex and gender binaries (Cheng, 2011: 5) describes as a tool to challenge and deconstruct the existing gender binaries. This is an important tool, as we need a community that affirms and gives hope to all regardless of their gender and sexuality. Altheas-Reid (2000: 56) criticizes liberation theology as well as feminist theology, as these lack attention to the sexual body, particularly the gender and sexual body diversity. From her book, “The Queer God” (2003), she shines a light at the importance of dialogue between the sacred and transgressive body. This chapter showcases queer theory as a tool that is used to disrupt the norm that exclude, discriminate and stigmatize LGBTIQ+ people.

#### **3.2 Queer theory**

Schneider (2000: 208) argues that queer theory generally, aims to “disrupt” modernist fixed ideas concerning sexuality and gender by taking post-structuralist critiques of “natural” identities. Schneider (2000: 210) continues to argue that, closely tied to analysis of gender, sexuality and culture, queer theory slants its hermeneutic position decidedly in the direction of historicism and social constructionism. Queer theory disrupts sexual identity as a stable signifier by focusing on it as a functional product of historical and social processes. Cheng (2011: 7) asserts that neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality are given in the queer frame. Furthermore, De Laurits (1991: 48) argues that queer theory is hard to clearly define, since it came from multiple critical and cultural contexts, including feminism, post-structuralist theory, radical movements of people of color, the gay and lesbian movements, AIDS activism, many sexual subcultural practices, such as sadomasochism, and post-colonialism. Although queer theory had its beginnings in the educational sphere, the cultural events surrounding it also had a huge impact. Activist groups pushed back in the 1980s against the lack of government intervention after the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic. Gay activist groups like ACT-UP and Queer Nation took the lead to force attention to both the AIDS epidemic and the gay and lesbian

community as a whole. These groups helped define the field with the work they did by highlighting a non-normative option to the more traditional identity politics and margin group creations.

Queer theory as an academic tool came about in part from gender and sexuality studies that in turn had their origins from lesbians and gay studies and feminist theory (Teresa de Lauretis, 1991:14). It is a much newer theory, in the sense that it was established in the 1990s and contents many of the set ideas of the more established fields, it comes from by challenging the notion of defined and finite identity categories, as well as the norms that create a binary of good versus bad sexualities. Queer theorists contend that there is no set normal, only changing norms that people may or may not fit into, making queer theorists' main challenge to disrupt binaries in hopes that this will destroy difference as well as inequality. Lauretis (1991: 39), in her book *Queer theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* explains that the term queer there are at least three interrelated projects at play within this theory, namely: refusing heterosexuality as a benchmark for sexual formations; a challenge to the belief that lesbian and gay studies is one single entity; and a strong focus on the multiple ways that race shapes sexual bias.

Queer theory 'queers' take for granted cultural associations concerning all sexual identities (and the social placements that adhere to these identities) by revealing their vulnerability to history and politics and therefore to change. Schneider (2000: 206) also hints at the importance of queer theory, employing 'queer' in its name as it is important too for these basic presuppositions of the discourse. So, in theoretical terms, 'queer' has come to denote a hermeneutic similarity to other late 20<sup>th</sup> century theories, such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism and post-colonialism, all of which denaturalize or de-essentialize formerly stable identities, such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, race, nationality, woman and man. Schneider notes that "As a term, queer refers to something outside the norm" (2000: 206). So, with heterosexuality as a norm, queer then, 'naturally' refers to those who are not heterosexual. A difficulty inherent to the task of defining 'queer', however, is that the act of defining brings and domesticates the defined, rendering the queer no longer outside of anything, and so no longer queer, in theory at least. Because queer theory takes on the outside viewpoint, at least in terms of placements of power based on heteronormative presuppositions, domesticating queerness is a problem of its work. Historically, the term was a signifier for men who desired sex with other men, introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is some opposition as the pathologizing medical term "homosexual" (coined by a Swiss doctor in 1869) (Schneider, 2000: 208). Although this whole lexicon was known and deployed only by queers, it has registered at least from the Victorian

period onward, in terminology that could be packed up and understood by the wider culture and that improved on the usual choice of words flung around locker rooms were valued. While in the larger culture, queer did become one of the more polite of a range for derogatory terms for same-sex lovers, it remained in ambiguous tension for so-called queers themselves, making it eventually ripe for theory's plucking, as it were. Schneider (2000: 206) states that transformation in the late 1960s, paved the way for contemporary queer theory, from the closet society to public gay rights organizations and the public discourse on homosexuality that resulted. Queer emerged in the "wider culture (to the chagrin of those who thought a perfectly good word was thereby "ruined")" (Schneider, 2000: 206). Although it was actually a term taken from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century slang for "woman of dubious morals" (Schneider, 2000 :207) and seemed to support assumptions of gay male effeminacy, 'gay' basically fit the civil rights ethos of the 1960s and 1970s, by suggesting a more positive self-image (Schneider, 2000 :210).

Additionally, 'gay' had become associated mostly with men and primarily with logic of rights that relies for the most part of the modernist notion of identity: stable, binary, homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality. As the 1980s closed, the 'gay community' had come out of the closet, only to discover that it was not only of the same-sex loving men and woman, but of lesbians who rejected gay identifications, bisexuals, transvestites of all persuasions and transgendered persons (Schneider, 2000 :211). Queer began to be deployed in order to encompass the emerging of sexual minorities, both because it did not seem to be historically attached to any one of them and because its implied defiance of the gay rights effort to 'fit-in'. a number of problem where queer meets biblical studies and theology. Queer refers to a particular, and of difference that stands outside and against normative sexual identity and so refers to more than same-sex pairings of men or women (Schneider, 2000: 208). Queer theory's adaptation of feminism (the kind of feminism, that is, that argues for the differences gender makes in perspective and meaning) claims people who do not fit in the heterosexual norm do not just live differently (from the norm). They are different in the sense that they use differently and constitutes a difference that both supports and undermines the givenness of the norm. This thesis uses queer theory to disrupt and decolonize the same system and push its buttons, precisely because they do not conform to the larger cultural demand that sex be made invisible (and thereby less obviously shameful) through normative, normalizing, and naturalizing practices, assertion), and assumptions (Schneider, 2000: 5 & Cheng, 2011: 206). Queer theory is used in this paper to destabilize identities, and lesbian/gay liberationist readings, which seek to legitimate them.

Now I turn to the understanding and use of queer theory. Queer theory, as demonstrated by the late philosopher Foucault, looks at sexuality as an entity that is still undergoing through negotiations and dissemination rather than a natural entity. Cheng (2011: 6) asserts that queer theory “challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduced to fixed binary categories such as ‘homosexual’ versus ‘heterosexual’ or female versus male”. Therefore, I employ the use of queer theory in this study as it is relevant for my topic as the Shembe Church is against homosexuality, believing that it is against the way God created us. I employ the use of queer theory as a tool to deconstruct and disrupt or decolonise the Shembe Church’s socially and traditionally constructed ideologies of gender and sexuality (homo). As the queer theory questions the very notions of sexual identity, which is why queer theology is not an identity-based theology, but rather, an anti-identity-based theology (Stuart, 2003: 128). Stuart continues to point out that queer theory “problematizes the binary understandings of gender and sex” (Stuart, 2003: 128).

I am also using queer theory to deconstruct the colonial category of 'gay' as White, North American, middle class, late-capitalist, and even middle-aged, Goss (1999: 50). Queer theory, in short: “has much to do in keeping up with queer political culture, it contributes to the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age, it can make the world even queerer than ever” (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 11). Althaus-Reid (2000: 92) asserts that at the heart of queer theory lies an attack on essentialism the belief that any apparent complexity can be uncovered to reveal simplicity at its core denaturalising of identity. In this respect, these tools provided by queer theory are useful in my study, and the fact that queer theory exposes the sexual roots underlying all theology and takes the search for God to new depths of social and sexual exclusion (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 140). Schneider (2000:206) argues that “Queer theory is just for or about so-called homosexuals, it is a critical theory concerned principally with cultural deployments of power through social constructions of sexuality and gender”. In general, queer theory seeks to deconstruct modernist notions of fixed sexuality and gender (Tolbert, 2002: 62) by stressing natural identities.

Piantato (2016: 5) states that queer theory is an “anti-normative approach that refuses the dichotomies by suggesting a more complicated explanation of gender and sexuality and it actually goes beyond the limit of feminism that, with its emphasis on gender identity, leaves almost unexplored the sexuality field.” Therefore, queer theory concentrates particularly on the ideas of sex and sexuality through reflecting all persons with marginalized sexual identities

which could fit into the hegemonic social discourses, legitimating them as alternative sexual orientations that can be describe by the term queer. It is exactly across the notion of fluidity that queer theory formulates a new understanding of gender identity, through refusing the binarism concerning men and women. Certainly, queer theory argues that gender identity cannot be simply reduced to this opposition, as it incorporates a broad range of subjectivities that are not essentially recognizable with the term 'man' or 'woman'. Additionally, this approach suggests that it is not likely to define an individual's gender based on such individual's not belonging to the opposite gender, however, rather, gender must be recognized as a social performance that an individual of either sex can perform (Butler, 1990: 124). Furthermore, the feminist binary reasoning resulted in the development of additional combinations at different levels. On the other hand, gender conceptualizations as if it was two distinct categories, contributed to formulate a difference among feminine and masculine functional sex and therefore to reinforce the biological postulation of the male/female sex difference.

On the other hand, it also commanded to the opposition among hetero- and homosexual orientation by reflecting sexuality as an inner and fixed individual's attribute. Currently, this gender binary order is firmly connected with the heteronormativity, which places heterosexuality in a hegemonic or dominant position regarding homosexuality, perceived as a deviation from the norm, and which entirely refuses any other opportunity of other sexuality (Fineman, Jacson, and Romero, 2009: 6). As such, the aim of using queer theory in this thesis is to deconstruct such identified categories and the hegemonic structures and ideologies pertaining to homosexuality, and that which contribute to the maintenance of the understanding gender, sex, and sexual identities as rigid and unalterable. Henceforth, across the view of fluidity and non-heteronormative identities, queer theory provides the opportunity of the development of a dynamic queer community for "a being-together animated by resistance, discord and disagreement" (Sullivan, 2003: 148) among persons, recognizing difference and diversity (Piantato, 2006: 6, cited in Hatzfedt, 2011: 17).

It is essential to note the fact that queer theory does not only limit itself in deconstructing the traditional heteronormative understanding of sex and gender; however, it embraces deconstructing homosexuality as a binary as well. Consequently, providing space to contain all sexualities in the modern age has raised the fact that sexuality is not fixed, rather fluid. Therefore, it would be not fair to only deconstruct heterosexual for homosexuality for the longest time has been taken to substitute gay and lesbian, and this also builds questions as to

how about the other BTIQA identities. Callis notes that “to the queer theorist, heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary social constructs that old saliency only in certain historical moments, rather than descriptors of innate types. Therefore, rather than studying the homosexual or heterosexual individuals, the queer theory studies the webs of power and discourse that establishes and maintain the idea that such individuals exist, and that defining individuals be sexual objects choice is somehow natural” (Callis, 2009: 215). Schneider (2000: 209) also describes queer theory as not just for or all about homosexual people, but advances that “it is important to know why queer theory employs queer in its name, for understanding the basic presupposition of the discourse the term queer has come to denote a hermeneutical position similar to other late 20<sup>th</sup> century theories”. He then points out that in primary, queer theory delivers an intellectual framework “for treating sexuality as a meaningful site of difference that could illuminate texts and traditions in helpful if sometimes unsettling ways” (Schneider, 2000: 206).

De Laurites (1991: 209) states the three vital features of queer theory: “a refusal of heterosexuality as a benchmark for all sexual formations, an attentiveness to gender capability of interrogating the frequent assumption that lesbian and gay studies is a single, homogenous object and an insistence on the multiple ways in which race crucially shapes sexual subjectivity” (De Laurites, 1991:209, cited in Sithole, 2018: 44). This auto-ethnographical study seeks to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition, drawing from the tools of queer theory in the way demonstrated above. Werner (2004: 322) assert that queer researcher seeks to speak and/or address issues pertaining to gender and sexuality, and desire in ways that problematize the referent. This is the move that seeks to use embodied personal narratives to discover how they can contribute to enhance the capacity for the African Independent faith traditions to navigate sexual diversity. Stuart (2003: 103) points out that queer theory, like all theories, has its own critiques, like that “it has been accused of patriarchal terrorism boring its way into gender politics and erasing the hard-fought identities and women and gay men in the name of liberation. It has also tended towards nihilism (negativism, nothingness and pessimism), the only hope it can hold out is the hope of an unending, subversive performance of identity, and endless drag show” (Stuart, 2003: 103). Cathy (2005, cited in Love, 2010: 174) mentions that queerness has also been criticized as a “false universal, one that claims to address the situation of all marginal subjects but in fact, is focused on the concerns of gay and lesbians” however, Love (2010) adds that there will always be a

correspondence in the knowledge formation of queer studies and transgender studies (Love, 2010: 174).

Butler (1990: 118) provides a performative grasp of gender, which goes beyond the idea that it is culturally and socially constructed. She argues that gender identity is not a manifestation of the person's natural gender and of what they actually are at an intrinsic level, but it is established across repetitive practices that the subject continually enacts. Thus, performance is not influenced since it is not conscious, but regulated across regulative discourses, and there is no self behind it. Hence, in Butler's view, the subject is completely disadvantaged of agency and altered into a simple illusion of the self, where they are not the actor of the action but the outcome of it (Butler, 1990: 118). Across the deconstruction of sex and gender, Butler (1990: 119) gives also the likelihood to enlarge the methods in which sexual orientation is comprehended by refusing the idea that sexuality should be described by a mutually exclusive gender preference. So, this destabilisation of heteronormativity, in this paper, is also inherent to the struggle in contradiction with heterosexist expectations, which contribute to generating and maintaining a sex-role system (gender binary).

This subsection has discussed and engaged the understanding of queer theory from different perspective and how it developed and is understood with regards to gender and sexuality. It further discussed its importance and effectiveness in engaging issues of sexuality and gender binaries. The following subsection engages queer theology.

### **3.3 Queer Theology**

Cheng (2011: 7) states that the term 'queer theology', is, for many, a troubling term, as they tend to question the association between theology and "queerness"; and queer is known to be a term that is derogatory. However, in contemporary years, this term has been increasingly put in use by scholars in a different context of biblical and theology, looking at the intersection between faith, gender, and sexuality. Examples from the book *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body Collection of Provocative Essays* (Petrik Cheng 2011: 13) hints on queer theory and theology as the groundbreaking. *The Queer Bible Commentary* (2011: 11), written from the point of views of those with marginalized sexualities and gender identities. In simple terms, Cheng (2011: 9) states that queer theology is "talk about God", that is God plus Word, which can therefore be understood as "queer talk about God" (Cheng, 2011: 8).

Cheng (2011: 3) gives us the three definitions of the terminology 'queer', by means of which he understands queer theology. His framework I find informative and applicable here. He first demonstrates the definition of queer as an umbrella term that wholly covers and defines queer a synonym for the acronym LGBTQIA. This term, here, appears to be an inclusive, that defines queer, gender diverse, sexual orientation, and gender non-conforming people. To add, according to Cheng (2011: 13), the utilization of the term queer as an umbrella term reflects an identity that is collective and should be differentiated from the personal identity of queer. Although the term 'queer' was previously attached to negative connotations, in recent years, LGBTI people positively and proudly embrace all that is transgressive or opposed to societal norms, particularly with respect to sexuality and gender identities. Queer refers to the erasing of boundaries and the grounding in academic discipline (queer theory), that is challenging and disrupting the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific facts or scientific concepts that can be reduced to fixed binary categories (such as homo vs. hetero/female vs. male). Therefore, queer theory erases and/or deconstructs these boundaries with respect to these categories of sexuality and gender. Schneider (2000: 208) also argues that queer theory is not just about the 'so-called homosexuals' but is more a critical theory concerned primarily with cultural uses of power through social constructions of sexuality and gender.

Schneider (2000: 207) indicates that historically, this term queer was utilized as a signifier for men who had sexual attraction with same sex, introduced back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in some opposition to the pathologizing medical term homosexual. Schneider (2000: 207) continues to state that: "by mid-1980s, when the AIDS epidemic galvanized [sic] a more visible, vocal and demanding activism, gays seemed too tamed, and parlor bound for the defiance and desperation of the men who were dying and the lesbians who often were the only ones willing to care and fight for them." The term queer fits the changes better because it seemed effective and stronger and could be used in active opposition to its practice. In addition, gay became associated with mostly men, and primarily with a logic of rights that relies for the most part on a modernist notion of identity, with a steady binary maintaining homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality. During the 1980s, they "shut the gay community that came out of their closets only to find that it was not only comprised of same-sex loving men and women, but of lesbians who rejected gay identifications as well, as bisexuals, transvestites of all affiliation, and transgendered individuals" (Schneider, 2000: 206). Then the term queer was used in order to

encompass the emerging diversity of sexual minorities, both because it seems not to be historically attached to any one of them, and because its implied defiance of the gay rights to fit in (Schneider, 2000: 207).

Considering this in the context of the current study, I propose to use the queer theory as the relevant theological framework. Queer, as described by Cheng (2011: 3), argues that queer is an umbrella term that refers collectively to “gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning as other individuals who identify with non-normative sexualities and/ or gender identities” (Cheng, 2011: 3). The term “queer” also includes allies, who do not identify as lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning. However, they stand in solidarity with their queer sisters and brothers in pursuing a parallel world and respect for LGBTI community members and sexual and gender diversity. In simpler words, queer is another word for LGBTQIA. The term queer also referred to as a “transgressive action”, meaning that action of reclaiming the word that has been understood and used negatively. In recent years, this word is used by LGBT people in a positive way to refer to all that is opposed to social norms, specifically concerning sexual and gender diversity (Cheng, 2011: 5). Lastly, the queer term is understood as “erasing boundaries” that has been understood to differentiate between men and woman, as in that fixed binary of normative and performative sexualities that are considered natural and others as unnatural.

Queer theology as a framework links to queer theory as a tool and tends to begin by understanding that gender variance and queer desire have always been present in human history, including faith traditions and other sacred texts, for example, Jewish scriptures and the Bible. The church as well as the queer community, through the queer theological framework, can benefit from ‘reexamination’ of church teachings on sexuality through these tools that work hand in hand on complex issues. The African Independent Churches’ stance pertaining sexuality does not uphold its own teachings on the importance human dignity due to sexual ethic that opposes homosexuality and contributes to the marginalization of members of queer community.

In this thesis, I engage my experience in how I came to understand myself as a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition. Through the use of queer theory, which counters dominant African stories in Africa that construct queer people as simply powerless, disgraced, and in need of empowerment. Queer theory is applied in this paper as it interrogates how discourses of sex and sexuality are associated in the process of subjectivation, which establishes subjects

who are sexed and sexualised in particular ways (Youdell, 2010: 88). A central project of queer in this theological framework is contradicting these processes through practice that disturb the meanings of these discourses and deploy other discourses that have been subjugated or disallowed. This paper, therefore, views queer people as being associated in the discourse of identity construction and views at methods in which these people resist and challenge such discourses in the African faith landscape.

Liberation of queer people in African Independent Churches can be achieved through queer African theology and queer narratives/ storytelling in dialogue with traditional leaders, church leaders and other prominent leaders. Why I mention all these leaders is because identity (sex, gender) is a socially constructed (and through the use of biblical scriptures), that is, not constructed from a single context. Each landscape must engage its understanding of LGBTIQ+ persons and start deconstructing and yet re-constructing from there in an inclusive and life-affirming manner. Bringing a new type of theology (queer African theology) which is inspiring and provides people fullness to membership the community, which is marginalized. West (2016: 1) has argues that “the old theology does not fit to the new site of struggle which is sexuality”. West continues to state that “for sexuality in all its God-given fullness to become the subject of the doing theology, marginalized [sic] sexual communities with their own particular experiences must become the primary dialogue partners in the doing of theology.” West, here, is not implying that the Christian theology must be ignored or put to an end, however, it must be confronted for its usefulness for the new site of struggle at hand (sexuality). Sithole (2018: 54) argues that African queer theology must “take into account all the different aspects that build up the identity of an African queer person and engage them to be a life given and life fulfilling for African queer who is Christian.”

### **3.4 Queer in Africa**

Queers (LGBTIQ+) have identities that are raising controversies within the African perspective. From the tradition and the culture of the Zulu tribe, a child “born with unusual genitals used to be hidden from the society, and even be taken away from the community in which the child was born because that child was regarded as a shame” Sithole (2018: 14). This is the act of avoiding killing of such children and avoiding being regarded as a shame or a curse and not deserving to be kept alive. Times have since changed, and homosexual people find their ways of reclaiming their identities within an African exclusive and discriminating

contexts. Queer people exist and cannot hide any longer. Now we must challenge these ideas so to implement a life affirming space that will openly allow for the engagement of teaching and understanding of diverse identities beyond any binary system in African cultural traditions.

### **3.5 Queer theology and Indecent Theology**

Queer theology is a theological method that has developed out of the philosophical approach of queer theory, built upon scholars such as Foucault, Rubin, Kosofsky Sedgwick and Butler. Cheng (2013: 4) asserts that queer theology begins with an assumption that gender non-conformity and gay, lesbian, and bisexual desire have always been present in human history, including the bible. He states that it was at one time separated into two separate theologies, that is, gay theology and lesbian theology. Later, the two would merge to become the more inclusive term of queer theology.

Queer theology can be understood as theology done by and for LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) individuals focusing on their specific needs; theology that purposefully opposes social and cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality. It seeks to unearth hidden voices or hidden perspectives that allows theology to be seen in a new light; and theology that challenges and deconstructs boundaries, particularly with respect to sexual and gender identity. Cornwall (2013:6) and Cheng (2011: 12) note that queer theology is inclusive to individuals' sexual and gender identity and allows the LGBTIQ community to reclaim their space in faith spaces. Furthermore, according to Jenifer Purvis (2012: 189), queer signifies not only a range of variant genders and non-heterosexual sexualities, but a posture of resistance, questioning attitude, and a set of techniques, and approaches. For that reason, queer theology calls on us to think beyond what may be known, disciplined and controlled and asks us to re-embrace our queer cognisance.

West states that to do African theology on sexuality, we must draw on other established African forms of biblical and theological hermeneutics, such as those found in inculturation, liberation, feminist/ Womanist and post-colonial theologies (West, 2010). Queer theology questions what has been rendered normal in order to expose the voices of those who have been silenced and/ or disempowered for not being considered 'normal'. Althaus-Reid (2007: 7) points out that queer theology "assists us to look deeper into political and sexual queering of theology through the understanding the regulation of sexuality in the name of divinity and order of affection."

The existence of LGBTIQ+ challenges the traditional binary categorization of gender and sex as male and female. Stuart (2003:89) states that “queer theology is not an identity-based theology; indeed, it is an anti-identity-based theology; it’s not a natural development of gay and lesbian theology, but rather unnatural development which emerges from the figures within the gay and lesbian theology to which the repetitions within it draw attention”. However, such theology serves to liberate everyone from the contemporary constructions of sexuality and gender. Althaus-Reid, a component of queer theology, who drew on Latin American liberation theology and interpreted the bible in a way in which she saw as positive towards women, queer people, and sex. She proposed a theology that centered marginalized people, including people in poverty, and queer people.

(Althaus-Reid 2006; Stuart 2003; & Goss, 1999) propose that a queer God challenges the oppressive powers of heterosexual beliefs and seeks to liberate God from the closet of traditional Christian thought and to embrace God’s part in the lives of LGBT people and the poor. Althaus-Reid continues to state that Queer God establishes a concept of holiness that overcomes the sexual and colonial influences and demonstrates how queer theology is ultimately the search for God’s own deliverance. Using the auto-ethnography and queer theory. For Althaus-Reid, theology ought to be connected to the body and lived experience. She put it this way, “indecent Sexual Theologies may be effective as long as they represent the resurrection of the excessive in our contexts, and a passion for organizing to lusty transgressions of theological and political thought” (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 207). “The excessiveness of our hungry lives: our hunger for food, hunger for the touch of other bodies, for love and for God, only in the longing for a world of economic and sexual justice together, and not subordinated to one another, can the encounter with the divine take place; however, this is an encounter to be found at the crossroads of desire, when one dares to leave the ideological order of the heterosexual pervasive normative”(2000, pg. 207). “This is an encounter with the indecency and with the indecency of God and Christianity” (Althaus-Reid, 2000:207). Queer theory and queer theology take seriously the bodies, voices, embodied experiences, and stories of LGBTI people. This leads to methodology technique, auto-ethnography, which this thesis has employed.

### **3.6 Queer and the Implications for the Project**

As this study focus on the lived embodied reality/experience of the *isitabane* of faith, the following section focuses on the disruption of the norm, the importance of the body, and experience. This embraces the embodiment of queer identities within the African faith tradition and spaces. These are the important things engaged in this project to engage the lived reality of *isitabane* of faith within traditional faith spaces. Fundamentally, the basis of the embodied self-feature, which produces body experiences (certainly unaware) are, according to this study, the bodies as experienced by the queer people, as it is an important feature in forming one's identity. In this subsection, I look at how in the South African societies and faith spaces the bodies of queer people are perceived and related. From the body theology perspective, it can be argued that queer people perceive their bodies as a place where their rejection is generated. This is the result as the politics of the body confronts the natural laws of gender and sexual binaries (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998: 10). Feminist liberation theology puts experience at the center of creation theology, and not the controlling experience of males, however, of the persons' belief. Therefore, body theology places importance on experience (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998: 15).

Moving forward, queer also refers to persons who are non-gender conforming (LGBTIQA+), which makes people, inevitably, contemplate of the body when addressing them as this principally assumes that the sense of being is not complementing the body, which is their sex assigned at birth. This is the reason of their struggle and feeling of rejection, because of their body. People have ideologies that to construct one's gender identity is through their bodies, which is why queer people always depict their bodies as "the wrong body" (i.e., transgender people). Emgdahl (2014: 267) describes the 'wrong body' as the idea that entails of divaricate clarification of their experience of being in the wrong body and or assigned wrong sex. Being in the wrong body or assigned wrong sex is frequently associated to the manner in which the body is gendered. Sithole writes, "The wrong body notion is born out of the knowledge and understanding that one has grown up of how society understands to be male or female" (2018: 53). This is why queer people in the binary create allusion based to that information and classify supplementary with the opposite gender, which was assigned at birth. The eagerness of being accepted as a queer person and their bodies in the South African families, community, and faith spaces causes pressure on fellow queers to undertake sex change surgeries (i.e., transgender persons).

### **3.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter clarified the theoretical frame of this thesis, as deconstructing gender binaries and the idea of heterosexuality as the only dominant and acceptable way of being, which informs the conceptualization of this research study. In this study, I discussed how queer theory developed. I therefore discussed queer theology and how it contributes to examine deeper into political and sexual queering of theology understanding the rule of sexuality (Altheas-Reid, 2010), in the understanding of divinity and affection order. I moved to engage queer in Africa; queer theology and indecent theology; and lastly, queer and the implications for the project. This theory informs the way I theorize the reality and/ or experiences of queer people in the Shembe faith tradition. This is an empirical study, which is located in the qualitative research paradigm, uses the auto-ethnography method. The following chapter provides the detailed research design of this study, as well as how it will be used in this auto-ethnographical study.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

So far, I have, in this thesis, discussed the background and issue around gender and sexuality in the landscape of religion and African tradition and the perceptions and ideologies around gender and sexuality. In Chapter 3, I further discussed the theoretical frame of the study and argued for the use of queer theory and the assistance on drawing from the embodied experience of LGBTI people. Now I will engage the tool that will assist me in this process. This chapter, following from the previous one, where I outlined the details for the research design of this study. This is an empirical research, drawing from an auto-ethnographical approach, drawing on a qualitative paradigm.

### **4.2 Research Design**

According to Maxwell (2012: 4), qualitative research design is “an interactive approach, which relies on data collected by the researcher from first-hand observation, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, participant observation, recording made in natural settings, documents and artefacts”. Generally, these data are not numerical. Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 3) note that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them”. However, the underlying assumption concerning qualitative research is that “reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live in” (Silverman, 2000; Freebody, 2003 cited in Mendez, 2003: 280). This implies that reality and truth are flexible and fluid. Therefore, qualitative research/ paradigm/ approach has been accepted as a valuable research practice. “The qualitative research method employs a variety of methods which imply a humanistic stance in a way phenomenon under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants” (Creswell, 2009, In: Mendez. 2003: 280). It is due to this particular approach of inquiry that personal narratives, experiences, and opinions that are valuable data which provide researchers with tools to find these tentative answers they intend to pursue (Marshall and Roseman, 1999: 23).

### 4.3 Auto-ethnography

This empirical research, an auto-ethnographical exploratory study, is located under the qualitative research paradigm. It is exploring the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition. This is done in the auto-ethnographical manner, as Mendez (2003: 277) notes that “auto-ethnography is a useful qualitative research method to analyse people’s lives”, a tool that Ellis and Bochner (2000: 739) describe as “autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural”.

Furthermore, Holt (2003: 18) states that autoethnography emerged due to the “calls to place greater emphasis on the ways in which the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched”. Thus, auto-ethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to make sense of a particular phenomenon or culture. As mentioned above, I am employing this auto-ethnographical instrument to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition and to understand how I became aware of my sexual orientation. Additionally, it is used here in order to understand how could embodied life stories/personal narratives contribute to enhances the capacity for the African independent faith traditions to navigate sexual diversity: and how an auto-ethnographical exploration be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *Isitabane* in the Shembe faith tradition. Mendez (2003: 280) states that auto-ethnography is a “useful qualitative method used to analyze [sic] people’s lives”. There are numerous uses of the term, and it differs with regards to the associations between my personal experience (as the researcher) and the phenomenon being studied (Foster, 2006: In, Mendez, 2013: 281); in the case of the current study, my embodied experience within the faith tradition and sexual orientation. Auto-ethnography can vary from research about personal experiences of a research process to parallel exploration of myself and the participants’ experiences and about the experience of the researcher while conducting a specific piece of research (Ellis and Bochner; Maso, 2001). Thus, this auto-ethnographical exploration of *isitabane* aims towards self-introspection of the topic to allow audiences to make a connection with my feelings and experiences.

Foley (2002 cited in Mendez, 2003: p. 281) advocates for a more “reflexive epistemological and narrative practices, as he considers that they would make auto-ethnographies a more

engaging and common genre which could contribute to bridging the gap between researchers and ordinary people”. Bochner and Ellis note that “On the whole, auto-ethnographers do not want people to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel and care and desire” (1996: 218). Mendez (2003: 279-281) hints at the significance of autoethnography, here personal narratives give access to participants’ private world and provide rich data. There is also the “case of access to data as the researcher calls on self-experiences as the source from which to investigate a particular phenomenon” (p. 282). Mendez also states that “it is with this advantage that also entails a limitation as, by subscribing analysis to a personal narrative, the research is also limited in its conclusions”; however, Bochner and Ellis (1996: 24) consider that this limitation on the self is not valid, since “if culture circulates through all of us, how can auto-ethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?”.

Mendez (2003: 282) also speaks of advantageous uses of autoethnography that it potentially contributes to “others’ lives by making them reflect on and empathize [sic] with the narratives presented; through reading a cultural or social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before, which makes autoethnography a valuable for, of enquiry” (p. 282). This study has a goal and purpose of informing and educating audiences/ readers. Richards (2008: 281) acknowledges another advantage of autoethnography as emancipatory since “those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized [sic] by others and subjected to their agenda or relegated to the role of second-class citizens” (Richards, 2008, In: Mendez, 2003: 172).

Despite all the beauty of autoethnography, as other method techniques, it has its own critiques. Sparkes (2000: 22) states that “the emergence of autoethnography and narratives of self has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic”. The frequent recurrent critique of autoethnography is of its strong emphasis on the self, which is at the core of the resistance to accepting autoethnography as a valuable research method (Mendez, 2003). Thus, autoethnography has been criticised for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised (Atkinson, 1997: 244; Coffey, 1999: 283). Ellis and Bochner consider the aim of autoethnography to recreate the researchers’ experience in a reflexive way, aiming at making connection to the reader which can help them think and reflect about his or her own experiences. Tylor (2016: 12) notes that the phenomenological approach assists to capture the ways people construct their realities, at attempts to see things from others’ perspectives (p.12). this study concentrates on, but is not limited to, the lived reality (experience) of a queer

individual on the faith-tradition concept and beliefs in the Shembe church, in KZN, on queer identities. It concerns itself with a personal experience that allows participants to share their realities. This is the reason I employed this study in the qualitative paradigm, as compared to quantitative study.

Additionally, Rogers, Leydesdorff and Dowson (2004:164) note that “in order to undo the entrapment of the traumatic reality and its re-enactment, one must engage in the process of constructing a narrative, reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event.” They continue to argue that “the act of telling one’s story, both through visual and narrative representation, is an important part of the process” (2004: 164) and the process of telling stories, within the context of psychotherapy, is a “slow, laborious process, a fragmented set of wordless, static images that are gradually transformed into a narrative with emotion, feeling, and meaning” (Rogers, Leydesdorff and Dowson, 2004: 168). By breaking the silence, survivors ‘take the stand’ to construct new oppositional narrative that defies a taboo and engage in the process of re-creating themselves. Rogers et al. (2014) assert that “in resisting traditional narrative forms, survivors often encounter great skepticism and resistance to the telling of their stories”, letting their voices be heard and speaking out is a political and a therapeutic act, and a claim to power. Though it includes risks, however, it includes promise too. Additionally, it is a great danger to remain mute.

#### **4.4 Location of the study**

The location of this study is in the Pietermaritzburg area, KwaZulu-Natal. The location makes it easier to access to access subjects and getting them to Uthingo Network for briefing and/or counselling when needed; ascertains an instant rapport among participants, collecting data related to the study’s interest (Taylor et al., 2016: 32). The province of KwaZulu-Natal accommodates almost isiZulu speaking persons, and most are patriarchal with regards to the landscape of culture and tradition, as well as faith landscapes. Although coming out of closets, for people from religions with people or communities and societies that are intensely rooted in culture and tradition and patriarchal systems, it is considered complex, considering homophobic attacks that are suffered by LGBTIQ+ communities. However, many people do come out and be public about their sexual orientations, and there are organisations that advocate for people are discriminated against their homosexual identities. This shows that the KwaZulu-

Natal Province (rural and urban; rich and unique cultural diversity) does represent a diverse and complex landscape of gender identities and sexual diversity.

#### **4.5 Positionality and reflexivity**

I identify as a lesbian. I had been a member of the Shembe faith tradition since my childhood years. I grew up in a family that was a Shemberite and deeply rooted in culture. There was not much challenge experienced at home, since I hid my sexual orientation, fearing what my father would do to my mother and me. I also feared expressing my sexual feelings because my mother would likely be beaten for that. I was aware that I hated men to the extent that I could fight boys if they show any interest in me back in high school. I never hated how I felt. The problem started when my classmates realized how I would walk, and that I was not too much of a talker. My classmates and teachers expected me to have a boyfriend, as we were all adolescents (adolescent stage). Growing up from a strict home that has beliefs rooted in a patriarchal system and attending a church that is deeply embedded in Zulu cultural/traditional practices and customs, as well as gender binaries, which excludes same-sex relationships, made it difficult to start dating while living with my parents. I had to try all possible to behave and perform like other girls (*amakhosazana*) in the church, society and home. There was no way I could ever address or tell how I felt about (my story), because I would be judged, stigmatized, perceived as a shameful, isolated, both in the church and the family. If I did, the war would be declared.

Both in the church and the community speak ill and negatively about *izitabane* (queer people) and how 'evil' it is, and how they detest it. People in communal spaces use harmful, hurtful and negative terms when referring to LGBTI people to discriminate and discourage in trying to convince sexual minorities how 'unclean' homosexuality is, and therefore themselves are unclean as well. During my early 20s, I went to one of the Christian churches in PMB, and one of the church leaders came to me during the liturgy celebration and asked me to repent because I performed like a guy, and he assumed I was *isitabane*. They wanted me to internalize that 'this' was just passing, that it was a 'phase or stage' which every girl experience when growing up. The church leaders maintained that they would never fellowship with *isitabane*, though addressing or engaging on the issues of gender and sexuality was rare, and that indicated the silence of the church concerning the issues of gender and sexuality. Now, with this study, I want to challenge negative and harmful ideologies and assumptions that African Independent Churches and other faith traditions hold against homosexuality. I want other girls to flourish

who navigate these African faith landscapes through my narrative, sharing embodied experience, that is, being *isitabane* of faith. I want to educate audiences, I want them to be aware how negative faith (texts) and cultural beliefs against homosexuality are harmful to sexual minorities, how them making homosexuality ‘un-African’ and ‘un-Biblical’ a norm that gets queer people killed, raped, and discriminated every day, while having ‘rights’ to life and not be violated in any way.

This study is centered on my own personal embodied experience. I acknowledge that I am conscious of its attachment to the study. I am also aware of my bias and limitations. An analysis from own experience and that of the study participants will be brought up. This study also has two other participants as a source of data, as well as the researcher. I will be telling my mother's story to tell my story, in terms of how I came to understand myself as a queer person. I also acknowledge that study participants are Zulu speakers, and I will translate and transcribe, define, explain from Zulu to English language, so to accommodate all readers and/ or audiences. Conducting this study requires the researcher to be objective as possible as the researcher is interconnected to the study. I anticipate keeping that with caution. The Shembe faith ought to establish a life-affirming space so as to accommodate all people despite their sexual diversity, and also move from employing discriminating forms of methods when engaging issues of sexuality and gender within the church and the African community at large. It should be more accepting and caring, humane, as they had great standards to the definition of ubuntu. At the church I was *inkosazane*, with no position, as it is known that women are barely offered leadership positions in the church. However, that did not bother me, as I was just following the church that was being followed at home. I am *isitabane* of faith who grew up in the Shembe faith tradition. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) assert that being flexible in the conduction of the research process is an act of attending systematically to the context of constructing knowledge, particularly to the influence of the researcher at all phases of the research process. My views of homosexuality are ensured not to be evident to participants of the research, as they way of overcoming any possible bias.

Warner (2014: 334) asserts that the research methodology that is about queer needs to be reflexively aware of the manner in which the object or phenomena it investigates. Additionally, he proposes that the queer research methodology must accounts qualitatively for its object of inquiry. With this, Warner (2014: 234) means that qualitatively accounting for the experiences of the queers as the actual individuals and humans living these experiences, due to the fact that

it speaks directly to the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed group of people (Warner, 2014:334). Althaus-Reid (2003: 8) argues that queer theology needs to initiate an intimate reflection, which is linked to a 'God-talk' concerning loving and pleasurable relations. This is a relevant challenge that queer theologies bring to theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The confrontation of theology, where concerns are about sexuality and love relations, these are not only relevant in theological concerns, but also experiences which un-form the totalitarian theology are relevant (Althaus-Reid, 2003: 10). This study engages the experience of a queer (as the researcher) with that of my participants in this study, and they are also members of the Shembe faith tradition. My experience and theirs as well, helps in counting for un-forming the heterosexual harmful and toxic theological ideologies that the church holds. Creswell (2007: 133) proposes that reliability can be improved when the researcher finds detailed field notes. This is by using good quality instruments for data collection, like high quality recording tape for recording conversations with study participants, and, by transcribing the collected data in the tape recorder. In conducting these interviews with study participants, I also consider observing facial expressions and the body language. I also employ the use of a notebook to transcribe relevant notes, however, the recording tape is also helping capture data or information I might miss when making conversation with study participants.

#### **4.6 Sampling**

Sampling involves selecting a number of study units from a defined study population. This study employs a non-probability sampling, that's according to Taherdoost (2016: 22) is utilized for choosing the population of the study. The purposive sampling technique is being employed, which is under the non-probability sampling methods for research purposes. Non-probability sampling technique, according to Taherdoost Hamed (2016: p. 22) is frequently related to “with case study research design and qualitative research”. These concentrate on smaller samples and envision to evaluate a real-life phenomenon, “not to make statistical inferences in relation to the wider population” (Yin, 2003: p. 27). A sample of participants in this sampling technique needs to be a clear rationale for the inclusion of some cases or individuals rather than others. This study employs a purposive or judgmental sampling method, which Taherdoost (2016: 23) describes as a “strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices”. I chose the purposive/ judgmental sampling technique since this study is an account of my own

experiences, focus in on six turns in my life, and this account is accompanied and compared with the knowledge and experiences of two participants.

- One of the participants was chosen because they know about the history, rules and/ or principles or rules in the Shembe faith tradition.
- the other was chosen because I used to confide in with regards to my sexuality and we went to the same faith tradition, therefore, they know me and my experiences.

Study participants are willing to partake in this research study and share their experiences as well. Thus, I anticipated it would be helpful working with the Uthingo Network Organization, in Pietermaritzburg, which is the organization that works with LGBTIQ+ community in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. I selected this technique partly due to cost, convenient, time efficiency, and its suitability for this auto-ethnographical exploratory research study.

In this study, I use autoethnography as it brings forward the shifting aspects of self and creates ways to write about experiences in a wider social context (Hamilton, Smith and Worthington, 2008: 22). Auto-ethnography is a form of a qualitative research study. Hamilton et al. (2008: 22) propose that auto-ethnography refers to inscribing about the personal and its association to culture. Auto-ethnographers include cultural elements of personal experience, situating themselves, contesting, and resisting what they see. Auto-ethnographers always write in the first person. Auto-ethnography is originally used to describe cultural studies of ones' own people. It can be said that it refers to stories that feature the self or include myself as a researcher, as a character. Autoethnography focuses on making a difference in the world. I chose auto-ethnography because it involves a self-reflexive direction of knowing and attempts to break away from the confines of anthropology to loosen disciplinary constraints (Moore, 2006), providing an explanation of how one is “othered” and coming to know as to why they are othered, what are the ideologies that traditional societies hold towards gender and sexual identities.

The study will employ the criteria of selecting or choose six snapshots from my embodied narrative based on the events that occurred: being born a girl child; my father’s violence, my mother’s vulnerability; learning what it means to be a Shembe believer; my feelings for other girls; being called *izitabane*; and, having a bad spirit-*izitabane* and faith. In this proposed study,

I use my own experience (in the form of a narrative method of auto-ethnography) to gain deeper insights into the larger culture in which I was raised. In this study approach, I am reporting my experience as the primary data source. This means that the researcher is the subject in it. I employed the useful autoethnographic technique (Muncey, 2005: 71), which is the snapshot. I employed the use of a snapshot method to offer data in this thesis is seeking to portray a new narrative.

<b>SNAPSHOT THEMES</b>	<b>MAIN THINGS TO INTERROGATE</b>
Being a girl-child in the poor family	I will reflect on my own narrative of growing up and experiences of poverty; gender in the family, in the society and personal recollections.
My father's violence, my mother's vulnerability	I will reflect on my mother's vulnerability due to my father's violence towards her and how it impacted on my sexuality.
Learning what it means to be a Shembe believer	I will reflect on the tradition, patriarchy and culture of the Shembe faith tradition and its negative impact on towards homosexuality.
My feelings for other girls	I will engage my experience and narrative of having a sexual attraction to other girls and why and how I kept it a secret endeavour.
Being called <i>izitabane</i>	I will reflect on and engage the negative usage of these terms to refer to queer (LGBTI) people and how our faith communities and societies tend to treat <i>izitabane</i> once you are known to be one.
Having bad spirits- <i>izitabane</i> and faith	I want to reflect on the hatred (hate speech, hate crime) that faith spaces and leaders have towards homosexuality ( <i>izitabane</i> ) and how badly they stand to painted, such as being accused of being possessed by bad spirits; standing accused of all-natural disasters and diseases that occur.

## **4.7 Data Collection Strategy**

### **4.7.1 Data collection and procedure**

In this study, I use in-depth interviews (together with account from myself) that might last, ranging from a stipulated time frame of 30-60 minutes. These in-depth open-ended questions (interviews) assist in apprehending study participants lived experiences from their views and without limiting them (Leedy and Ormond, 2005: 183). I use the semi-structured interviews (to interview two people as this helps and allows study participants to freely answer questions and express themselves in sharing and engaging their experiences. I am also the subject in this study, drawing from my own narrative. Gill (2008: 192) states that these interviews entail several key queries that help to decide areas that need be explored; however, the interviewer or interviewee also is allowed to differ so to follow an impression or follow on a response in more detail. I employed this interviewing approach, compared to the structured interviewing method, because it is flexible and allows discovering and elaborating information that is important to participants, but maybe that previously never been thought of as relevant or related. As study participants are isiZulu speakers, I have considered interviewing them in their native language (IsiZulu). This makes the communication easy and comfortable. I then translate the obtained data into English. Also, this makes ease purposes of data analysis because the study concerns itself with the religion and cultural concept which is rooted in the Zulu community. After the interviews, I make scripts so that I ensure that their responses are not misinterpreted and/ or misrepresented. Interview questions are as follows:

- What is your background in the Shembe faith tradition?
- How do you know Sipehelele Mazibuko?
- What has been your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?
- What are your biggest fears that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?
- How do you understand that she grew up in a gender-based violence home setting and that it impacted on her sexuality?
- How do you think Gender-based violence affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?
- How do you think church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

However, these questions are translated in isiZulu because my study participants prefer to engage in their home language, which is isiZulu. As I am also the subject in this study as the primary source of data, I am engaging six snapshot themes, according to life experienced. These are as follows:

1. Being born a girl child (I reflect on my own narrative of growing up and experiences of poverty and domestic violence within a family setting);
2. My father's violence, my mother's vulnerability (I reflect on my mother's vulnerability due to my father's violence towards her and how it impacted on my sexuality);
3. Learning what it means to be a Shembe believer (I reflect on the tradition, patriarchy and culture of the Shembe faith tradition and its negative impact on towards homosexuality);
4. My feelings for other girls (I engage my experience and narrative of having a sexual attraction to other girls and why and how I kept it a secret endeavour);
5. Being called *isitabane* (I reflect on and engage the negative usage of these terms to refer to queer (LGBTI) people and how our communities and societies tend to treat *izitabane* once you are known to be one); and,
6. Having bad spirits-*izitabane* and faith (I reflect on the hatred (hate speech, hate crime) that faith spaces and leaders have towards homosexuality (*izitabane*) and how badly they stand to be painted, such as being accused of being possessed by bad spirits; standing accused of all-natural disasters and diseases that occur and people suffer from).

#### **4.7.2 Selection criteria**

The chosen methodology is inspired by my own personal experience, as I grew up in a family setting that had extreme gender-based violence or domestic violence against my mother, which contributed to the development of hatred for men. There are numerous queer individuals like me, and they feel threatened to share their experiences, because the Shembe tradition is deeply rooted in church and faith tradition which is against homosexuality and create toxic gender binaries which are the source of all forms of abuse to women and girls and people of sexual orientation, gender identity expression (SOGIE). Therefore, I believe that my experience is shared by other queer people within the Shembe faith tradition and other African faith

communities in which queer people navigate. The sample includes one key informant, and further two participants, who have been members of the church for a long time. They are giving responses and sharing insights and understandings on beliefs and attitudes of the Shembe faith tradition towards queer identities. To engage the key focus of this study, participants are interviewed, which relates to how they know the researcher and how they feel about my sexuality, as well as relating to the embodiment of my sexual identity. The study's participants are from Pietermaritzburg and Ulundi, KwaZulu-Natal. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, study participants voluntarily partake on it. They were provided with an informed consent form that they signed, giving their permission to being interviewed.

#### **4.7.3 Research instruments**

The permission to audio-record interviews from the participants is obtained. Semi-structured interviews are then recorded, which allows for later transcription for better analysis of data. I use an interview schedule, which entails an open-ended question that allows participants to talk freely and expand on their responses, which co-produce rich detailed data in the research study. The purpose for the interviews in qualitative studies is to discover and explore views of persons with regards to the particular phenomena being studied, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes or motivations of people on a particular subject or matter. In general, interviews are relevant that they provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena, which would be found from purely qualitative methods, including questionnaires. Gill (2008:197) states that interviews are mainly suitable for exploring sensitive matters, in which respondents may not feel comfortable to speak about issues in a public society. As this study is sensitive in its nature, interviews establish a proper kind of research method to utilize for this research study. This study interview schedule is organized to ask questions which are liable to produce detailed information on the research study phenomenon and address the aims and objectives of the research.

#### **4.7.4 Method of analysis**

The study employs the thematic method of analysis. The themes that emerge from the research are those that guide the analysis for the study. Braun and Clarke (2013: 80) states that thematic analysis is “suited to a wide range of research interests and theoretical perspectives and is also useful as a basic method because, firstly: it works with a wide range of research questions from those about peoples' experiences and understandings to those about the representation and

construction of particular phenomenon in a particular context”. Secondly, it is relevant because it can be used to analyze various kinds of data, from secondary sources such as media to transcripts of focus groups or interviews. Thirdly, it works along large or small data sets. Last and foremost, thematic analysis can be applied to give data-driven or theory-driven analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 81). Furthermore, according to Braun and Clarke, there are six steps of thematic analysis. This study employs these six steps to identify and analyze themes emerging from data collected from interviews of this study. These steps are considered when employing thematic analysis to analyze research data. As Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) designated that thematic analysis” as a method for identifying, analysis and reporting patterns within data”. The six steps (step-by-step) that I follow in analysing study data as thematic analysis requires are as follows: familiarising yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

Every research study must comply with the research ethics code of conduct, which ensures that all members involved in a research study are treated with respect and dignity (Emanuel, Wendler and Grady, 2000: 125). This study ensured that the research ethics code of conduct is adhered to by ensuring that informed consent, competency and confidentiality, risk-benefit ratio, and the ongoing respect for the church is guaranteed.

To ensure the confidentiality in this study, I use pseudonyms and not telling the branch of the Temple we went to, to minimise risk and to protect the researcher and study participants. The consent form was issued to participants. As engaging this auto-ethnographic study, I received the support from the school and the psychologist for counselling during the course of this thesis.

#### **4.9 CONCLUSION**

. This chapter demonstrated the research design, method, strategy for the sampling, the tools of data collection and analysis, as well as the production of data. Taking into consideration of the sensitivity of nature of this research study, that engages experiences of queers in Shembe faith tradition, with regards to beliefs and religion-cultural patriarchal ideologies surrounding

queer identities in the church, in KZN. Validity and reliability, as well as the ethical considerations for the study are outlined and taken into consideration. The following chapter looks at the presentation of data collected from study participants.

#### **4.10 Interview schedule (narratives) addenda**

What is your background in the Shembe faith tradition?

How do you know Sophelele Mazibuko?

What has been your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

What are your biggest fears that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

How do you understand that she grew up in a gender-based violence home setting and that it impacted on her sexuality?

How do you think Gender-based violence affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

How do you think church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

## CHAPTER 5

### DATA PRESENTATION

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In connection to the theoretical frame, this chapter presents data drawing from queer theory, which embraces the embodiment stories of queer identities and/or individuals, of my own embodied experience, and from those I interviewed. My own narrative presents itself according to the six snapshot themes.

In addition to my own ethnographical snap-shot reflections, I will also appropriate the data from two semi-structured interviews, The interviews were also conducted so as to enhance or compliment my own narrative reflection.

This chapter presents data from my voice and that of the study participants in terms of my narrative and lived reality and my participant's interviews, their background in the Shembe Church and their experience in navigating my queerness within the Shembe faith tradition. All research participants to this study are woman from the Shembe faith tradition in KZN. In the sections below, I present data from snapshot themes and data collected from two participants. At the end of the chapter, I will distill key themes from the data presentation that will form the basis of my analysis chapter.

##### Snapshot theme 1: Being a girl-child in a poor family

In this theme, I reflect on my own narrative of growing up and experiences of poverty and domestic violence within a family setting.

I am a woman who was born a girl at Ulundi, Nkonjeni Hospital, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in the year 1995. I was raised in an extremely rural, disadvantaged background. I knew this to be true, because there was no electricity or clean water in the area, no good education, no reasonable standard of living, and very low income in the family. Being a born girl child meant behaving and 'performing' like a girl or woman, that is, cooking, cleaning, fetching water from the river, fetching firewood from the bush, that is, conducting all the 'roles' that are known to be assigned to a girl child in the family

When I grew up, my father was unemployed, however he used to herd cows and goats that belonged to him. That is how a man would be described back then, according to what a man has (his livestock, wife, children) represented his power, and whether he was able to take care of his wife and children. The culture of violence also counted. My father was, from my childhood, a violent and abusive father, to the extent that all members of the community were afraid of him. Even his parents would not reprimand him when he was beating my mother, because he was a beast. When he came back home from the Tavern, even chickens in the yard would see their way to other places. If he entered the room (rondavel), we used to vacate the house one by one until he was left alone with my mother. He would shout about food, cattle, or something, anything, even creating something to shout my mother about.

Although I knew nothing by violence from my father as I grew up, there is one incident that stands out for me. I remember it was in the afternoon when we travelled with my sisters and other women from our neighbours to fetch water from the river. It was during the afternoon, from the school. We had our 25 litre buckets full of water on our heads. My sisters and other women were chatting and laughing. I kept quiet as if something was wrong. I felt that something might just upset me. We were a few minutes away from home, and we approached, I could hear a voice shouting. I listened tentatively, “that is my father’s voice” I said to myself. My stomach turned; I walked a little quicker. I knew he was shouting at my mother. I got home and called my mother to assist me to take the bucket off my head. She came out and helped me, I saw tears brimming in her eyes. I never asked anything. I heard him shouting about cold food, but I knew my mother would never risk serving him cold food. He always looked for something to shout about. I thought to myself “there must be something really wrong with Father.” I thought it was because he was an unemployed man, that perhaps this caused him duress, but wondered “but why always taking it out on her? she is not the reason!” I always heard people mentioning that sometimes men who abuse their partners it’s due to their unemployment. I therefore assumed that is why he was behaving that manner.

Shortly thereafter he was walking around the yard, wearing his blue overalls and slider shoes. One could swear he had never made someone shed a tear. I looked through the window as he called for a matchbox to light and smoke his tobacco (boxer). He sat on *umthangala* (a shallow wall made of stones on compound yard) in front of the houses, just near kraal. He seemed deeply lost in his thoughts. So, as the girl child I went to assist my mother in the kitchen with

house chores, as following sexual or gender division of labour. My father started shouting about his livestock, claiming that we suffer and remain in poverty in this family because his livestock is not well taken care of, and that people in the area never wish him well. Brothers in the family spent less time at home than sisters I loved spending time at home. I can say I am a loner; one could swear I was suffering from antisocial personality disorder; however, I still enjoy spending 75 percent of my time in my own company. This resulted in me witnessing most of the painful and traumatising events that happened at home. Though I also did witness happy events as well, when father bought us Christmas clothes. We tried on our new clothes. There were also times we had braai, we had a “family time”, my father cracked jokes and we were laughing, and we were happy. However, inside I was not completely happy, because I knew that with my father “anytime is teatime”. He was an unpredictable man.

I remember another incident when we all went to sleep late that night. There were many rondavel houses scattered in the same yard: for our parents, for women, for men, for our late grandfather and grandmother, an old rondavel house we used as a kitchen (thatched roof) called *ixhiba*. Later that night, I heard voices of people having an argument. I listened and realised that the quarrel was heating up. I awoke and stood up. One of my sisters asked me where I was going. She thought I was sleep walking, because someone in the family used to do that. I asked her to listen to the voices and told her I was going to check if mom is alright. I opened the door. Looking outdoors, it was a dark night with lovely half moon and stars. It seemed it was supposed to be a peaceful night. I slowly walked down to their rondavel house, there was no more arguing voices. I listened through the door, and surprisingly, they were just asleep snoring. I went back to the house where we slept with sisters. My head hit the pillow and just when I was falling asleep, I heard those voices again. I woke my sister and we listened through the window, and it was the voices from the neighbourhood. That was a relief. It was a bit difficult to sleep peacefully knowing that my mother was alone with the man who abuses her.

### Snapshot theme 2: My father’s violence, my mother’s vulnerability

In this theme I reflect on my mother’s vulnerability, due to my father’s violence towards her. Another incident that comes to mind is during the Christmas festivities. My sisters and unmarried sisters were in the ‘big’ house in the evening, with candlelight, since we had no electricity in the area. We were sitting and chatting there with my sisters. One of my sisters were plaiting the hair of a woman from our neighbour. I heard my father’s voice shouting from

the rondavel house. I immediately got diarrhoea, so afraid was I of my own father's voice. There was soon cold silence in the home. I quickly ran into the rondavel house, where my father and mother were. My mother sat on *icansi* (mat made from rushes or reeds) on the left side, inside the house and my father on the right side, candlelight in the centre of the rondavel house, just near *insika*. There was *ifodo* (a picture of Shembe) at the *umsamo* place. He had his tribal weapon (*iwisa*) by his side. He was shouting at my mother. My mother held her head facing the floor, not saying anything. She was wearing *iphinifa* (a pinafore) and a rug, which symbolises respect. I entered the rondavel house with my other sister, and we sat beside our mother, while our father was shouting at our mother, in front of us. There was wind all of a sudden, and I have no idea where it came from, and the candle went out when my father took his tribal weapon (*iwisa*) and stood up right in front of my mother. My sister asked to be excused, we cried out screaming. I heard her screaming, crying and shouting the name of Shembe (asking for help, hoping that when calling the name of Shembe my father would cease beating her up). He hit her repeatedly using the *iwisa*. We were terrified. We slept at our aunt's. I hated myself for leaving mom all that night alone with the man who verbally and physically abused her, but our brothers were there. They came a bit later from fetching cattle. The following day, we came back home and saw how badly injured our mother was. Her clothes were sticking to her skin because of the blood. She was swollen and moaning from pain. She had bruises on her face and body. That broke me. I ran to hide and cried covering my mouth so that no one could hear me. My sister took her to the clinic, because it was so bad. Father tried to stop them from going to the clinic, because he knew police would be alerted. My sister insisted, and she was crying as well. They went to the clinic. My mother was still bleeding from the wounds. Indeed, the police were alerted. During the day they came back from the clinic, and they were followed by the police van. My father had escaped to the mountain.

We are eleven at home, all from one mother and one father. I grew up in a home rooted in religious culture, where the woman had no say on her reproductive health, meaning their rights (sexual, freedom from beatings) were suppressed when our mothers grew up, and they were told to get married and bear children. I would say my father was a 'respected' man, yet feared in our community, due to his violence towards his wife (my mother). He used to insult my mother and call her all sorts of vulgarities, swearing at her, saying she was having an affair with other men, and on some days, he would tell her, 'One day I will kill you with my bare hands'. And my mother was none of that. She used to tell us that she wouldn't dare, because she knows that our father would kill her. Neither my mother got a chance to go to school, nor

my father. As a result, my mother used to cultivate in the garden, mealie meal, pumpkins, spinach, and other greens called reed, domesticated chickens, goats, and cows. These animals belonged to my father.

My mother used to help other families to dig toilet holes, and they would give her a R50, and she would save that money to buy what was most needed at the time, such as buying school uniforms for my elder siblings, and paying for their school fees. My father would come and demand to be given that money my mother saved for the most important things and when she refused him that money, my father would beat her to a pulp. We would hear my mother crying asking for forgiveness, but he would beat her like she was an animal, and not a human being. That broke me. I developed a dislike for my father, where I wished death on him, so that my mother would find peace. I loved my father. I still do, but I wished the church would come through during those times and intervene. They failed. Even today the church does not address issues of domestic violence much in the church.

No one appreciated spending holidays at home, because we knew there would be no peace because my father shouted, swearing, and threatening to kill our mother. One Christmas day, if I'm not mistaken, I had passed Grade 5. It was Christmas day, we were all happy and my father started shouting as usual, telling my mother that she had no brains, *hawu!* I remained there inside the rondavel (an African-style hut) sitting next to my mother, I did not want to leave her alone when my father was shouting. My mother sat there with her head facing down and not saying a word. The next thing my father grabbed his armour (*saagila or iwisa*, a Zulu stick with a metal head), and I stormed out crying out loud and screaming, asking help for my mother. He beat her like she had no feelings. We all with my sisters ran to the neighbourhoods, because he used to become the beast that beat everyone. That day was the first time I witnessed my mother getting beaten like an animal in front of me. Aah, my father had no respect for his wife and children, that he would beat his wife in front of their youngest daughter like that. In the morning, my sister took my mother to the hospital, because she was badly injured. I saw her clothes covered in blood that it was so painful to even take off her clothes. I stood there hiding, looking, and coming to. I started hating even fathers from our neighbours, because it was the common thing that head of the families (fathers) all beat up their wives.

There were times my mother would shout at us, wanted everything to be kept in order, because she knew that if any small thing was not right, she would be the one getting punished for that. That showed me that she was depressed, and perhaps she was not aware. I also developed

personality disorders. I would not sleep at all if my father was around, because I wanted to be able to scream in defence of my mother; although there was no help to be had, because even my father's family would keep their door locked every time my mother got beaten and cried for help. I could swear some of them enjoyed my mother's cries.

Despite my mother's vulnerability under her husband's abuse, she showed herself to be a very strong and a resilient mother. We never had water borehole or taps back then. So, she used to wake up around 3am to fetch water at a about a four-kilometre distance. On her way back home, she looked for firewood, so that when she got home, she could prepare food for her husband, and more than six children in the family. I remember when she came back, I was trying to start fire to boil water for tea, and I saw her coming, at a distance. I rushed to assist her. She had on her head a full 25-litre water container, carrying firewood on the side. I took firewood on my head, and we headed back home. She then prepared food and headed to the garden, where she ploughed. She raised her children very well, with love and respect. She sent them to school. She used to sell her vegetables to her neighbours, and other societies. That's how she generated money, because by that time, she was not qualified for old-age grant or pension.

It saddened me to see my mother going through all that. I could not make sense as to why she was going through all she went through. It was during the afternoon when I saw her sobbing tears and she started singing, I suppose she did not want us to see that she was crying. She sang one of the Shembe songs "Weludlawu LweZulu"- p. 31, The Nazareth Baptist Church Song Book (no date/ year, 31).

1. *"weludlawu lwezulu (Heaven's Fork)*

*Woza ungephule, (Come and rescue me)*

*Sengishile sekwanele (I have burnt enough)*

*Hawukela umoya wami (I am at Your mercy)*

2. *Umzimba usuphelile (The flesh has been finished)*

*Akubhubhe okwenyama (Let that of flesh perish)*

*Ukuze umoya usinde (so that my soul survives)*

*Ngosuku lweNkosi. (On the day of the Lord)*

*Mhawukeli wezinyembezi (Merciful to those who cry)*

*Hawukela umoya wami (Have mercy on my soul)*

3. *Mthandi wezoni (Lovers of the vilest sinners)*

*Hawukela umoya wami (Have mercy on my soul)*

*Awukhethanga bala lamuntu (You never choose according to anyone's colour or deeds)*

*Kubo bonke abakhalayo (To those who cry)*

*Mhawukeli wezinyembezi (Merciful to those who cry)*

*Hawukela umoya wami." (Have mercy on my soul)*

This song is taken from one of the Nazareth songs. It is the song she used to sing. It is a prayer song as she was asking God (Shembe) to sympathise with her on that situation, to have mercy on her. I remember it was during the afternoon when she sat outside the rondavel house, on the mat, cutting pumpkin she had collected from her garden. She sang this song as she was preparing *isijingi* (pumpkin pudding) for supper, and I listened very carefully. She sang this song with a trembling voice. I cried silently as I sat inside the house near fireplace, drawing crying faces on my exercise book. I love drawing when I am feeling bored or emotional. My mother was feeling pressure and pain of being a woman in an African context, with all the ideologies and norma-performances that 'come with being a woman' in the African context. She would sing other songs, stating what *imbokodo* (rock) she is.

### Snapshot theme 3: Learning what it means to be a Shembe believer

In this theme I reflect on the tradition, patriarchy, and culture of the Shembe faith tradition, and its negativity towards homosexuality. What comes to my mind is some of the key-teachings/realities in the Shembe faith tradition. We were going to the Church that is rooted in culture/tradition, the Shembe Church. Everyone in that church knew how my mother was treated back home, because she used to go to the church with bruises on her face and body, and sometimes, she could not walk up straight as she had a fractured bone, or wrist. It was an open

secret as the other mothers from the church and neighbours occasionally had these bruises on their faces and bodies. The church knew about this, but no one talked about it. Now I know why, it is because all women in that church experience gender-based violence, and even the Church elders beat their wives; not to mention emotional and sexual violence they endured. However, some mothers (Shembe Church members) had pleased each other sexually, and they got caught, and they were banned from the church and their homes and were told to come back with a cow for a damage to cleanse the family and the church, because what they did was a ‘disgrace’, a ‘sin’ that needed them to repent; they were required to admit that they committed a sin and follow the cleansing procedure. Our mothers were told not to refuse or reject their husband’s sexual desires at any time. That shows why our mothers gave birth to many children under difficult situations, despite the poverty that they were under. No education, no hospitals. My mother told me that when she was raised, a woman who went to clinics for family planning methods (contraception) was thought to be whore, a woman with no morals, less of a woman. She was not considered a woman enough in the society.

I remember going to the religious gathering called “25”, designated for unmarried women (*amakhosazana*). We went with my sister and other *amakhosazana* from the area. This type of women’s gathering was usually held in the Pastor’s home. We joined the afternoon prayer in the rondavel house in the Pastor’s home. We then moved to the rondavel house, where to gather as young women and with unmarried women and perform our Shembe traditional dances (*ukusina*) and share sermons. I remember I wore the same rug (*ihiya*) as my elder sister. She is a more extroverted person than me. We were told that dancing with pride during this gathering shows and proves a girl’s womanhood, which would attract men for marriage. They danced in the front line, and I remained at the back, as I thought it might help me since I knew my inner-self, how I felt. There were sounds of drums and *izimbomu* (a long vuvuzela made of metal), it was nice, and they were dancing nicely. We wore our white uniform that’s assigned for *amakhosazana* (*umnazaretha* and *nansuka*). I took few steps back, and put my mat on the floor, and sat down. I talked to myself, asking that if I dance there, this will mean I would be dancing to prove my womanhood for marriage to a man. Yet I do not have much of a ‘thing’ for men. This taught me that being *inkosazana* in the Shembe faith tradition means one is not expected to and can never be allowed to be in a same-sex relationship. Though it did not bother me at that stage, I was aware of how I felt, but yes, I desired to settle down and have my own family in future. As I sat there, I told myself that I did not ever need to ‘sign any contract’ about my sexuality. My bubbly sister came looking for me, and asked if I was still doing fine, I slightly

smiled at her and nodded “yes” and stood up to join the dancing queue. We calmly danced to the Shembe songs. It made me feel uneasy, but I had to do it to avoid any unnecessary drama and questions. I learned that I should be away from hometown just to avoid going to the women gatherings that might force me to be a person I feel that I am not.

#### Snapshot theme 4: My feelings for other girls

In this theme, I engage my experience and narrative of having a sexual attraction to other girls and why and how I kept it a secret endeavour. I started developing feelings for other girls, and during the time I was attending the Shembe Church. I was the total opposite of what is expected of *inkosazana* (princess/female youth). I used to walk like a guy, talk like a man, dress like a guy, with only the difference being a skirt, because girls were not allowed to wear trousers. I remember looking at my cousin and felt that I was falling deeply for her. Oh, I disliked men, not to mention if he would try to ‘hit’ on me, I could frown my face, showing no interest, only that I was getting disgusted. When I was doing Grade Seven, I started asking out a girl to be her “friend” and she agreed, I did not want to risk other people knowing about my sexual orientation, because I knew how the society felt about gays and lesbians. They were called names that were, from my knowledge, created to discourage homosexuality, especially the Shembe Church. Now the girl was excited over me and started telling her friends that she was dating me. So, the secret endeavour came out that we were actually dating. They started calling us *ungqingili*, *inkonkoni*, *isitabane* (these are the slang words used in the communities to people with non-gender conforming identities).

I never appreciated these terms. They did not sit well with me, to the extent that I wanted to hit all the fellow students who called me that. Some guys from my high school asked if I didn’t have a ‘private part’, and they told me they were going to find out someday. I remember during my high school years (2011), they used to follow me after school, and I would run away. Our way to school passed across the mountains, and we were walking to school and not using the transport as some other students did. Some days I would find them in the mountain waiting for me, to ask me to be their girlfriend, and when I refused, they grabbed my hand. Luckily, my brothers came, and they ran away. At the time, it may have felt like fun and games, but I now know the full intention of these interactions were the common practice of *corrective rape*,

which is a homophobic rape where lesbian women are raped with the intention to ‘correcting’ homosexuality to heterosexuality.

Moreover, now that the people in school knew about this, I had to relocate to Mtubatuba and live with my sister there, who was a born-again Christian. This was another concern. I would not risk my family knowing about my sexual identity. Not myself alone would suffer the hate from the society, but my family as well, and my mother would pay for that ‘sin’ of mine. My father would punish her. There were many communal implications of coming out. In 2011, I relocated to Mtubatuba, without telling my family the honest reason why I was relocating. At Mtubatuba, all of a sudden, there were a lot of ‘people’ like me, and that was so liberating. I met new people, made new friends like me. I was happy, they were beautiful. I remember one ‘girl’ used to come during the break time and gaze at me, I knew she liked me. We complimented each other. Well, I guess she read between the lines ‘who’ I am. We started dating secretly. The guys were hitting on me still, and that made me so furious, because I loved girls.

At Mtubatuba, just a small town, in KwaZulu-Natal, I lived with my sister’s family and that meant I would fellowship with them in their church. The church was about a kilometre away, so we used to walk there. I remember on a Sunday; we woke up and got ready for Sunday service. We were walking to church with my two sisters, and other two girls from the neighbourhood. We met this girl walking with her friends, and she seemed happy to see me, so wanted to come greet me. But I had to ignore her, acting as if I never knew her, like she was just a random girl. We continued to the church and had our service. After church around 13:00 pm, we went back home. The path was just between block houses. The ladies started chatting about their boyfriends. I kept listening and not sharing my own story, because it was different from theirs. I kept quiet, fearing to be judged and or discriminated against, because I fell for women instead of men. Even though my sister knew about my secret sexual orientation, I dreaded that the girls from the neighbourhood might talk to their families and friends about my sexuality and be in danger of the kind of hate crime that is usually perpetuated against homosexual persons in African contexts. Though I desired to also talk about my sexuality, I had to keep it a secret.

Snapshot theme 5: Being called *isitabane*

In this theme I reflect on and engage the negative usage of these terms to refer to queer (LGBTI) people and how our communities and societies tend to treat *izitabane* once you are known to be one.

I grew up in a community and a church that was not friendly to people like me, people called *isitabane*. *Isitabane* is and was a prevalent term used to refer to those who had physical appearances or looks or characteristics of the opposite gender or sex. During the high school years, my mates, both guys and girls, would call me *isitabane*, a tomboy, and other terms to refer to my “perceived” sexuality. I guess that was due to how I would speak, walk, and talk. These derogatory terms make me fear ‘coming out’ about my sexual identity. This makes LGBTI people vulnerable to GBV, and all prevalent hate crimes, and they fear being stigmatised, feeling shameful and guilty due to their gender and sexuality. Being called these terms made me feel shame, guilt, and a loss of dignity, because of discrimination by health providers, faith communities, and other community members. Many LGBTI people and I end up internalising the stigma and experience a reluctance to seek help, as well as unwillingness to disclose these risk behaviours to healthcare workers.

Thinking back to the year 2012, I lived with a family in Mpangeni. I was doing Grade Ten in one of the location high schools. This was the year I was called *isitabane* repeatedly, since I had a relationship with a woman who was not hiding her sexual orientation. I thought it was because she was from a family and a community that understood homosexuality, though there was still ongoing hate speech towards *izitabane*. As we were doing Grade Ten, we were expected to attend during weekends for the subjects like Mathematics, Life Sciences and Physical Sciences. This is the time when we would spend some together with my former partner without having many eyes on us. It was during lunchtime. I wore school uniform (long sleeve and a trouser). I had my hair cut, since we were not allowed to keep our hair long. We had chatted on WhatsApp with partner as to where and how to meet. That day I was less feminine than usual. I went to the shop by the school entrance where we met with her. One of the classmates who was the class representative had once asked me if I was a lesbian and I denied this. So, my partner was chatting with the classmates when I approached them. As I came closer and closer, they all gazed at me one by one. I knew they noticed the ‘unusual me’ and they were talking about me. Therefore, I stood away from them and whistled for the person I came for. She gave me attention, and I waved at her and asked to have a minute with her. I did not want to go over to the crew, because I would not know what to say to her in front of our fellow

classmates. She came to me smiling. I was blushing, and so ashamed of the same time. I could not help myself. She was exquisite. She had her short sleeve sky blue school shirt and navy printed skirt. We held each other's hands and then went to buy something for lunch. I could feel our fellow classmate eyes on my back. It made me feel extremely uneasy. I quickly let go of her hand. After the lunch in class, I felt like all the eyes were on me. I am a shy person by nature. I could not raise my eyes and look at them. I am silent, observant. I am not really good with eye contact, but I felt their eyes all over me.

I remember when our female class representative came to me and said “oh, so, you are indeed *isitabane*”. I did not understand whether it was a question or a statement trying to validate her notion. I stuttered and said, “I have no idea what you have heard or seen but I really have no idea what you are talking about”. I tried to act strong and lifted my eyes to look at her. Her face frowned, and she seemed disgusted. She asked me to talk to her and tell her what is going on between me and the lady, since my partner was open about being homosexual. The class representative threatened to tell the class if I do not tell the truth. I had to tell her, because if feared she might tell her friends, and I would suffer hate speech from the school. She went back to her friends, sitting on top of desk tables. They started a debate about *izitabane*. I knew she told them. Some were arguing for and some against homosexuality, mentioning that it is against our faith and tradition. The male fellow classmates were making jokes about *izitabane* and later during the year they got used to calling me *isitabane*.

I remember coming late, and it was raining that day. I knocked at the door, apologised and quickly joined the class. There were voices whispering “*siLate ke isitabane namhlanje*” meaning ‘the *sitabane* is late today’. Being called *isitabane* did not sit well with me. It made me feel completely different, in a wrong way. I was a shy person, not prone to talking. I felt defenceless. I felt like a dumb person for a moment. I felt tears burning in my eyes, but I said to myself ‘I would never let them see me crying’. They were high school pupils who made mockery and found joy in bullying one of them, especially if they realised that one is vulnerable.

#### Snapshot theme 6: Having bad spirits-*izitabane* and faith

In this theme, I want to reflect on the hatred (hate speech, hate crime) that faith spaces and leaders have towards homosexuality or homosexual people (*izitabane*), and how badly they

stand to be painted, such as being accused of being possessed by bad spirits; standing accused of all-natural disasters and diseases that occur.

However, as I was living with a family of born-again Christian followers, I loved this church and, in this family, they would preach to us about everything about Christianity. I therefore became a manner of born-again Christian, while hiding from them ‘who’ I am. I remember when we went to the church conference and when the Pastor was preaching, he said something to the effect of “in this church we will never fellowship with *isitabane*, we will cast that spirit out very soon”, while he was looking in the direction of where we were sitting. I knew at that time that he was aware of my orientation. I opened up to my sister and told her about my sexuality and she told me that I was fine, it is just bad spirit, but I am straight, it will *fade* away at some point. In this community, the youth are not allowed to have a romantic relationship, and particularly no sex before marriage. Well, due to some challenges in Mtubatuba I went back home at Ulundi and finished my matric there. I did not date anyone, because in that community they are ruthless when it comes to homosexual people, and I did not want my mother to ‘pay’ for my ‘sins’. In 2015 I came to the University and lived with my other sister, who is also a born-again Christian. I was attending Sunday services and I could feel the Holy Spirit upon me. Still, I had feelings for the same sex persons, but I suppressed it, and there were a lot of beautiful lesbians, gays, and transgenders. I had no hate for them, despite that I am a Christian.

Due to the violence towards my mother, I developed anger for other men in general. As a result, I started ‘dating’ at the age of 23, having a relationship with a man. I was always expecting him to hit me, because I assumed all men to be violent. There was no trust from my side at all. Therefore, the relationship never lasted.

In Pietermaritzburg during my early university years, my sexuality was equated to having bad spirits, or possession. I remember it was a beautiful bright and warm Sunday morning when one of the family members came into the room where I slept and heard a heavy knock and followed a voice “it is a Sunday, we are all going to church”, that was my sister. I was excited, not remembering previous encounters when I would feel worried that I could be excluded because of my sexual orientation and had forgotten previous hostile sermons. I woke up and got ready for the Sunday service. On our way to the church, it hit my mind that I am a queer person and I know how some beloved feel about *izitabane*. I comforted myself, since I had my

brown long dress, put on my lipstick, high heel shoes, had short hair. I also told myself that there would be no way anyone could tell that I was homosexual, since I was in a relationship with a person of opposite sex. However, during the holy communion service, a female pastor asked me to repent.

On our arrival, the female pastor welcomed us, and introduced herself to us, and we did the same. She seemed like a powerful woman with a short temper. She had a nice voice, she had her black two-piece, and red pencil heels. During the holy communion, there were silver dishes that were used to serve the congregants the holy communion. The male pastor led the prayer before serving the congregants with the holy communion. In this prayer I heard something about repenting before partaking in the holy communion. I had internalised that being homosexual is wrong, since I never had someone to explain it to me. What I knew and had in my mind were the relatively few positive comments and proliferation of negative comments about homosexuality and being homosexual. So, during the service the female pastor came to me and asked to talk to me outside. She told me to repent before taking holy communion. I never knew exactly what she was asking me to repent about, so I thought she was talking about my homosexuality. I therefore became scared and said to her “it is just how I feel” and cast my face down. She convinced me to talk. I told her I love people of the same sex as mine. I heard her praying in tongues, put her hand on my shoulder and prayed. She then told me it is not how God planned it to be, that I am possessed by a bad spirit and God is totally against it. She quoted the bible and said that God created a man and a woman, Eve and Adam, to breed and multiply, and that therefore homosexuality is entirely out of the will of God. However, I should not worry about it, she smiled and said “it will pass” she said.

## **5.2 Presentation of data from interview discussion using the snapshot guide**

In this section, I present data from interview discussion in the snapshot guide. I will start by snapshot Theme 1 and engage interview questions and responses from participants that most speak to that particular snapshot which further explores the snapshot theme. I will therefore follow the process with all the other snapshots and interview questions and responses. All responses are transcribed verbatim.

### 5.2.1 Being a girl born a girl child in the poor family

In Snapshot 1, I discuss my own experiences of being born a girl child in a poor family, and I will now present feedback from my research participants exploring the theme further.

How do you know Sophelele Mazibuko?

**Participant #1:** *Yes, I know Sophelele (hmhm- clearing throat) ... because I gave birth to her. When I was supposed to be operated (giving birth to her), they had put clothes, prepared me for theatre, shaved me. They pushed the hospital bed and when we were approaching the theatre entrance (nqomondweni)... then I said 'haw Shembe, do I really have to be operated, my lord', right there I felt like pushing (shouting I feel like pushing!), and they pulled back the hospital bed to the labour ward, glasses broke with drips they had put on me, hhawu! Right there I gave birth to her. She is the girl child that grew up under my care all the time until she grew up to this stage and left for school and then I separated with her when she went for tertiary education.*

How do you know Sophelele Mazibuko?

**Participant #2:** *Uhm, thank you so much. Uhm, she is my younger sister.. We are from the same womb with her. She is the tenth child from our living siblings. I would say we grew up together because she was born in the year 1995, and I was born in the year 1994, so we are more like twins, I would say she's the sibling I grew up with. I know her; however, I would not say I know EVERYTHING about her, but I know her, thank you.*

### 5.2.2 My father's violence; my mother's vulnerability

In Snapshot 2 I discussed my own experiences of my father's violence and my mother's vulnerability, I will now present feedback from the research participants, exploring the theme further.

How do you understand that she grew up in a gender-based violence home setting and that impacted on her sexuality?

**Participant #1:** *No, on that point, I'm observant because their father was drinking alcohol and physical abusing (hitting me, way too much). It was something that kids did not perceive well. They cried, hurting. That is why, probably, she realised that being married is horrible, not having a man because men turn to abuse women and exploit them and doing all insane things.*

*Probably, that is what made her, realise, that maybe it is better to be in love with another woman like her, because maybe a woman will not abuse her, and if she does, she can be able to fight her back; whereas it can be difficult to fight back a man because they are powerful.*

How do you understand that she grew up in a gender-based violence home setting and that impacted on her sexuality?

**Participant #2:** *Uhm, I think that's the main reason she ended up feeling that way due to the fact that our own biological father was a person with so much anger and had an easy hand, especially towards our biological mother. So that, I think she perceived and thought all men are like her father to women. So, she ended up distancing herself from men and instead preferred to have another woman. In fact, I think all women siblings at home would mention that they won't get married fearing that their partners probably would treat them like their father did their mother, of which was very abusive. They would mention that they prefer to remain single (unmarried).*

### **5.2.3 Learning what it means to be a Shembe believer**

In Snapshot 3 I discussed my own experiences of learning what it means to be a Shembe believer, I will now present feedback from my research participants exploring the theme further.

What are your biggest fears that she is the queer person in the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #1:** *Our aim, good people, eh... we expect that if a person is as girl, they must get married to their in-laws' home and build a home and bare children. If they become isitabane, how will they get children? Because a child comes from getting married and bare children, so from another girl... how will she get a child? She won't get it anywhere!! That is what hit my spirit, that how will it happen if it is like this. That is, indeed, what I sign off.*

What are your biggest fears that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant 2:** *Hey, my biggest fear with all of this is that, in nowadays, we live in a time where people are discriminated against their gender and sexuality, you see. So, since the Shembe*

*faith tradition is a traditional church, a church rooted in culture, tradition and customs and all that, I fear that she will not feel accepted within the church. Ehh... she could be isolated I can say. I don't know if the term 'nyumnazane' (isolation) is understandable, but she will feel isolated, you see? Uhm, yeah.*

#### **5.2.4 My feelings for other girls**

In Snapshot 4, I discussed my own experiences of my feelings for other girls. I will now present feedback from the research participants, exploring this theme further.

What has been your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #1:** *(hmm-clearing throat) ... indeed, when I noticed that my child is isitabane... (silence)... it was hard because Shembe church... they are Zulu tradition too much and 'this' (ubutabane/ homosexuality) is not allowed. Something called ubutabane or isitabane is not allowed/ not done at all, but because I gave birth to her, I had to accept it because she is my child, and there is no where I can ditch her. A human cannot be ditched.*

What is your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #2:** *Uhm-uh-uh, the experience I have, I don't know how to put it, but it took me some time to notice that she is queer, but honestly, I would ask myself that every girl/ woman in our age group was busy about boyfriends' stuff, but she was not into it. It was hard to converse to her about my relationships, or hold boyfriends talk with her. She did not have that much interest in those topics. For a person who is almost my age, it was not easy to talk to her about boyfriend stuff, because she was not interested as I was. I was confused what kind a person she was, 'she is not into boyfriends' stuff', so I don't know; but regarding the Shembe faith tradition, I was not too rooted into it and its customs, but I know that homosexuality is not allowed, however, when I grew up, it was usual to have feelings for a person of your same sex. So, to me it was not a big deal, you see? But I don't know... (laughing)... how to put it but that's all I can say. But with Shembe faith tradition, same-sex relationships are not allowed. So yeah, I don't know, but yeah...*

### 5.2.5 Being called *izitabane*

In Snapshot 5 I discussed my own experiences of being called *izitabane*, I will now present feedback from my research participants exploring the theme further.

How do you think GBV affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #1:** *Indeed, this leads to fear: fearing men, people with this thing, not feeling well or free, because they fear getting abused in a way that they act like men when they are not and fear, because people are not used to homosexuality (same-sex relationships). People are confused because it is not a normal thing or usual thing. That is why queer people end up fearing and hiding themselves; whereas they feel like behaving like men when they are not. So, they end up fearing 'coming out' that they are this 'thing' (homosexual) because people do not like this. Actually, it is something that is not done at all. We do not know how it started or came from.*

How do you think that Gender-Based Violence affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #2:** *This makes izitabane lack self-esteem, which leads to them fearing to 'come-out' as they are, their true selves, that exactly who they are. They end up feeling greatly oppressed with fear that they could be discriminated against in the community, within the church they fellowship, that 'this' is not allowed. In the bible... okay, there was a story about homosexuality in the bible but, it was rendered wrong, you see? So, they are oppressed in all angles. They are scared and frustrated and all, I guess. Thank you.*

### 5.2.6 Having bad spirits-*izitabane* and faith

In Snapshot 6, I discussed my own experiences of 'having bad spirits- *izitabane* and faith. I will now present feedback from the research participants, exploring this theme further.

How do you think church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

**Participant #1:** *Congregations - religious spaces oppress homosexual people because it is something not legal, because even with the Zulu tradition and culture and its customs - it is not legal. That is why they find themselves oppressed as they are not allowed to do as they wish. That is all.*

How do you think that church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

**Participant #2:** *Ey, it is very hard on that one because, ey, no ways, especially, in terms of culture, tradition and religion. That 'thing' (ubutabane- homosexuality) ... I'd say they are oppressed; I'd say. As I have responded to the question above, that they are greatly oppressed because, religiously, it is said that one cannot be involved in a same-sex relationship, you cannot date the person of your same sex, it is against God's will. It is against tradition and culture. So, they end up getting oppressed because, eh... there is no place where they feel... what I would say is... there is nowhere they feel that their side is taken or supported. They are always blamed. Indeed, they are oppressed and discriminated, both in religious spaces, culturally and traditionally.*

### **5.3 From data to distilling themes**

After engaging my own narrative and the insights from interviews I conducted a thematic analysis. As discussed in the research method chapter, a thematic analysis is, according to Braun and Clarke (2013: 80) "suited to a wide range of research interests and theoretical perspectives and is also useful as a basic method because, firstly: it works with a wide range of research questions from those about peoples' experiences and understandings to those about the representation and construction of particular phenomenon in a particular context." I followed the six steps, as described by Braun and Clarke, of thematic analysis to come to these key themes.

Now I have written my story and share some insights from the research participants and have done a thematic analysis, where I picked up the dominant themes emerged from the data. The six dominant themes developed from the entire data are as follows are distilled below:

#### **5.3.1 Understanding lesbian sexuality as a rejection of men rather than an attraction to woman**

The first theme that I distilled alludes to the fact that lesbian sexuality is often constructed as a rejection of men, rather than attraction to women. In this theme, I will engage the idea that people understand lesbians as those who reject men. So, in this case it means that lesbianism is understood as a rejection of men framed by patriarchy and heteronormativity. This rejection of men has implications for masculinity as constructed by dominant ideologies of patriarchy

and heteronormativity. The assumption of the heteronormative norm is that women are supposed to desire men, and if they do not, they are perceived to have something abnormal or wrong with them and are therefore constructed as those who want to crush men. Findings also reveal the side of this where lesbians are constructed as women who want to be men. Hence, lesbians are defined in proximity to men, either as a rejection of men, or wanting to be men. And actually, men have got very little to do with being lesbian.

### **5.3.2 The link between male violence and lesbian sexuality**

Secondly, I will explore the link between male violence and lesbian sexuality. This theme developed from the data, because people understood my sexuality as a reaction against my father's violence. This is a prevalent popular discourse employed by communities to explain the existence of Lesbian woman. This is in line with what Muholi (2004: 119) argues, namely that lesbian sexuality is understood and constructed as a 'phase' or 'situational' when a woman has frustration with her male partner. This implies that woman 'choose or prefer' to be in a same-sex relationship when experiencing frustrations with their male partners. This also implies that lesbian sexuality or identity is 'determined' by their situations in life, which is not the case.

### **5.3.3 The link between faith – heterosexuality and reproduction**

Thirdly, I will be exploring the perceptions, understanding and teachings from the church and society pertaining reproductivity and heterosexuality. This is also deeply informed by heteropatriarchy links between faith, heterosexuality, and reproduction. I will also explore the links of reproduction and heterosexuality to the dominant notions of family that flows from this.

### **5.3.4 *A human being cannot be ditched***

The fifth theme is: *a human being cannot be ditched*. This theme developed from the data looking at the hate and crime queer people experience from their families, society, and faith spaces. This theme came from the data, as the mother expressed the love for her child, despite

harsh and exclusionary teachings of the Church. So, in this analysis theme, I will be exploring the difference between the teachings of the church and the love that a mother has for a child.

### **5.3.5 Naming**

The sixth theme is: naming. This theme developed from the data, where participants express how they are addressed in the society through the usage of the derogatory terms such as *izitabane*, *ungqingili*, *inkonkoni*, etc. These are the common terms that are used in the society and faith spaces to refer to people who are not conforming to gender binary/ norms and/ or people in same-sex relationships. In this theme, I will be discussing how I felt when being called these derogatory names. I will also share my participants' insights on these negative terms.

### **5.3.6 Queer bodies and dress**

The fourth theme is queer bodies and the dress. This theme developed from the data as queer bodies are often oppressed with the way they dress in the society, and their respective faith spaces. People cannot freely express their gender identity through dress and therefore feel forced to wear something that they would rather choose not to. This is typical in the context of faith, where people are expected to wear dress according to their gender and or sex, for example, through the enforcement of church uniforms, which preserves gender binary. In this theme, I will be exploring the link between dress and gender codes and gender performativity. These are ways in which I see myself and people around me conceptualise lesbian sexuality.

## **5.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the focus was on data presentation resulting from data collected from the interview discussion and my own narrative. The analysis of dominant themes will be further discussed in the following chapter. This chapter concentrated on the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition, and how it relates to queer identities. It explored how the Shembe church engage with the lived reality of queer people and how faith spaces impact and influence their spiritual identity development within the church or as members of the church as queer as they are. In this chapter, I have presented how community use heteroperformativity as informed by patriarchy, derogatory terms to negotiate queer identities in South African

contexts. I also examine the oppression of queer bodies in South African faith landscapes. The following chapter I discuss the findings and themes in line with the obtainable literature and other research.

## CHAPTER 6

### DATA ANALYSIS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I presented data from an auto-ethnographic narrative and the conducted interviews, drawing from queer theory framework of Patrick Cheng's (2011) proposal of queer theory and use of storytelling, which embraces the embodiment and or experiences that establishes the self-identity of queer people's identities and their narratives. Important and emergent themes and arguments from discussions from both narrative and interviews were grouped under the dominant themes. These reflect the ways in which I see myself, and the way in which people around me conceptualize lesbian sexuality. The key themes are: first, understanding lesbian sexuality as a rejection of men, rather than an attraction to women; second, the link between male violence and lesbian sexuality; third, the link between faith – heterosexuality and reproduction; fourth, a human being cannot be ditched; fifth, queer bodies and dress; and six, naming. I conducted the thematic analysis and followed its six steps (familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing up) and these six dominant themes emerged.

In this chapter I provide insights and further discuss findings on the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe independent faith tradition and within the landscape of African Independent Churches in KwaZulu-Natal. I am providing a nuanced discussion as to how this research study challenges and provides new insights on the existing literature on the Shembe faith tradition and African Independent churches, sex, sexuality and gender identities in a South African context.

Walter (1999: 27) argues that the issues pertaining gender identities and sexuality are the main causes for church splits in Africa, as some do not believe that queer people ought to be excluded from the house of the Lord, which breaks the whole values of the church. Sithole (2018: 98) argues that over the years, the churches in Africa have been observed proclaiming the gospel which aligns the vulnerable, marginalized, and poor; however, the issues pertaining gender and sexual diversity are found hard to be held and engaged within faith spaces. This shows that the African faith spaces are not taking initiative to open a life-affirming platform within the churches for sexual minority groups. As discussed in chapter two that to begin engaging on theological reflections pertaining LGBTIQ+ African Christian sexualities, this requires to begin from the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ people themselves (West et al., 2016: 1). West

refers this to liberation theology, where the LGBTIQ+ community takes part in theology, from the perspective of their own embodied experiences. This study eager to attain this, to lead theological reflections based on lived realities and or experiences of marginalized people.

As I have mentioned, there is not many studies that have been conducted on African independent churches, especially the Shembe Independent Faith Tradition, on issues of gender and sexuality. This study sought to contribute to that. So, in the following section, I am discussing the findings or results from presented data in the field by study narrative (story) and participants understanding, insights and experience of queer or *isitabane* identity embodiment as informed by the mentioned above themes.

In constructing the discussion of each theme, I will introduce the theme, then illustrate how this theme was significant in my data, and then I will engage with dominant theory and scholarly insights.

### **6.2.1. Understanding lesbian sexuality as a rejection of men rather than an attraction to women**

This theme looks at the heteronormative construction of gender and sexuality) as being challenged by the lesbian sexuality. I am looking at the prevalent discourse used to make meaning of lesbian existence. Below I start sharing my auto-ethnographic narrative from snapshots, then follow with data from interviews that talk to this theme. The following I quote from the narrative I shared in Chapter Five the episodes in which I witnessed my mothers' abuse.

**Snapshot 2:** *"...I heard my father's voice shouting from the rondavel house. I immediately got a runny tummy; I was frightened by my father's voice. There was soon cold silence in the home. I quickly ran into the rondavel house where my father and mother were. My mother sat on icansi (mat made from rushes or reeds) on the left side inside the house and my father on the right side), candlelight in the centre of the rondavel house just near insika. There was ifodo (a picture of Shembe) at the umsamo place. He had his tribal weapon (iwisa) on his side. He was shouting at my mother. My mother has her head facing the floor, not saying anything. She was wearing iphinifa (pinafore) and a rug which symbolises respect. I entered the rondavel house with my other sister, and we sat beside our mother while our father was shouting at our mother, in front of us. There was wind all of a sudden, I have no idea where it came from, and the*

*candle went out, when my father took his tribal weapon (iwisa), stood up right in front of my mother. My sister asked to be excused, we cried out screaming. I heard her screaming, crying and shouting the name of Shembe. He hit her repeatedly using iwisa. We were terrified. We slept at our aunt's. I hated myself for leaving mom all that night alone with the man who verbally and physically abused her...'*

**Snapshot 2:** *...The following day we came back home and saw how badly injured our mother was. Her clothes were sticking to her skin because of blood. She was swollen and moaning from pain. She had bruises on her face and body. That broke me. I ran to hide and cried covering my mouth so that no one could hear me... They went to the clinic. She was still bleeding from the wounds...*

**Snapshot 2:** *...He used to insult my mother and call her all sorts of names (vulgarity), swearing at her, saying she is having an affair with other men, and at some days he would tell her that 'one day I will kill you with my bare hands...'*

What is your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #2:** *Uhm-uh-uh, the experience I have, I don't know how to put it, but it took me some time to notice that she is queer, but honestly, I would ask myself that every girl/ woman in our age group was busy about boyfriends' stuff, but she was not into it. It was hard to converse to her about my relationships, or hold boyfriends talk with her. She did not have that much interest in those topics. For a person who is almost my age, it was not easy to talk to her about boyfriend stuff because she was not interested as I was. I was confused what kind a person she was, 'she is not into boyfriends' stuff', so I don't know, but regarding the Shembe faith tradition, I was not too rooted into it and its customs, but I know that homosexuality is not allowed, however, when I grew up, it was usual to have feelings for a person of your same sex. So, to me it was not a big deal, you see? But I don't know... (laughing)... how to put it but that's all I can say. But with Shembe faith tradition, same-sex relationships are not allowed. So yeah, I don't know but yeah...*

How do you think GBV affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #1:** *Indeed, this leads to fear- fearing men, people with this thing, not feeling well or free because they fear getting abused in a way that they act like men when they are not and fear because people are not used to homosexuality (same-sex relationships). People are confused because it is not a normal thing or usual thing. That is why queer people end up fearing and hiding themselves; whereas they feel like behaving like men when they are not. So, they end up fearing 'coming out' that they are this 'thing' (homosexual) because people do not like this. Actually, it is something that is not done at all. We do not know how it started or came from.*

In South Africa, as well as in many other countries, people openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and or/ or intersexed (LGBTI). This means that one is vulnerable to violence due to gender and sex (Muller, 2013: 3). This includes and is not limited to hate speech, hate crime, discrimination, murder, etc. Within communal spaces, faith spaces as well as family environment, there are negative attitudes that people hold concerning lesbian sexuality and other sexual orientations. So, under this theme, I focus on lesbian sexuality in relation to men and masculinity. There is perception that lesbian people desire to be men.

Matebeni (2011: 35) argues that with femininity attached to heteronormativity, lesbian people felt relegated by notions of feminism. Bernstein Cock (2001, cited in Matabeni, 2011: 35) argues that certain forms of feminism can be exclusive as (African and Black) “essential position”, as they tend to claim that gender and sexual identities are “fixed and rely on the socio-economic, cultural and/ or biological heritage” (p. 35). Such notions can be exclusive and produce heteronormativity, which excludes others and normalizes heterosexuality over homosexuality. Matabeni (2011: 263) states that “while it is clear that women have “something” when they love each other; however, it is difficult to articulate what it is sex or just something physical”. This proves that in our contemporary South African contexts, lesbianism sexuality is often questioned and labelled. As in the data, participants share their insights, and think that my sexuality was a desire/ wanting to me a man or rejecting men as they used to see me talking and walking like a man. Sex is reduced to penis and vagina penetration and therefore lesbians cannot have it. It is also believed it has to be procreative to count as sex. For example, Kendal (1998, cited in Matabeni, 2011: 263) states that “lesbians never have sex at all”.

Matebeni, 2011: 265 shows the challenge presented by the sexual relationships between women, noting that “what is threatening to patriarchy is the idea of intimate same-sex

relationships where a dominating male is absent, and where woman's sexuality can be defined without reference to reproduction". The existence of lesbians in communities challenges the existing negative notions of sexuality regarding what is considered normal or abnormal concerning sexuality. With lesbianism, patriarchy is missing and challenged. Foucault (1978, cited in Matabeni, 2011: 363) asserts that experience of pleasure by the subject position is vital: "pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, but in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of intensity, its specific quality its reverberations in the body and the soul". My experience with my sexual orientation to other women does not rely on generic cultural scripts, which enact sexuality informed by heteronormativity. I actively embodied my lesbian sexuality. I argue that attraction to other women is not desiring to be men, but attraction and desire to actively embody and embrace our sexual diversity.

Cultural heteronormativity notions of the gender roles of a man initiating a relationship or approaching a woman are challenged by lesbian sexuality, where toxic masculinity is therefore challenged. Matabeni (2011: 271) states that "the notion of 50|50 suggests that lesbian people are free from gender roles" (Rose and Zand, 2002; In Matabeni, 2011: 271), and "modify sexual scripts in pursuit of men egalitarian relationships". I challenge the idea that lesbian sexuality is either an expression of wanting to be or rejecting men, and argue that lesbian sexuality constitutes attraction to women, which challenges and rejects normalized notions and norms of intimacy, power, gender roles, and dominance, and the heteronormativity informed by patriarchy. Matabeni (2011: 282) asserts that "women sexual relationships show that relationship between women is not only bodily, but also social and destabilise existing notions of sex and gender."

Jones (2014: 1) states that masculinity has been interpreted as the rejection of homosexuality, where lesbian sexuality is viewed as the rejection of men or wanting to be men. Jones (2014: 2) further argues that "lesbian women do not simply 'perform' masculinity, but instead, challenge hegemonic ideologies of femaleness in the construction of their lesbian identity or sexuality". Central to this case is that non-femininity does not necessarily require to be described as 'masculinity'; instead, femininity as well as masculinity are redrafted, queered and negotiated in the category of women's construction of a lesbian-specific identity. Inness (1997: 185, cited in Jones 2014: 3) argues that wanting to be men or wanting to be men is taken from the 'butch' lesbian sexual identity as they use 'masculine identifiers' and disrupt and

decentering dominant heterosexual masculinity. I argue from a black lesbian sexuality point of view that lesbian sexuality is neither the rejection of men nor wanting to be men. However, it reinforces a discourse of difference from, and rejection of, the heteronormative mainstream. It is not connected with rejecting men or wanting to be men. It is broader than that.

In this theme, I have discussed the popular understanding of lesbian sexuality in the communities and faith spaces and within families that it is constructed as rejecting men and or wanting to be men rather than attraction to women. In this theme, I have also shown that women sexual relationship/ lesbianism does not reject men or wanting to be men; however, it rejects not only heterosexual norms of sex/ sexuality and gender, but it also challenges these notions and present various and ‘complex’ forms of negotiating sexuality. Construction of lesbianism is “mutable and evolving”, it consists of no singular formations of the category” (Matebeni, 2011: 283).

### **6.2.2 The link between male violence and lesbian sexuality**

In this section I explore the link between male violence and lesbian sexuality. Many people understand and construct the existence of lesbian sexuality as reaction against men’s violence against women. As a black lesbian woman, I aim to challenge this notion. I start by proving my auto-ethnographic narrative, then data out from interview and then discussion.

Following is the data from snapshots and interview data that speaks to this theme:

**Snapshot Theme 1:** *...I grew up in a family that was a Shemberite, that is, deeply rooted in culture. There was not much challenge experienced at home, since I hid my sexual orientation, fearing what my father would do to my mother and me. I also feared expressing my sexual feelings because my mother would be beaten for that. I was aware that I hated men to the extent that I could fight boys if they show any interest in me back in high school. I never hated how I felt. The problem started when my classmates realised how I would walk and was not too much of a talker.*

**Snapshot Theme 4:** *...Oh, I disliked men, not to mention if they would try to ‘hit’ on me. I would frown, showing no interest, but instead that I am getting disgusted...*

**Snapshot Theme 6:** *...I therefore became scared and said to her “it is just how I feel” and I faced down. She convinced me to talk. I told her I love people of the same sex as mine. I heard her praying in tongues, put her hand on my shoulder and prayed. She then told me it is not how God planned it to be, that I am possessed by a bad spirit and God is totally against it. She quoted the bible and said that God created a man and a woman, Eve and Adam to breed and multiply, therefore homosexuality is entirely out of the will of God. However, I should not worry about it, she smiled and said “it will pass”.*

What is your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #2:** *Uhm-uh-uh, the experience I have, I don't know how to put it, but it took me some time to notice that she is queer, but honestly, I would ask myself that every girl/ woman in our age group was busy about boyfriends' stuff, but she was not into it. It was hard to converse to her about my relationships, or hold boyfriends talk with her. She did not have that much interest in those topics. For a person who is almost my age, it was not easy to talk to her about boyfriend stuff because she was not interested as I was. I was confused what kind a person she was, 'she is not into boyfriends' stuff', so I don't know, but regarding the Shembe faith tradition, I was not too rooted into it and its customs, but I know that homosexuality is not allowed, however, when I grew up, it was usual to have feelings for a person of your same sex. So, to me it was not a big deal, you see? But I don't know... (laughing)... how to put it but that's all I can say. But with Shembe faith tradition, same-sex relationships are not allowed. So yeah, I don't know but yeah...*

How do you think GBV affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #1:** *Indeed, this leads to fear- fearing men, people with this thing, not feeling well or free because they fear getting abused in a way that they act like men when they are not and fear because people are not used to homosexuality (same-sex relationships). People are confused because it is not a normal thing or usual thing. That is why queer people end up fearing and hiding themselves; whereas they feel like behaving like men when they are not. So, they end up fearing 'coming out' that they are this 'thing' (homosexual) because people do not like this. Actually, it is something that is not done at all. We do not know how it started or came from.*

How do you think that GBV affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #2:** *This makes izitabane lack self-esteem, of which leads to them fearing to 'come-out' as they are, their true selves that exactly who they are. They end up feeling greatly oppressed with fear that they could be discriminated against in the community, within the church they fellowship, that 'this' is not allowed. In the bible... okay, there was a story about homosexuality in the bible but, it was rendered wrong, you see? So, they are oppressed in all angles. They are scarred and frustrated and all, I guess. Thank you.*

How do you understand that she grew up in a gender-based violence home setting and that impacted on her sexuality?

**Participant #1:** *No, on that point, I'm observant, because their father was drinking alcohol and physical abusing (hitting me, way too much). It was something that kids did not perceive well. They cried, hurting. That is why, probably, she realised that being married is horrible, not having a man because men turn to abuse women and exploit them and doing all insane things. Probably, that is what made her, realise, that maybe it is better to be in love with another woman like her, because maybe a woman will not abuse her, and if she does, she can be able to fight her back; whereas it can be difficult to fight back a man because they are powerful.*

How do you understand that she grew up in a GBV home setting and that impacted on her sexuality?

**Participant #2:** *Uhm, I think that's the main reason she ended up feeling that way, due to the fact that our own biological father was a person with so much anger and had an easy hand, especially towards our biological mother. So that, I think she perceived and thought all men are like her father to women. So, she ended up distancing herself from men and instead preferred to have another woman. In fact, I think all women siblings at home would mention that they won't get married fearing that their partners probably would treat them like their father did their mother, of which was very abusive. They would mention that they prefer to remain single (unmarried).*

Muholi (2004: 117) states that although South Africa celebrates years of democratic freedom, “black lesbian women are still refused the entry into the nation’s most public spaces and are punished for their same-sex desires and relationships”. The lived reality and experiences of “lesbian-identified women in urban-townships are still overwhelmingly dominated by a set of intersecting raced, classed and heterogendered politics that blur the line between our apartheid past and our new constitutional democracy” (Muholi, 2004: 117). Muholi argues that the sexual violence such as ‘corrective rape’, and physical assaults against black lesbian bodies exacerbates their invisibility and silences their voices. Heteronormativity, as informed by patriarchy and heterosexuality, makes the lives of black lesbian queers impossible, as black societies and faith communities harbor the idea that anything or any sexuality outside the ‘norm’ is not normal and employ negative actions such as ‘corrective rape’ to ‘control or cure’ black lesbian sexual orientation. The ideology of men being ‘in control’ costs us our lives and freedom as black lesbians in the South African landscapes.

As many black African communities have notions explaining existence of black lesbian sexuality that it is the result of male violence they experienced, this leads to the interpretation of lesbian sexuality as a ‘situational or phase’. This also makes black lesbian vulnerable to male violence, which they inflict on lesbian women as means of diminishing their existence and silence their voices. This informs and limits how and to whom we address about our sexual lives and bodies. Hate crimes and speeches against black lesbian women in the South African landscapes attempts to fight against the challenge reflected by lesbian sexuality on boundaries of the heteronormativity and hetero performance informed by patriarchy, which attempts to label “who is, what is, an ‘African’ woman” (Muholi, 2004: 117).

The reality of being a woman, black and lesbian in the South African contexts is that we become a ‘foreigner’ in our own communities, faith spaces and families as some have labeled homosexuality racial, and ethnic as ‘un-African’, which reflects assumptions that LGBTI is western culture (Muholi, 2004: 119); and construct black lesbian sexuality in a heteronormative manner. This results people constructing black sexual orientation as ‘fashion’ or ‘situational’ rather than pure attraction to other women. As in my data, participants thought that my lesbian sexual identity was the result of my father’s violence against my mother. Muholi (2004: 119) states that “many believe or construct that black lesbian sexuality as a ‘response’ to frustrations with a boyfriend”. Morgan (2003, cited in Muholi, 2004: 119) states that “more recently, lesbian *sangomas* are claiming their lesbian identities and their sexualities publicly to highlight

the fact that their culture and their spirituality has not always been based on heterosexism and that their traditions have not been restricted to the homosexual or heterosexual binary.”

Notions following heteronormativity, as many people believe and construct that lesbian sexuality to be a reaction against men’s violence against women is what exacerbates homophobic crimes against black lesbian people in South African landscapes. Muholi (2004: 121) in her study finds out from a lesbophobic rapist that they “wanted to prove wrong their lesbian friend that she is not a man”. The way in which gender and sexuality (in terms of masculinity and femininity) is constructed in our familial, social, and faith spaces need to be interrogated for life-affirming purposes.

Nabulivou (2013: 2) found that “across the globe, sexism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia lead to violence against LBT (Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transwomen) women, ranging from bullying, harassment and violence in families and communities to sexual assaults and brutal extrajudicial killings”. From the narrative I shared in the data presentation chapter, in Snapshot Two I spoke about my father’s violence and my mother’s vulnerability. Participants in this study understand that my lesbian sexuality is the result of my father’s violence against my mother, which occurred when we grew up. This is a popular discourse usually used by black communities in particular, to explain and understand the existence of lesbian women in the South African contexts. Nabulivou (2013: 3) argues that sexual orientation is a “natural part of who you are; however, it may change over one’s lifetime”. As I have discussed above, gender and sexuality are fluid, and not permanently fixed. Individuals do not choose who they are attracted to, and therapy, treatment or persuasion will not change a person’s sexual orientation. It is not known if people’s exposure to violence can determine or affect their lesbian sexual orientation.

People’s popular understandings and views of lesbian sexual identity reflects to be informed by heteronormativity, which is informed by patriarchy. These negative views and understanding of lesbian sexuality make lesbian sexuality misunderstood, which results in their lack of ability to accept this sexuality. This is why, in faith landscapes, traditional and cultural contexts as well as the society ‘think’ that they can ‘fix’ or ‘correct’ lesbian sexual identity through rape known as ‘corrective rape’. This I call ‘homophobic rape’. The existing ideologies concerning lesbian sexuality in communities and faith spaces, which is informed by patriarchy decreases the ability of addressing gender and sexual diversity, inequalities, and consequences

that draws from heteronormativity and hetero performance, for women of all gender and sexual minority of those not conforming to the established societal norms of femininity or heteropatriarchal notions.

Nabulivou continues to argue that “the more patriarchal a society, the more homophobic it tends to be, and controlling of women non-conforming sexualities” (p. 3). Therefore, I argue that my experience of my father’s violence towards my mother is not likely to be connected to my lesbian sexual orientation or identity. Gender and sexuality are not rigid and are not likely to be determined by exposure to violence. Lourenco, Baptista, Senra, Almeida, Basilio, and Bhana (2013: 3) argue that there are multiple effects of being exposed to domestic violence for children. However, these factors are not associated with their sexual orientation or identity.

In her interview participant 1 shared her insights, namely that she thinks that I ‘preferred’ a romantic relationship with another woman in order to avoid male violence. This is popular in cases where women have experienced male violence to rather not be in a relationship anymore. However, in this case, both participants feel that my sexuality is an attempt to avoid male violence, which I witnessed my mother experiencing at the hands of my father. This shines a light on gender inequality informed by heteropatriarchy, which exists in heterosexual relationships. However, my lesbian sexuality was not a way of reacting against my mother’s experience of gender-based violence from my father.

In this section I have explore and discussed the understandings and perceptions people have about lesbian sexuality in black families, societal and faith communities, that lesbianism is a result of violence experience and/ or reaction against male violence.

### **6.2.3 The link between faith – heterosexuality and reproduction**

This theme explores heteronormativity that aims to prescribe people’s desires and reproductivity, as informed by faith traditions in their teachings on gender and sexuality. As a black lesbian woman, I am challenging this notion. I will start by sharing data from my narrative, interview data and then follow with a discussion.

Below I share data extracted from my snapshot themes, interview with participants which speaks to this theme:

**Snapshot Theme 3:** ...*Our mothers were told not to refuse or reject their husband sexual intercourse, anytime, anyhow he wants he must get. That shows why our mothers gave birth to many children under difficult situations, despite the poverty that they lived under. No education, no hospitals. My mother told me that during their time, a woman who went to clinics for family planning methods (contraception) was thought to be whore, a woman with no morals, less of a woman. Not considered a woman enough in the society. Therefore, she was considered not worthy to be respected or married, but to be raped by community boys, because she takes contraceptives as if to become the 'playground' of boys.*

**Snapshot Theme 3:** ... *I remember I wore the same rug (ihiya) as my elder sister. She is an extroverted person than me. We were told that dancing with pride during this gathering shows and proves a girl's womanhood and that would attract men for marriage. They danced in the front line and I remained at the back as I wondered how that could help me since I knew my inner- self, how I felt... We wore our white uniform that's assigned for amakhosazana (umnazaretha and nansuka). I took few steps back and put my mat on the floor and sat down. I talked to myself asking that if I dance there, it means I would be dancing to prove my womanhood for marriage to a man. Yet I do not have much of a 'thing' for men. This taught me that being inkosazana in the Shembe faith tradition means one is not expected and can never be allowed to be in the same-sex relationship.*

What are your biggest fears that she is the queer person in the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #1:** *Our aim, good people, eh... we expect that if a person is as girl, they must get married to their in-laws' home and build a home and bare children. If they become isitabane, how will they get children? Because a child comes from getting married and bare children, so from another girl... how will she get a child? She won't get it anywhere!! That is what hit my spirit, that how will it happen if it is like this. That is, indeed, what I sign off.*

Participant in her interview raised her fears regarding reproductivity that a lesbian woman will not be able to conceive a child from another woman. She reflects teachings and the way women are raised in black communities, instilled from a young age, that they must get married and bare children. This is a notion informed by heteropatriarchy that exists in black families, societies and churches to raise women regarding women and reproductivity and/ or fertility.

However, as Muholi (2004: 118) argues, lesbian *sangomas* in the South African context challenge these heteropatriarchal and hetero performance notions enclosed and associated to women and reproductivity or women fertility. In Snapshot 3, I discussed the teachings existing in the Shembe independent faith tradition that teaches and encourages women for marriage and reproductivity. This is also included in the church's policies following its Black lesbian women, which forbids them marriage and calls for the damage fee payment. As I have discussed in the literature chapter, faith is a strong influential shaper of identity and meaning and that means that it influences and prescribes social norms, values, ethics, as well as behavior. Most often, religion does violence to individuals not conforming to the dominant gender and sexual codes (Judge, 2020: 1). Heteronormativity prescribes desire and reproduction of women, and this is informed by faith traditions. And as a lesbian I am challenging this.

Judge (2020: 7) states that almost all African Independent churches holds interest in the manner which life is ruled and “thus in the rules and regulations around which social and culture practices are organized”. Judge continues to argue that “for this reason, LGBTIQ+ activism in the sphere of religion should concern itself with how conditions of life are shaped by law and policy, both inside and outside of religious structures- this includes policies on gender and sexuality, on sexual and reproductive health and rights, on traditional practices, on social development and on gender-based violence and abuse against women and black lesbian women’ (p. 7). I have discussed in Chapter Two that within the Shembe faith tradition, there are policies, teachings that were implemented following young unmarried and married women, as well as lesbian and gay sexual identities. These teachings and policies prevent persons who have had been in a same-sex relationship from getting married, promoting exclusively heterosexual relationships. Society, churches and families expect that their daughter get married to men and bare children. This reflects a perception that churches encourage heterosexual relations within churches, society, and families for reproductivity.

The perceptions that the church holds regarding heterosexuality indicates a strong association with reproductivity or procreation. Queer theory, as suggested by Cheng (2011: 7) and Altlus-Reid (2018: 72) destabilizes the gender binary chains that religion, culture, families and society use to ‘propertise’ women and refuse them access to their sexual reproductive health rights. As much as I respect order, protocol, and authority respective of these contexts, however, it is more respectable and relevant to interrogate and deconstruct the patriarchal religious tools that

control and oppress women with reproductivity and heterosexuality within these landscapes. So, what I am arguing under this theme is that heteronormativity as informed and bolstered by religion and culture, informs SRHR for woman and dictates reproductive choices.

In this section, I have discussed the link between faith, heterosexuality and reproductivity that heterosexuality prescribes the reproductivity of sexual and gender non-conforming persons.

#### **6.2.4 A human being cannot be ditched**

This theme sets up an argument between the exclusivist teachings of the church against lesbian sexuality, and the love of a mother for their children despite their non-conforming gender and sexual identities. As I have discussed in Chapter Two on the excluding and incriminating policies and laws that exists within the Shembe faith tradition concerning the issues of gender, sexual diversity and homosexuality identities, this study participants' shows love and care for queer people within this church. Participants' responses also show that the church hold ideas that perpetuates heteronormative stereotypes.

In the following section I share data from snapshots and interview that speaks to this theme:

**Snapshot theme 4:** *...When I was doing grade seven, I started asking out a girl to be her "friend" and she agreed, I did not want to risk other people knowing about my sexual orientation, because I knew how the society felt about gays and lesbians. They were called names that were, from my knowledge, created to discourage homosexuality, especially the Shembe Church.*

What has been your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #1:** *(hmm-clearing throat) ... indeed, when I noticed that my child is isitabane...(silence)... it was hard because Shembe church... they are Zulu tradition too much and 'this' (ubutabane/homosexuality) is not allowed. Something called ubutabane or isitabane is not allowed/ not done at all, but because I gave birth to her, I had to accept it, because she is my child and there is nowhere, I can ditch her. A human cannot be ditched.*

What are your biggest fears that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

**Participant #2:** *Hey, my biggest fear with all of this is that, nowadays, we live in a time where people are discriminated against their gender and sexuality, you see. So, since the Shembe faith tradition is a traditional church, a church rooted in culture, tradition and customs and all that, I fear that she will not feel accepted within the church. Ehh... she could be isolated I can say. I don't know if the term 'nyumnazane' (isolation) is understandable, but she will feel isolated, you see? Uhm, yeah.*

One participant shared her insights and experience navigating that her daughter (myself) is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition that is rooted in the harsh policies, tradition and culture when it comes to gender and sexuality of its members. She shows to be a traditional and a cultural woman and a mother, who respects and abides by the Church's policies and laws. However, her motherhood, womanhood and spirit of *ubuntu* does not allow her isolate, discriminate, and ditch her child, because she is a lesbian and because the church and culture perceive their sexuality as not allowed, un-Godly, sinful, and shameful. She indicated acceptance beyond the church's hate and exclusivity for homosexuality. Indeed, there is no dustbin for a human being.

Both participants reveal that the Shembe faith tradition is rooted in the Zulu culture and tradition that is embedded in patriarchy. As I have discussed in chapters One and Two of this thesis about the Shembe church and its culture and tradition, it is a patriarchal culture and tradition seeking to diminish women, whilst benefiting men. This occurs when it promotes heteropatriarchy and toxic masculinity 'dressed' as culture or as religion. The words of my mother portray love for her child even when the church, culture and tradition has painted their sexuality 'sinful, and shameful'. Her words "a human cannot be ditched" advocates for the emancipation, inclusion, and restoration of *ubuntu*. This shows that religion as the main contributor to homophobia, while the culture, families, society and government also have a lot to answer for. The GBV against queer people only increases as they are waking up and recognising that they have the right to exist equally as others.

Bongmba (2016: 15) argues that "*ubuntu* offers a way of rethinking the negative discourses on homosexuality in Africa and in the African Church." The spirit of *ubuntu* promotes more acceptance and communication "within the ecclesial community in Africa" (p. 15) and challenges the negative discourses reflecting from political and religious figures (leaders).

*Ubuntu* also provides a capacity and possibility that *ubuntu* philosophy provides for “addressing the divisions over homosexuality” (Bongmba, 2016: 15).

Chitando and Mateveke (2017: 125) argues in line with Bongmba in saying that “*ubuntu* has the capacity to overcome the stigma and discrimination as it places the emphasis on accepting the full humanity of another person” and continue on to state that maybe “one of the most prominent examples of the importance of the Africanisation of homosexuality is the role revealed for religion” (p. 126).

Masango (2002: 958) adds to this positivity expressed towards homosexuality, and states that “as the African church, we need to set Christian values that will guide people, in order to relate to each other in the spirit of *ubuntu* (human dignity)”. The exclusivist teachings of the church, especially the Shembe independent faith tradition, which are informed by the patriarchal systems of the church concerning homosexuality (heteronormativity and hetero performance) are challenged by the love of a mother drawing from the spirit or the notion of *ubuntu*. Non-acceptance of queer people within the African Independent Churches in South Africa, especially within the Shembe faith tradition, is the concern and fear for many people as leaders sustain and maintain its laws and policies concerning homosexuality. As discussed, there was a split of Shembe church members concerning the policies and laws that were implemented to exclude, discriminate, and isolate queer people and their sexuality. Participant 2 raises the issue of gender inequality exists within our societies and churches that discriminate people against their gender and sexuality. As with many of the scholars cited, she is concerned that queer people are not accepted in the African Independent Churches, especially in the Shembe faith tradition, as it is deeply a Zulu traditional and cultural church embedded in patriarchy and its customs. This proves that the Shembe faith tradition does not have love, the love that a mother has for her child despite any form of difference. The church still has to work on its policies and laws to have a ‘whatever it takes’ to be accepting, inclusive, loving and caring church in its application and practice of *ubuntu* theology.

Gitari and Walter (2020: 26) in their interview conduction for their study found that many participants revealed that they were mostly harassed and rejected by their families rather than community and faith spaces at some point in their lives “due to being lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered or because they were perceived to be”. In their findings, the authors report that “fear of isolation led people to go to extraordinary lengths to conceal their sexual

orientation, including entering heterosexual marriages and some left unbearably hostile home environments; others were thrown out of home, cut off from family support and left to fend for themselves” (p. 26).

Ryan (2009: 8) states that “we found that family acceptance promotes well-being and helps protect LGBTI young people against any possible risk”. In this theme, I examine the hate churches, families, societies reflected against queer people. However, despite the hate LGBTI people are vulnerable of, mother accepts her lesbian daughter, which reflects love a mother has for their children, despite the dominant negative teachings and policies of the church which excludes and cuts off people with gender and sexuality identities not conforming to the dominant heterosexuality informed by patriarchy existing within the church and its practice of theology. The love of a mother wins and shows little or no rejection and more accepting as she states that “a human cannot be ditched”. They continue to state that “showing little rejection and more accepting by parents can make an important difference in reducing a young person’s risk for serious health problems, including suicide and HIV” (p. 10).

In this section, I have discussed the exclusive teachings of the church concerning queer people within the church and families, and the *ubuntu* and love that the mother has for their children despite their homosexual identities.

### **6.2.5 Naming**

This theme looks at the derogatory terms used by communities and faith spaces such as *inkonkoni*, *isitabane*, and *ungqingili*, to refer to people in same-sex relationships and/ or people not conforming to gender and sexual binaries. In this section, I share my experiences and those of my participants in line with these terms, which are usually employed to exclude, discriminate, isolate, shame people in same-sex relationships in societal and faith communities. Below I provide the data from my narrative and interview that is in line with this theme, and therefore follow up with a discussion.

**Snapshot theme 5:** “*They started calling us unqingili, inkonkoni, isitabane. I never appreciated these terms...*”

How do you think that GBV affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #2:** *This makes izitabane lack self-esteem, of which leads to them fearing to 'come-out' as they are, their true selves that exactly who they are. They end up feeling greatly oppressed with fear that they could be discriminated against in the community, within the church they fellowship, that 'this' is not allowed. In the bible... okay, there was a story about homosexuality in the bible but, it was rendered wrong, you see? So, they are oppressed in all angles. They are scarred and frustrated and all, I guess. Thank you.*

How do you think church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

**Participant #1:** *Congregations, religious spaces oppress homosexual people because it is something not legal, because even with the Zulu tradition and culture and its customs- it is not legal. That is why they find themselves oppressed as they are not allowed to do as they wish. That is all.*

How do you think that church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

**Participant #2:** *Ey, it is very hard on that one because, ey, no ways, especially, in terms of culture, tradition and religion. That 'thing' (ubutabane- homosexuality) ... I'd say they are oppressed; I'd say... they are greatly oppressed because, religiously, it is said that one cannot be involved in a same-sex relationship, you cannot date the person of your same sex, it is against God's will. It is against tradition and culture. So, they end up getting oppressed because eh... there is no place where they feel... what I would say is... there is nowhere they feel that their side is taken or supported. They are always blamed. Indeed, they are oppressed and discriminated, both in religious spaces, culturally and traditionally.*

All participants acknowledge the existence of LGBTIQ+ in the Shembe independent faith tradition. This proves that there are queer people in this church and the church leaders are aware of their existence within the Shembe faith tradition as queers are always discriminated, isolated, and violated in this church. This indicates the issue of gender diversity and human rights pertaining LGBTIQ+ in this church and other African Independent Churches at large. The issues concerning the intersectionality of gender, religion, sexuality, and sexual reproductive health rights are topics avoided in the church. This creates the ground of silence which results to women (young girls, married and unmarried women, lesbians, and other queer people within the church) oppression and disempowerment in the South African landscapes, particularly within African faith landscapes. This silence forms the toxic ideology that gender and sexual

diversity or fluidity of sexualities is a taboo. Kaoma (2016: 68) and Antonio's (1997: 296) argue that “traditionally, except under ritually constrained circumstances, sex, and sexuality are not publicly discussed thus the whole subject is encircled by secrecy and enclosed around with numerous taboos”.

This section reveals that Shembe faith tradition and other African Independent Churches have hesitate on creating safe space to collectively engage issues pertaining gender and sexuality and rather hold a theology that means this is not the goal. From the findings, participants keep on referring homosexuality as *'lento'* - meaning ‘this thing’. As much the language can be the problem and some English terms cannot be translated into isiZulu, participants lack positive Zulu terms to refer to homosexuality. From the literature the church portrays hate for homosexuality by the derogatory terms *ungqingili*, *isitabane*, *inkonkoni*, etc. From the interviews, the participants attempt to find a specific and safe Zulu term to use without sounding hateful. Hence, they kept saying ‘this thing’. This lack of safe vocabulary to discuss and engage queer identities makes it difficult to safely engage issues pertaining gender and sexuality, especially the LGBTIQ+ identities. The Shembe faith tradition nevertheless functions depending on the patriarchal structure, which does not provide safe and life-affirming resources as well as theoretical frame to openly and safely engage and discuss issues of sexuality and gender identity. The lived reality of *'isitabane of faith'* is theorized and engaged with by utilizing the experiences of hetero patriarchy (Van Der Walt et al., 2019: 10).

The findings show that queer people are understood and referred to as *ungqingili*, *inkonkono*, *isitabane*, etc. when addressing them. These are the most famous Zulu names used to refer to LGBT people. There are numerous Zulu or Nguni terms for people in the same-sex relationships.

Mkasi (2013: 32) notes that intersex individuals are often tolerated in the Zulu communities as they are perceived as the natural people. In the communal black spaces, people in the same-sex relationships are referred as *isitabane*, *sis-bhuti* and *ungqingili* (McLean and Ngcobo, 2013: 32; Nkoli, 1993).

In my auto-ethnographic narrative, I reveal that I was frequently called *isitabane* in my school years, as well as the church calls queer people *izitabane*, *ongqingile*, *izinkonkoni*, etc. when referring to them. This reinforces the results by the African Commission on Human and

People's Rights Report (ACHAPR, 2014: 5) which noted: "diverse gender identities and gender expressions remain marginalized [sic], invisible and oppressed in South Africa due to the continued dominance of cis-normative and heteronormative conceptions of gender". This study hints at the point that has been raised in this study that queer identities are referred to all derogatory terms to discourage homosexuality and make it seem immoral, unnatural and un-African. Everything that fit heteronormativity is considered normal and that is not in line with heteronormativity is seemed as abnormal and unnatural.

Now this study states that there is not much literature that has been conducted on the Shembe faith tradition to view the complex and lived reality of *izitabane* identities within it. There is an existing lack of understanding gender diversity, safe and life affirming vocabulary, and accommodation of the marginalized and sexual or LGBTIQ+ minority groups. This already reveal a huge gap that exists in this landscape of gender difference and sexual orientation. The lived reality of *isitabane* shared in this study in a form of a narrative proves that the terms used to refer to queer people and the language to differentiate what establishes the gender identity and sexual orientation of lesbians, gays, and transgender people. People therefore refer all these sexualities to as *isitabane*, *ungqingili*, and/or *inkonkoni*.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that gender-based violence, religion and systems of patriarchy plays a huge impact and role in the way people perceive their sexuality and gender identities (as discussed in chapter five). However, some churches try to move with the times and engage issues pertinent to these realities. Voices of queer people within African Independent Churches are silenced. Findings show that queer people within the Shembe Church feel discriminated against, isolated, silenced, oppressed and ashamed of their queer gender and sexual identities as they are not allowed to fellowship in the church. This is usually through the use of derogatory names, where queer identities are considered unnatural and prohibited. This study tries to surface the existence of queers within the Shembe Independent faith tradition and encourage other queers within these churches to embrace their queer identities through storytelling and narratives regardless of the discouraging terms used on us to discourage our sexuality pride.

In this section I have discussed derogatory terms that are typically used in the communal and faith spaces to refer to people in same-sex relationships, and how these terms negatively affect them.

### 6.2.6 Queer bodies and dress

This section examines the issue of dress, as people are often expected to dress according to their gender and sex. This relates to gender performance, which determines who does what and how, and forces people to dress in the manner which they would rather not. This also relates to heteronormativity, which is informed by patriarchy, where dressing in a different dress from their gender or sex means that something is wrong or not normal with them.

Below I provide data from my auto-ethnographic narrative, interview and then discussion:

**Snapshot theme 3:** *...I remember I wore the same rug (ihiya) as my elder sister... ...We wore our white uniform that's assigned for amakhosazana (umnazaretha and nansuka). I took few steps back and put my mat on the floor and sat down. I talked to myself asking that if I dance there, it means I would be dancing to prove my womanhood for marriage to a man. Yet I do not have much of a 'thing' for men. This taught me that being inkosazana in the Shembe faith tradition means one is not expected and can never be allowed to be in a same-sex relationship.*

How do you think that Gender-Based Violence affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

**Participant #2:** *This makes izitabane lack self-esteem, of which leads to them fearing to 'come-out' as they are, their true selves that exactly who they are. They end up feeling greatly oppressed with fear that they could be discriminated against in the community, within the church they fellowship, that 'this' is not allowed. In the bible... okay, there was a story about homosexuality in the bible but, it was rendered wrong, you see? So, they are oppressed in all angles. They are scarred and frustrated and all, I guess. Thank you.*

How do you think church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

**Participant #1:** *Congregations, religious spaces, oppress homosexual people because it is something not legal, because even with the Zulu tradition and culture and its customs, it is not legal. That is why they find themselves oppressed as they are not allowed to do as they wish. That is all.*

From the findings, the participants mentioned dress codes and how some queer people walk or dress/ behave. This shapes people's perceptions and the way in which they address queer people according to their gender and sexuality. Van der Schan (2015: 1) notes that it is impossible to turn a blind eye to the way in which people walk, how they dress, and the language they use to address others. All these partly forms part in other people's gender identities. People tend to read other people's bodies and it is something they cannot ignore. Therefore, people's behaviors (walk, talk, dress) in their communities have a role it takes in how wide communities and society relates to queer people in their societies. From the narrative of this study, the writer notes that the students and other people in her community started noticing the way she used to walk, talk, and dress.

As I have discussed in Chapter Two of this study, the literature reveals that "queer African Christians tend to find a sense of belonging even within these contexts that are seen to be Christian and homophobic. Queer people tend to experience marginalization and exclusion from the spaces they once referred to as their spiritual homes, as in my experience" (Van Klinken, 2019: 16). Participants in this study show that the bodies of the queer people within the African Independent Churches, especially in the Shembe faith tradition, feel oppressed from all sides, and there is nowhere they feel their side is supported to openly live with their lived gender bodies. One participant mentioned that she would wear dresses and wear lip stick in trying to conceal her true lived gender and sexual identity. This reinforces the study just mentioned above about Van Klinken (2019: 16) that African queer people find sense of their belonging and spirituality within these churches that isolate them and discriminate against them.

In a study by Sithole (2018: 4) some queer people are considered to be suffering from gender dysphoria and only feel excitement after going through transition. This is the different landscape for those who do not wish to undergo transitioning, which leaves them suffering and experiencing homophobic comments about their bodies. This is particularly so in the traditional faith spaces.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Van der Walt, et al (2019: 9) reported on the degree of visible and tangible progress in examining justice for the LGBTI people within the African faith landscape. In this paper, they propose that the use of "*izitabane zingabantu, ubuntu* theology" could be applied to liberate *izitabane* from hate crime (homophobia) in African contexts to a

more life-affirming faith space. One participant mentioned her hiding her sexuality as she feared judgement, where no justice existed within the Shembe faith tradition, which stands for and liberates queer people or *izitabane* of faith from within the church. Hence, as I have stated above, African Independent Churches need to progress, since many queer people are no longer in hiding. These churches, therefore, need to apply the “*izitabane zungabantu, ubuntu* theology”, which will help liberate queer people from all possible homophobic crimes in African landscapes and simultaneously create that life affirming spaces churches should have been representing long time ago- loving, caring, and inclusive regardless of people’s backgrounds, gender and sexual orientations. By this, they would be following what is God’s Will. Love does not judge.

The literature reveals the sad reality of the queer people in parts of Africa with regards to legislation and constructional rights (Kretz 2013: 208). Queer people have numerous respective body expressions and gender identities. This also includes dressing in masculine or feminine ways sometimes. One participant mentioned that she used to dress according to her lived gender body or identity. However, this is slightly different to transgender people whom before transitioning processes, used to involve some objects in their dressing to align their anatomic body with their lived gender identity (Sithole, 2017: 138). This is the case for many queer people, and this is because we feel trapped in the wrong bodies. Churches tend to discriminate against queer people for this. I mentioned wearing the clothes that would not make congregants aware of my lived gender identity. This ‘concealing’ the queer body with feminine clothes is the mechanism to prevent any possible hate speech when going into faith spaces, especially the African Independent Churches, since they are the ones deeply rooted in culture and tradition (heteronormativity or hetero performance) that people should ‘behave’ according to their sex and gender.

As discussed in chapters two and three above, LGBGTIQA+ people perceive their body, looking at their embodied experiences as a site of struggle. Sipehelele expresses that she is happy with her anatomical body. However, she was not content with the comments high school students made, which generally fuels queer people to internalizing the stigma that results in depression and low self-esteem. Trends of hate crime reveals that marginalized and sexual minority groups face violence as well as verbal attacks, which follows their lived sexual and gender identities.

Both participants emphasized that queer people are oppressed within the African Independent Churches, and especially within the Shembe faith tradition, as it is openly against homosexuality. The oppression and negative comments experienced by *izitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition exacerbate the stigma, depression and anxiety amongst LGBTIQ+ community. This silences them and reduce their power and courage to embrace their sexual and gender diverseness within the context of African spirituality. These negative experience shines a light and brings to light the lived reality of *izitabane*, their body incompatible with their gender identity they prefer to identify with- exacerbate, inequality, depression and internalizing stigma which decrease self-esteem as queer people within African contexts.

### **6.3 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have analyzed the data presented in the chapter five using thematic analysis. This chapter analyzed the lived reality of *isitabane* of faith and experiences of its study participants who are members within the Shembe faith tradition. The Shembe faith tradition is public about its stance that shows that they are against queer people in its church and people's understanding of a lesbian sexuality and its implications. This church behaves as if queer people do not exist within its church, and further silence them with its homophobic acts, policies, and hate speeches. This limits the capacity of the church to open life affirming platform that allows collective engagement for issues pertaining gender and sexuality or gender diversity within the church and the community at large that consists of *izitabane*. This study shines a light on the challenges experienced by queer people within the church, and the challenge of the church in confronting issues pertaining gender and sexual identity. This study also shines a light on heteronormativity which exist within the African Independent Churches and the Shembe faith tradition particularly, that prevent these churches from taking initiatives or interventions to collectively engage along with sexual minority groups that exist within their African Independent Churches who do not conform to the dominant hetero-performance or heteronormativity. This chapter also looked at the queer bodies that experience oppression and exclusiveness due to their bodies not aligning with their lived gender identities. Queer bodies experience discrimination, isolation, shaming and exclusion, which, because they want to navigate their spirituality within these churches, end up wearing in the manner that the church approves their existence within the Church's scope of doing theology or place of worship.

## CHAPTER 7: STUDY SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE CONCLUSION

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I analyzed and discussed the research findings from the interview discussions and my auto-ethnographic narrative to present a nuanced details and discussion in the manner which this study challenges and provide new insights on the literature on African Independent Churches, sex, sexuality, as well as gender identities in the South African landscape. This chapter provides a summary of the entire study and provides recommendations for the future research in this context. The aim of this study was to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe Independent faith tradition and to contribute towards the flourishing of other queer people navigating their journey and existence within the Shembe Independent faith tradition through lived and embodied storytelling which ensures that their silenced voices are heard.

This study developed from looking at the lived reality of *isitabane* lived reality in the Shembe independent faith tradition in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. I shared my auto-ethnographic narrative in the intersection of gender, religion, culture, and sexuality. What informed this study is the silence and all forms of violence that its ongoing pertaining issues of gender and sexuality. This study is done with the aim to prosper fellow queer people within the Shembe faith tradition and to surface what is thought to be inexistent and challenge existing binaries, which follows gender and sexuality as the Shembe church is a traditional and cultural embedded church with fixed notions of sexuality and gender. This study promotes love, *ubuntu*, and not hate.

The research question was: what is the lived reality (embodied experience) of *isitabane* in the Independent Shembe faith tradition? The sub-questions were: 1. What constitutes the faith, gender and sexuality intersection within the Shembe Church? 2. How could an auto-ethnographical exploration be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *isitabane* in the Shembe faith tradition? 3. How could embodied life stories/ personal narratives contribute to enhances the capacity for African Independent faith traditions to navigate sexual diversity?

In the literature review I examined the four sub-sections, which are as follows: engaging sexual diversity in African faith landscapes; sexuality and gender in the Shembe tradition; queer in Africa- *isitabane* and faith; faith and embodied research – drawing on one’s own narrative – in the form of embodied research. The key insight of this research is that enriching people with necessary knowledge in areas of gender and sexual diversity can lead to a life affirming attitude and embracing diversity. The research argues that it would be beneficial for the Shembe Church and its congregants to be open to negotiate, deconstruct the current exclusive existing notions and teaching, and therefore reconstruct these notions to restore the spirit of love, unity and ubuntu within the church. On the subject of storytelling/ narratives, I learnt that auto-ethnographic narratives can be an appropriate tool of empowerment and ownership, which provides a sense of self for queer individuals in order to freely and openly live and embody their gender and sexual identities. This research addressed a dearth of scholarship in the Shembe faith tradition concerning the issues of gender and sexuality, where the issues pertaining gender and sexuality keep worsening, as not much attention is being given to them. Doing this was relevant as it helped investigating the lived reality of *isitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition, so to destabilize the heteropatriarchal notions and ideas of homosexuality, to contribute to the life and hope giving to all the marginalized minority groups. In this study, I used an auto-ethnography method as a tool to explore the lived reality of *isitabane* of faith in the Shembe faith tradition. I shared my auto-ethnographic narrative, which consists of six snapshot themes in which my experiences occurred. I therefore interviewed two participants close to me to share their insights and experiences in navigating my lesbian sexuality within the traditional Shembe faith. This autoethnographic tool helped me conduct a nuanced research combining a cultural and personal/ sexual phenomenon. It helped answer research questions by examining the snapshot themes (experiences) and the interview discussions. This tool also helped me connect my personal sexuality to the cultural and draw on my own experiences to make sense culture and sexual identity. Most importantly, it helped me explore the usually untold lived reality of *isitabane* of faith within the Shembe faith tradition and helped me share how I became aware of my sexual orientation. The research also helped understand how could embodied life stories/ personal narratives contribute to enhances the capacity for the African Independent faith traditions to navigate sexual diversity: and it could be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *isitabane* in the Shembe faith tradition. This tool is more engaging. As Mendez (2003: 279) states, autoethnography (personal narratives) provides access to participants’ private world and provide rich data so that people come to know of what they never at first considered.

The location of the study afforded easy the access to Uthingo Network for participants' debriefing and counselling. The sampling of this study was me and two participants. For this reason, I used autoethnography to allow for the expression of moving aspects of a person's story and creates ways to write about experiences in a wider social context (Halmiton et al., 2008: 22). I made use of six snapshot themes, viz.: being born a girl child in the poor family; my father's violence, my mother's vulnerability; learning what it means to be a Shembe believer; my feelings for other girls; being called *izitabane*; and, having bad spirits-*izitabane* and faith.

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews (in-depth open-ended questions) and shared my auto-ethnographic narrative and conducted telephonically interviews with the participants, which lasted 30-60 minutes per participant. Telephonically interviews were conducted due to COVID-19 pandemic.

After collecting data, I therefore conducted thematic analysis to analyze all data collected (from my autoethnographic narrative to interview discussions). I followed six steps of thematic analysis and extracted six dominant themes, which are as follows: understanding lesbian sexuality as a rejection of men rather than attraction to women; the link between male violence and lesbian sexuality; the link between faith- heterosexuality and reproduction; *a human being cannot be ditched*; naming; and queer bodies and dress. Below I summarize these dominant themes.

### **7.2.1 Understanding lesbian sexuality as a rejection of men than attraction of women**

This theme discussed the issue concerning the understanding relating to sexuality and masculinity (heteronormativity). In the South African context, it is a prevalent discourse employed to make meaning of black lesbian people that they are rejecting men, or they want to be men. This is due to heteronormativity informed by patriarchy that the normal way of attraction or intimacy is only heterosexuality, and not homosexuality. It is considered that any form of attraction different from heterosexuality is not normal, moral or African. While black lesbianism is being questioned and labeled with sarcasms notions (heteronormativity) in many African countries including South Africa, it challenged existing norms about sexuality (homosexuality/ lesbian sexuality) concerning what is considered normal or abnormal with sexuality and gender. In same sex (lesbian) relationships, where the dominating male does not

exist, patriarchy is challenged. In this section, the understanding of black lesbianism as rejection of men or wanting/ desire to be men in black South African communities was challenged and argued that lesbianism is natural, normal, and discussed that what it rejects are negative 'normalized' notions of intimacy/ attraction and sexuality, shaped by patriarchy and heteronormativity.

### **7.2.2 The link between male violence and lesbian sexuality**

Under this theme I looked at the male violence and lesbian sexuality. I discussed notions used to understand lesbian sexuality or lesbian women in black South African landscapes, which includes, but not least that they construct it as reaction against men's violence against women. As I have discussed in this theme, Muholi (2004: 117) has argued that many lesbian-identifying people in the South African contexts do not freely enjoy their rights, as intersecting race, class, and hetero-gendered politics blurs the lines between the new constitutional democracy and the repressive apartheid past. Muholi continues to argue that physical and sexual violence against black lesbian people, such as corrective rape, silences and further marginalize and stigmatize lesbian people. Many black South Africans believe that lesbian sexuality is the result of male violence and believe it to be contextual or fleeting.

Participants believed that my lesbian sexual identity or orientation was a result of my father's violence against my mother. Negative notions attached to lesbian sexuality or identity makes lesbian people vulnerable to hate crime violence such as corrective rape as men believe that they can correct them. This also limits how and to whom we address the content of our sexual lives. Furthermore, hate crimes against lesbian people in the South African landscape are an attempt to fight against the challenges presented by lesbian and/ or homosexuality on the boundaries of heteronormativity informed by patriarchy, which label and control 'who' and 'what' an African woman is. My auto-ethnographic narrative shared in this thesis challenges and destabilizes the understanding and construction of lesbian sexuality under this theme and argues that my lesbian sexual identity was not connected to how my father abused my mother.

### **7.2.3 The link between faith- heterosexuality and reproduction**

In this theme, I discuss the heteronormativity that tends to set people's desires and reproductivity, as informed by faith traditions in their teachings regarding gender and sexuality. The prescription of women's reproductivity is typically the norm in black families, societies, and faith traditions, whose positionality and teachings are set against homosexuality in favor of heterosexuality. The expectations of women to bare children follows theme regardless of their gender or sexuality. This proves that women are still affected by the schemes of heteropatriarchy which aims to control women and their sexuality (reproductivity). The dominance and existence of heteropatriarchy in relation to reproductivity in lesbian women is challenges. Muholi (2004: 118) asserts that the existence reality of lesbian traditional people such as *izangoma* in the South African contexts challenge heteropatriarchal and hetero performance notions associated with women and their reproductivity. Faith traditions encourage heterosexual relations over homosexual, within families, societies, and churches for reproductivity. In this section I discussed the importance of interrogating and deconstructing the religious patriarchal tools that aim to control and oppress women with reproductivity as well as heterosexuality within families, societies, and faith landscapes.

### **7.2.4 *A human being cannot be ditched***

Under this theme I examined the exclusivist teachings of the church, which are implied to exclude, isolate and discriminate against non-conforming gender and sexual identities; and I observed the love of the mother for her child regardless of homosexual identity. Cultural and religious traditional teachings tend to pass from one generation to the other. Despite the teachings of the Shembe faith tradition, which exclude homosexual people, Participant 1, as a mother reflects an interesting discourse of love, and mention that "*a human being cannot be ditched.*" The application of love and *ubuntu* in this theme shows that love/*ubuntu* does not isolate, exclude or discriminate; rather, it emancipates by way of inclusion. It provides a life-affirming manner of rethinking and negotiate all negative and homophobic discourses on homosexuality in South Africa and African Independent Churches.

These words, ‘*a human cannot be ditched*’, interrogate the spirit of *ubuntu* of South African religious, traditional, and cultural people, especially prominent figures (leaders/ pastors) within ecclesial community in Africa. It was also discussed in this thesis under this section that *ubuntu* holds that life-affirming capacity to weaken existing stigma and discrimination against homosexuality, and places emphasis on acceptance of the complete humanity of another person regardless of their difference. *Ubuntu* and love of a mother challenges inhumane teachings against people in same-sex relationships in families, society and faith/ religious communities.

### **7.2.5 Naming**

In this section, I examined the usage of derogatory terms, such as *ungqingili*, *inkonkoni*, *isitabane*, in South African black communities and faith spaces when referring to queer people. As I have discussed above, these terms discriminate against, as well as isolate and exclude people based on their non-conforming gender and sexual identities.

In this section, it was shown that queer people exist within the Shembe Church, however, the Church diminishes their existence and rights through hate crimes and speech, as well as exclusive policies concerning their existence. The intersectionality of gender, sexuality and reproductive health issues are avoided, which sets the stage for silence on issues pertaining gender and sexual diversity. The silence further builds and maintains the toxic notions that homosexuality is a taboo. Participants referring to homosexuality as ‘*lento*’ (this thing) shows the significant lacking positive Zulu terms when addressing issues relating to homosexuality without sounding hateful as other faith traditions using these terms to portray their homophobic notions about homosexuality. I have also discussed the issue relating to gender diverse identities and gender expression as they remain marginalized, oppressed in the South African contexts due to continuing dominance drawing from cis-normative, as well as heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality.

There is not much literature produced in the Shembe faith tradition on the lived reality of *izitabane* within the Shembe Independent faith tradition. Religion and culture (patriarchy) has a negative impact in how some people perceive their gender and sexuality. In this study, the existence of queer realities is surfaced and encourages other queer people to embrace their queer identities through storytelling/ narratives despite derogatory terms used to discourage, discriminate, isolate and diminish them. There is need for intensive education, advocacy and

intervention for women (young girls, married and unmarried women, lesbian and transmen/women) in the Shembe faith tradition on the subject of gender and sexual diversity and issues pertaining to it. This can help create a more life-affirming and inclusive terminology.

### **7.2.6 Queer bodies and dress**

This section examines issues pertaining dress and queer bodies. This relates to heteronormativity and gender performance, which prescribes who does what and how. This forces people to dress or wear in a way they would not. Here I discussed heteronormativity and hetero performance, which ‘decide’ and ‘control’ what people’s bodies, such as what they wear, and start treating them a certain way that follows their gender and sexuality. I also discussed the oppression of queer people’s bodies through dress in faith and communal spaces. Many queer people dress in a manner that suits church patriarchal standards in order to conceal their true gender and sexual identity in order to avoid discrimination, isolation, and any possible hate crime and speech from their respective faith communities (African Independent Churches) they consider their spiritual home. Queer people dressing in a manner they would rather not makes them feel trapped in the wrong bodies. This oppresses queer people in church uniform and certain dress codes that applies in a particular church for a certain gender. It also worsens the stigma against lesbian people within the Shembe Independent faith tradition.

### **7.3 Future Research Study Recommendations**

In future research, the study may increase the sample and include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, allies’ individuals to offer broader insights into the lived realities of queer people in South African Independent Churches, in particular, the Shembe Church. The future studies could focus its exploration on queer biblical hermeneutics to further explore the gap. Queer Biblical hermeneutics as a method of understanding or interpreting sacred texts can help look at bible scriptures from the perspective of queer people as queer biblical interpretations does not follow the essential ways of understanding and defining gender or sexualities. This is the gap I want to explore through contextual bible study for Ph. D.

The African Independent Churches functions within the patriarchal systems, which make it difficult for them to open life-affirming platform within their churches so as to collectively with gender and sexually marginalized and minority groups, engage and discuss issues

pertaining gender and sexual identities and/ or sexual diversity. African Independent Churches also presumably play a huge role in reinforcing justifying patriarchy on religious and cultural grounds. There remains a need for further evaluation of these churches' understanding of gender and sexuality and gender diversity, as well as issues pertaining these contexts. There is need for the theological based research on African Independent faith spaces, specifically examining issues of gender and sexuality, as well as gender identities in the South African context, and using the notion of *ubuntu* in terms of establishing an *Izibane Zingabantu ubuntu* theology, and how it can be harnessed to engage issues of gender and sexual diversity in a life affirming way. People must be allowed to tell their 'life' stories so that many people can be educated about gender and sexual diversity and come to learn to love and accept all people, as different as they are. This will also teach people know that we, as queer people, exist and that our homosexual identities are normal and natural.

Findings in this study show that the 'coming out' process for queer people within the Shembe faith tradition is a difficult journey, as they suffer discrimination, hate crime, hate speech, isolation and all forms of homophobic violence in this church. Further research may also touch on the importance of support from significant institutions like families, church, and public or private services for queer people, contributing to the research study pertaining LGBTIQ+ people in South Africa. This study suggests implementation of outreach programmes to rural areas, in order to teach or educate school students, families, churches, and community as whole, about gender and sexual diversity. This will give people access to information and reduce homophobic acts against LGBTIQ+ in these respective spaces. In this way, the spirit of *ubuntu* in which we take pride as Africans can be restored.

## **7.4 CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived reality of *isibane* within independent Shembe faith tradition in KwaZulu-Natal. This study used six snapshot themes and extracted six dominant themes from both six snapshot themes and interview discussion, which was held with the participants. Dominant themes included: understanding lesbian sexuality as a rejection of men rather than attraction of women; the link between male violence and lesbian sexuality; the link between faith- heterosexuality and reproductivity; *a human cannot be ditched*; naming; and queer bodies and dress.

In this study, attention was drawn to the complexity of *isitabane* within the Shembe Church. It was shown that the experiences of queer people within the Shembe Church challenge some of the toxic Zulu traditions, biblical teachings, and the patriarchal systems in which the Shembe faith is rooted. Queer people within this church also challenges the understanding of sex, gender and sexuality.

The church uses derogatory terms such as *ungqingili*, *inkonkoni*, *isitabane* and *sis-bhuti* to refer to queer people. In this study, I used the '*isitabane of faith*' as an instrument for empowerment and ownership in claiming a sense of self as a lesbian woman to live and embrace my gender and sexual identity liberally and amenably. The lived reality of queer people and the love of the mother challenge essentialist views and rigid understandings of gender and sex and assure that gender and sexuality is fluid and not permanently fixed to any notions of social constructions of gender and sexuality.

Mbiti notes that "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" translates to "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". This is the meaning of *ubuntu*. Therefore, living *ubuntu* that incorporates and endorses life can accept *izitabane*, helping them to flourish in their sexual orientations and gender identities without fear of being discriminated against and isolated through hate crimes and homophobic speech. The kind of environment can allow life affirming spaces to collectively engage and negotiate queer identities and result to love, care, and inclusivity which churches ought to strive to represent.

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## **Appendix 1: information Sheet**

### **Consent form**

Date.....

Dear Participant

I, Sipehelele Mazibuko, a Theology (THEO8RA) student, in the School of Philosophy, Religion and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, invite you to participate in my research project entitled *Isitabane of faith: An Auto-ethnographic Exploration of Isitabane Lived Reality in the Independent Shembe Faith Tradition*.

The aim of this study is to explore what constitutes the faith, gender and sexuality intersection within the Shembe Church and what is the position of the Church on Sexual Reproduction Health and Rights (SRHR) related matters; to find out how could an auto-ethnographical exploration be harnessed to reflect on the lived reality of *isitabane* in the Shembe faith tradition; and to investigate what faith or pastoral resources could be envisioned to assist *izitabane* who navigate African Independent faith tradition.

Through your participation I hope to understand the factors responsible for hate crime inflicted towards *izitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition. The results of the questionnaire/interview are intended to contribute to suggest measures to control, minimize and if possible, elimination of hate crime and exclusion of *izitabane* within the Shembe faith tradition and let know of the existence of *izitabane* in the church.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time with no negative consequence. There will be no monetary gain from participating in this questionnaire/interview (in a form of narrative), however I consider providing counselling when needed. I will maintain confidentiality and anonymity of records identifying you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study, please contact me or my supervisor at the numbers and emails listed above.

It should take you about 1 to half an hour/s to complete the questionnaire/interview (in a form of narrative). I hope you will take the time to participate.

Sincerely,  
Siphelele

---

Signature of Researcher

---

Date

---

Place

## **Appendix 2: INFORMED CONSENT**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (full names of participant) have been informed about the study entitled (provide details) by (provide name of researcher/fieldworker).

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study (add these again if appropriate).

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 0791452432 or 215068849@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

Supervisor: Professor Charlene Van der Walt

Phone number: +27 83 6938686

Email address: [vanderwalt@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:vanderwalt@ukzn.ac.za)

**Address,**

Pietermaritzburg,

3201

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

**Additional consent, where applicable**

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Video-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes YES / NO

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date	Place

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Researcher	Date	Place

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Witness (Where applicable)	Date	Place

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Translator (Where applicable)	Date	Place

### Appendix 3: Interview Questions (English to IsiZulu interpretation)

- What is your background in the Shembe faith tradition?

Liyini imumva noma imvelaphi yakho ebandleni nomka esontdfni lamanazatreths?

- How do you know Sipehelele Mazibuko?

Umazi kanjani usiphelale maxixbuko?

- What has been your experience of her navigating the fact that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

Sithini isipiliyoni sakho ngaye njengoba ezibheka njengomuntu oyisitabene ngaphansi kwebandla lamaNazaretha?

- What are your biggest fears that she is a queer person within the Shembe faith tradition?

Kuyini ukusaba kwakho okukhulu ngokuthi uyisitasbane ebandleni lakwaShembe?

- How do you understand that she grew up in a gender-based violence home setting and that it impacted on her sexuality?

Ukuqonda kanjani ukuthi ukhulele emndeniini obunodlame olubhekiswee ngokobulili okubhekiswe kunina nokuthi ucabanga ukuthi loludlame ngabe lube nomtyhelela kubulili bakhe uma kuza kwezothando?

- How do you think gender-based violence affects the way we perceive or understand ourselves in terms of gender and sex?

Ucabanga ukuthi udlame olubhekiswe kumuntu ngenxa yobulili bakhe kunomthelela kanjani kwindlela esizibuka noma kwindlela esiziqonda ngayo?

- How do you think church affects the way we perceive our sex and gender?

Ucabanga ukuthi amabad;a noma amasonto anamthelela muni kwindlela esibona noma esiqonda ngayo ukulili bethu?