

# The influence of ancestral spirits on sexual identity amongst Traditional Healers (*iZangoma*) in South Africa: A discourse analysis

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## Abstract

*Over the years South African Traditional Healers have been discriminated against, with claims that they are 'witch-doctors'. Non-heterosexual Africans<sup>2</sup> are also often faced with the horror of violent attacks stemming from the belief that homosexuality is 'un-African'. The harsh experiences of homosexual, bisexual and transgender traditional healers are, therefore, unimaginable. This study explored the spiritual (ancestral) influence on the sexual identity of African Traditional Healers, particularly iZangoma. The study revealed that for some iZangoma engaging in same-sex relationships is never a choice but 'imposed' or forced by the dominant ancestral guide, depending on which sex the ancestor was attracted to when they were still alive. This paper challenges the idea that homosexuality has never existed in Africa, and is therefore an import from the West. Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: this study may potentially inform contemporary African debates around homosexuality and challenge how it is perceived amongst groups that are regarded as playing significant roles of healing and leadership in African communities. Since homosexuality amongst izangoma is not a chosen identity but forced by ancestral guides, this calls for an end to discrimination against ancestral possession, homosexuality in Africa, and the double stigmatisation against izangoma who are attracted to the same sex.*

**Keywords:** sexual identity, homosexual, bisexual, transgender, LGBTQI+, African Traditional Healer, *iZangoma*, ancestors, ancestral guide

## Introduction

Jordaan (2011) postulated that there is an increasing avoidance to conduct research on homosexuality in African studies which is caused by heterosexual panic concerning the issue of homosexuality in Africa. According to Jordaan (2011), the insistence and recurring refrain that there is no homosexuality in Africa best captures this tendency. This refrain is often accompanied by assumptions and accusations that African populations adopt homosexuality from Western perversion (Jordaan 2011). Given these kinds of positions spelt out by the likes of Jordaan (2011) this article explores sexuality and sexual identity in contemporary Africa. In particular, it explores the influence of ancestral guides on the sexual identity of Traditional Healers (*iZangoma*) in South Africa, an area that has received even less attention in Africa.

Stobie (2011), who examined the autobiography *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My life as a lesbian Sangoma* by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, stated that possession by her late male ancestor named *Nkunzi* (meaning Black Bull), her dominant possessing spirit in her healing work, serves a

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2. The use of the term(s) 'Africans', 'African people' and 'African culture' are not intended to suggest a completely homogenous group/culture.

validating transgender function in the case of this Traditional Healer who identifies as a lesbian. However, Stobie (2011) argued that this is problematic as it creates conflict between Nkabinde's modernist, feminist beliefs and her reverence for tradition. As a result, Nkabinde's composite identity is believed to highlight problematic aspects on how gender, spirituality and sexuality are represented (Stobie 2011). This article further problematises homosexuality by groups that are regarded as playing significant roles of healing and leadership in African communities. Similarly, it may potentially inform contemporary African debates around homosexuality, in the light of recent legislation in 34 out of 55 African countries which criminalise homosexuality (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association 2016).

### Research problem and purpose of the study

The main aim of this study was to explore whether sexual identity is influenced by ancestral guides among Traditional Healers (*iZangoma*) in South Africa. The focus of this study was on *iZangoma*; diviners who are possessed by *idlozi* (spirit of the departed who had the gift of healing spiritually) and reach trance states through *ingoma* (drumming).

The objectives of the study were:

1. To explore how a select group of homosexual and bisexual Traditional Healers define their sexual identity.
2. To investigate whether Traditional Healers' sexual identity can be influenced by their ancestral guides.
3. To explore whether sexual identity is actually a choice, or whether it is imposed on a select group of Traditional Healers.

## Review of literature

### Brief background into Traditional Healing and homosexuality in South Africa

Consulting a Traditional Healer or being one is something that is frowned upon and not respected by Western culture and some Christians (White 2015). In the African culture, however, this is normal and a part of life. According to Zuma *et al.* (2016), a Traditional Healer is respected and is positioned as unique and important. He or she can journey into other realms, look into the lives of others, and provide healing and guidance (Kgope, 2012). As a result, Traditional Healers are trusted in African culture because of the crucial role they play in their communities (Chung and Bemak 2012). However, this phenomenon is thought to be unreal, evil and bizarre by other cultures and religions. Individuals who are gifted with the ability to communicate with ancestors (their own and those of others) are believed to be insane or crazy by other cultures, postulated Jacob (2008) and Cromby, Harper and Reavey (2013).

However, Jacob (2008) refuted the stigma associated with Traditional Healing, emphasising that when the medical profession or society says a Traditional Healer is mad or crazy, all they really mean is that they do not understand what is happening to the individual. African culture views hearing voices and having visions as normal, although this is usually constructed as abnormal by other cultures. In South Africa, there have been many hate crimes against homosexual, bisexual and transgender people. However, it was found that Traditional Healers have also been mistreated (Farham 2011), and discriminated against in the past (Turner and Schlee 2017). This informs us that LGBTIQ+ Traditional Healers experience double-stigmatisation as a result of their calling as well as their sexual identity, over which they do not have a choice and which they cannot change. Homosexual relations, in some instances, carry some spiritual or religious significance, as with *iziNyanga* (herbalists), *iZangoma* (diviners who are trained and possessed through dancing and music-drumming) and other Traditional Healers, asserted Tamale (2014).

A South African study done by Morgan and Reid, on ancestors, sexuality and identity among same-sex identified female Traditional Healers, found that the way *iZangoma* construct their identity and desire, shifted between that of a dominant male ancestor and that of personal agency (cited in Banks 2013). Morgan and Reid (cited in Phiri 2016) revealed that these Traditional Healers have a different belief system – with regard to their sexual identity as African women – that revolves around gender, kinship, power, community and agency, which provides a window through which the interaction as well as intersection of their personal same-sex desire, and that of their male ancestors, can be viewed. With reference to these Traditional Healers, a same-sex relationship assumes a social status and, as a result, becomes a source of power (Phiri 2016). By considering the narratives of homosexual, bisexual and transgender *iZangoma*, this article will bring about understanding with regard to the influence of ancestral spirits on sexual identity, potentially reducing any stigma associated with LGBTIQ+ *iZangoma*.

### Afrocentric worldview: hierarchy of being, structure and characteristics of African Traditional religions

It is impossible to study African people as a whole, and most importantly homosexuality and bisexuality amongst African Traditional Healers (*iZangoma*), without a proper understanding of how Africans perceive or experience the world. African Traditional religion refers to ‘the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the people of Africa that include worship, consultation of priests, rituals, symbols, cosmology, arts, practices and society’ (Olupona, cited in Ndemanu 2018:72). African people recognise the existence of God or a Supreme Being. They also strongly believe in ancestral spirits (*abaphansi*; *abant’abadala*; or *amathongo*). In African culture, ancestors are believed to be mediators between the people on earth and the Supreme Being (Ndemanu 2018). In other words, the belief is that spirits of the departed are messengers that deliver or send to God the requests of man and in turn relay to man the responses and messages received from God. Therefore, Traditional African people believe that ancestral spirits are their intercessors, although they pray to, and worship, the Supreme Being (Masaka and Makahamadze 2013; Ndemanu 2018). Ukwamedua and Edogiaweri (2017) contend that the line of religious evolution comprises monotheism (One Supreme God), polytheism (major spirits, gods) and animism (countless spirits). Marumo (2016) and Ukwamedua and Edogiaweri (2017) had an opinion similar to Kanu’s (2013) that there are five categories in the hierarchy of beings in African religions. These begin with *God* as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things; *Spirits*, being superhuman beings and the spirits of men who died a long time ago; *Man* including human beings who are alive and those about to be born; *Animals and plants*, or the remainder of biological life; and *Phenomena and objects without biological life* (Marumo 2016; Ukwamedua and Edogiaweri 2017). Basically, this hierarchy expresses that the originator and sustainer of man is God. The destiny of man is explained by spirits and man is the centre of this ontology. The environment in which man lives is constituted by animals, plants and natural phenomena, and objects, which provide a means of existence and a mystical relationship with them is established by man, if need be (Marumo 2016). To remove or destroy one of these categories would be the destruction of the whole existence, and of the Creator, which is impossible.

The universe consists of two spheres: the visible and the invisible (Beyers 2010). According to Reyes (2012), creation, which we perceive around us, including human beings, is the visible world, with the invisible world being the place where God, spirits – including ancestors – and all powers reside. Iroegbu (2010) postulates that the invisible world determines each individual’s destiny in the visible world. The invisible world influences mundane happenings such as life, birth, love, luck, health, success, quarrels, accidents, illness, achievements and misfortunes (Iroegbu 2010). As a result, the invisible world prevails over the visible world, claims Reyes

(2012). The invisible world's inhabitants are called the vital forces or forces of life (Tempels, cited in Beyers 2010). God, the Creator, the Prime Energy is responsible for all things that exist in the universe (Thomas 2015). This Prime Energy or Vital Force provides every living thing with its own force of life as well as its own power to sustain it. As a result, because all living things receive the energy for life from the same Source, all living beings are interconnected through this life force. Beyers (2010) asserted that African religions display similarities although they are varied in outward appearance. The main characteristics of African Traditional religions include belief in a Supreme Being, belief in spirits and divinities, the cult of ancestors, as well as the use of spiritual forces, magic and charms. Kruger, Lubbe and Steyn (2009) state that African religions have three common traits, which include belief in a Supreme Being, the realm of spirits, and a unified community.

### Ancestral guides and their roles in the lives of African people

Iteyo (2009:155) defined ancestors as 'spirits of former living members of a community – both former members of various cults, as well as individual families'. Mabvurira (2016) added that ancestors are spirits of deceased relatives who are believed to relay people's petitions to God. An ancestral guide is an ancestor that is assigned to a human being before birth whether or not the individual is destined to be a Traditional Healer. Ancestral guides are intimately involved in the lives of their descendants as they help guide and protect these individuals on their life's journey, to the extent of influencing their behaviour (Gibson 2013). Crystal (2012) postulated that an ancestor or spirit guide teaches, helps, watches and heals an individual on his or her physical journey into spiritual awareness. The closest guides give the individual warnings which include a desire for particular foods, resisting certain invitations, bodily sensations and intuition. These, according to Mc Kay (2012), are some of the many ways in which guides communicate with an individual. Ancestral or spirit guides are believed to communicate by sending messages through sounds, visual images, archetypes or intuition during meditation or in a dream. However, *channeling*, which is looking at, listening to, as well as focusing on the messages that are received, is something that can be taught (Crystal 2012).

Mc Kay (2012) argued that in African culture there are two main reasons why ancestral spirits gift an individual with the ability to heal. Firstly, if a dominant ancestral guide before passing on was a Traditional Healer, he or she can pass this gift on to an individual so as to continue the healing work on earth. Therefore, Traditional Healing is seen as a gift that is passed down from generation to generation (Mc Kay 2012). Secondly, in African culture, it is believed that an individual's spirit or soul will remain in darkness and be punished by God if, whilst still in the physical world, the individual engaged in witchcraft and other unkind acts with the intention of harming others. As a result, Mc Kay (2012) postulates that to compensate on their behalf for these unkind acts, these spirits return to their descendants granting them gifts of healing to help people who are in need on earth, thereby freeing themselves from any bondage experienced in the spirit world. In the Other world, the purpose of the life of ancestors is believed to be the completion of tasks or responsibilities that were not fulfilled whilst still living in the physical world, as well as making amends for any bad deeds that they may have been involved in. According to Mc Kay (2012), these ancestral spirits may include grandparents, ancient ancestors or other deceased relatives.

Ancestors, insisted Mokgobi (2014), play an indispensable role in the ontology and phenomenology of African Traditional religion, especially those who remain in the conscious memory of their survivors, such as the living-dead or recently departed. The argument is that a personal ancestral spirit serves to preserve one's life. In return for periodic rites of sacred remembrance in the form of offerings, appellation (giving its name to a child or initiate), and prayers, the ancestral spirit protects its ward from the attacks of sorcerers and witches (Pew Research Center 2010; Ukwemedua and Edogiaweri 2017). This also occurs on a communal

level with regard to clan, prominent family and tribal spirits. The belief is that negligent persons may be chastised by the offended ancestor, allowing an accident or some sickness to befall them. If one violates traditional customs, especially the important taboos which govern interpersonal relations such as incest, similar punitive measures will also be effected. Matolino (2011) postulated that ancestors are believed to continue to exert their conservative influence as personal spirits on the present generation in various ways, such as inflicting fitting punishments on those who violate the established values, norms, mores and customs of society. According to Nurnberger (2016), by punishing transgressors, African ancestors who punish their negligent descendants have actions similar to those of Christ. Ancestors punish people by blocking life chances, bringing ill health, bad luck (Matolino 2011), as well as sterility, drought and other mishaps (Nurnberger 2016). However, the Saviour (Christ) rewards His faithful members plentifully. Again, His attitude here corresponds to that of African ancestors who are supposed to reward their faithful descendants. Marumo (2016) postulates that good or bad is brought by ancestors as a result of their favour or displeasure. Being in the spiritual world gives ancestors supernatural powers over those living in the physical world, such as the ability to give or take life and to bless or curse (Adamo 2011; Ekore and Lanre-Abass 2016; Okeke, Ibenwa and Okeke 2017). Therefore, O'Brien and Palmer (2009) and Essien (2013) argue that when calamity strikes, people will seek to make amends through expiation and sacrifices of appeasement which are stipulated by a diviner or an obvious act of revelation from the spirits, for example through omens, dreams or possession. Similarly, appropriate offerings of thanksgiving have to be made when one receives earthly blessings, such as a good harvest or a new child, assert Ukwamedua and Edogiaweri (2017). The capacity for life force is also threatened through the evil working of spirits, and not only by an immoral life (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014; Ndemanu 2018). Spirits can be employed both to tap the life force of some and to bring harm to others. The same spirits can also be implored to protect one from others' evil intentions.

### Understanding homosexuality: an African perspective

While there is a clear understanding of what homosexuality and bisexuality are, there is still a negative outlook on homosexual relationships in African societies as they hold strong beliefs that same-sex relationships have never existed in the past, are an import from the West, and are a disgrace to the African culture (Zabus 2009; Rudwick 2011). As a result, digging deeper into African history with regard to homosexual behaviour may help to either confirm or reject the now popular '*homosexuality is unAfrican*' belief. Contrary to the common belief that homosexuality is an import from the West, Ilesanmi (2013) states that since Africa is said to be the cradle of the human race, it can, therefore, be logically inferred that homosexuality started in Africa prior to the human race migrating to other places to spread its branches in different colours, shapes and sizes. Ilesanmi's (2013) views were later shared by Zabus (2014), who asserted that the African continent has always been more queer than is generally acknowledged. Ilesanmi (2013) substantiates these claims by stating that homosexuals and transsexuals in many African cultures were revered and worshipped as spirits of the gods, drawing attention to the Yoruba god of thunder, *Sango*, who was described as a beautiful man who had his hair braided and accessorised like a woman, and also dressed like a woman. According to Ilesanmi (2013), in northern Congo it was also routine for male Azande warriors to marry male youths who functioned as temporary wives. In Nigeria, it is culturally allowed for the eldest daughter in the family to marry another woman in the absence of a male child in the family. The eldest daughter is considered the husband and gets to choose a man to impregnate her wife in order for the child to bear the family name. Ilesanmi (2013) further claims that the various historical paintings on ancient African walls are proof that our ancestors enjoyed homo-affection, love and sex. Epprecht (2010), Mabvurira *et al.* (2012) and Ward (2013) argue that homosexuality has always

been present in Black society and asserts that homosexuality also occurred in traditional Africa. According to Jaji (2017), concurring with Epprecht (2010), Mabvurira *et al.* (2012) and Ward (2013), what's actually *unAfrican* is the condemnation of homosexuality. Epprecht (2010), Mabvurira *et al.* (2012), Ward (2013) as well as Bertolt (2018) maintain that homosexuality has always existed in Africa, in one form or another, with South Africa being no exception despite the difficulty in finding accurate data among Blacks about homosexuality.

Van Klinken and Chitando (2016) argue that there now exists a belief amongst Africans that homosexuality is caused by evil forces and witchcraft, all because Black societies refuse to accept homosexuality as normal. Sigamoney and Epprecht (2013) assert that the belief that homosexuality is *unAfrican* is widely viewed as an expression of homophobia. They further argue that people's understanding remains limited with regard to ways of shifting the prejudices associated with this belief because they do not have the knowledge of what homosexuality and Africanness mean in a given context (Sigamoney and Epprecht 2013). Mthembu (2014) and de Vos (2015) argue that homophobia is the result of people's fear of homosexuality brought about by a lack of understanding.

### **African theories on homosexuality and bisexuality amongst Traditional Healers**

This section begins firstly by discussing the different theories or explanations for homosexual tendencies that exist amongst Traditional Healers before discussing the constructed influence of ancestral guides on the sexual identity of Traditional Healers.

#### *The androgynous energy of Traditional Healers*

Conner and Sparks (2014) argue that in African cultures such as the Dagara spiritual tradition androgynous initiates (females who can vibrate male energy and males who can vibrate female energy) are known as *Gatekeepers*, believed to be individuals who live life between the physical and spiritual worlds, and are also mediators who bring balance between the two genders (Conner and Sparks 2014). As a result, a male Traditional Healer would have his gender assignment accompanied by all the mental or physical faculties and predispositions usual to that gender, but is also able to access all the female thought patterns, emotions and subconscious imagery. This, according to Hsu and Harris (2010), is assumed to apply to female healers as well (in reverse). According to Phiri (2016), Traditional Healers are individuals who have the power to enter the Other World mainly because of the belief that they have an essential androgynous energy. Even though some healers are gay and lesbian, same-sex attraction is not believed to be a mandate for the use of healing powers. The African culture positions healers as special as they are assumed to carry this androgynous energy, which is the energy of the spirits (Phiri, 2016). It is believed that this androgynous energy gives Traditional Healers the ability to exist in the physical form as well as journey into other realms (Hsu and Harris 2010).

Lambrecht (2017) concurs with Hsu and Harris (2010), Conner and Sparks (2014), and Phiri (2016), arguing that central to being an African Traditional Healer or *iSangoma* is the androgyny of behaviour and colourful dress code. This androgyny expresses an *iSangoma's* position between the material and spiritual world where he or she becomes a wanderer of boundaries (Lambrecht 2017). The cross-gender identification expressed by the dress code of an *iSangoma* suggests an overcoming of sexual differences and simultaneously highlights his or her androgynous state (Lambrecht 2017). During a trance-state, *iSangoma* resonates and expresses the aesthetics or beauty of the ancestors that he or she embodies. The souls that possess this androgynous energy are seen as blessed in the African culture and are positioned in the community as the holy ones (Conner and Sparks 2014). Hsu and Harris (2010) postulate that the balance of male and female energy (androgyny) in a Traditional Healer is significant as it

facilitates the connection between the patient and the ancestors, both male and female, to encourage healing.

### *The African Traditional Healing practice as female-centered, leading to gay male iZangoma*

According to Ogana and Ojong (2015), the sexual orientation of *iZangoma*, as controversial as it may be, cannot be overlooked. Zulu anthropologist Harriet Ngubane states that the capacity to bear children, or the matrilineal lineage, is the basis of an *iSangoma's* calling, arguing that a bridging role is played by wives or mothers as channels through which children enter the world of the living through their reproductive biological roles, with female diviners benefiting as a result through lineage (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015). Also, *iZangoma* are often females, due to women's greater tendency to be intuitive, child bearers, creators and carers, as well as possessing endurance, tenacity and compassion, which are important roles and characteristics in any healing profession (Ogana and Ojong 2015). Ngubane clarified that 'it is through a woman that the transition of spiritual beings is made', highlighting women's gender supremacy in their role as mediators between ancestors and the living (Lombo 2017:36). This, according to Phiri (2016) and Lombo (2017), is crucial in explaining why it is mainly women who are diviners and in turn why male diviners must become transvestite since a transvestite is an individual who dresses and acts in a manner that is traditionally associated with the opposite sex. Ngubane (cited in Conner and Sparks 2014:36), in an attempt to further amplify this concept, asserts, 'divination is a woman's thing and if a man gets possessed, he becomes a transvestite as he is playing the role of a daughter rather than that of a son; for the special and very close contact with the spirits is reserved for women, only who can form a bridge between the two worlds'.

Lee (cited in Conner and Sparks 2014) observe that male *amaThwasa* tend to veer to homosexuality when they are called to initiation and are usually young and unmarried. 'While the whole profession is female-centered, the minority of male neophytes are transvestite and tend to copy the way of women' (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015:73). Derwent (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015) concurs with this statement and asserts that male *iZangoma*, in the context of ancestral possession, have acted in ways that are typically associated with the female sex. Normally, it is women who train these males who undergo *ukuthwasa* and these apprentices take on female identities by donning female dress during the process. Placing emphasis on the extent to which these male *amaThwasa* adopt roles of the opposite sex, it has also been observed that in a traditional Zulu compound, they sit on the left hand side of the house, which is specifically reserved for women and even learn the female craft of beadwork. Further emphasising this form of emasculation, Derwent (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015) argues that these males mimic women in many ways because they are trained by female practitioners. They occupy the same space in domestic settings that females normally occupy, speak in high-pitched tones, and use female attire such as *imiyeko* (wigs imitating long hair, believed to hold spiritual power) and *izidwaba* (skirts). On the other hand, lesbian and transgender male (female-to-male) *iZangoma* are allowed to do things only done by traditional Zulu men, such as carrying a shield and spear, as well as enjoying beer and meat (Conner and Sparks 2014). Lambrecht (2017) argue that the cross-gender identification of *iZangoma* is symbolic of overcoming sexual differences and in addition it highlights *iSangoma's* marginality as well as the liminality of his or her androgynous state. It is no wonder, then, that male initiates are referred to as homosexual. Lindsay and Miescher (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015) remark that from a value-neutral identity, the transvestite male *iSangoma* experiences a gender transformation shift to a disparaging label for men of lower masculinity, as they are called derogatory terms like *isitabane* or *ungqingili* (men who have sex with men). As a result of homophobic information among male *iZangoma*, further research is needed from both a historical and socio-cultural perspective in order to derive a clearer understanding of the situation.

### *The constructed influence of ancestral guides on homosexuality amongst Traditional Healers (iZangoma)*

Buijs (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015) refutes Ngubane's argument and states that the gender identity of an *iSangoma* depends on the ancestor who inhabits the body of the diviner. A male *iSangoma* will take on female characteristics of walk, dress and voice, if he is possessed by a female ancestor and vice versa for a female *iSangoma*. According to Zabus (2014), an ancestor spirit-possessed man in Senegal, the *gor-djigeen* ('male-female' in the Wolof language) is said to be haunted by the primordial severance between male and female in the creation of the universe, whereas claims of being inhabited by a female spirit might be made by a gay Shona man in Zimbabwe (Zabus 2014). Such men in *ubungoma* are not hard to identify. Mkasi (2016) concurs with statements regarding the feminine traits that male *iZangoma* possess and declares that the few Zulu male *iZangoma* that exist tend to adopt a female persona. These males are often homosexual, Ogana and Ojong (2015) affirm, a gender orientation that is viewed as *unAfrican*, and the masculine roles of husband and father are not expected from these male *iZangoma* by their communities. These male *iZangoma* also cross-dress, speak in a high-pitched female voice and tend to walk with a female gait.

According to Morgan and Weiringa (cited in Mkasi 2016), female *iZangoma* are not excluded from this matter, as some older female *iZangoma*, despite gayness being taboo, are assisted by their ancestors to select a partner, a female ancestral wife or female *iThwasa*, with whom she will have sexual relations. Reiterating the gay tendencies observed amongst female *iZangoma*, Morgan and Weiringa (cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015) state that ancestral wives serve their female husbands and undertake chores to facilitate their healing work. The healers use these liaisons to have sex even though it is prohibited for female *iZangoma* to have sexual relations with their ancestral wives and/or *amaThwasa* in the African culture. Mkasi (2016) echoes these statements by enunciating that in Traditional Healing there is an understanding that one's behaviour can be influenced or changed by his or her ancestral spirits. The author proceeds to point out that witnessing a female *iSangoma* behaving like a male or a male *iSangoma* behaving like a female is not something strange, because at times, depending on the ancestral spirit that possesses an individual, the spirit can take complete control of one's body. Furthermore, as postulated by Mkasi (2016), it is expected that ancestral spirits cross gender boundaries. In an attempt to substantiate these claims, the author gave a background of how the Traditional Healing context interprets spirit possession:

'A female spirit in a female *iSangoma*

A male spirit and a female spirit in a female *iSangoma*

A male spirit in a female *iSangoma*

An authoritative male spirit in a female *iSangoma*

A female spirit in a male *iSangoma*' (Mkasi 2013:44).

When analysing these categories using Western concepts of homosexuality, they mean the following:

'Lesbian – A female *iSangoma* who is possessed by a male spirit

Bisexual – A female *iSangoma* who is possessed by a female spirit and a male spirit

Transgender – A female *iSangoma* who is possessed by a male (authoritative) spirit

Gay – A male *iSangoma* who is possessed by a female spirit' (Mkasi 2013:44).

Nkabinde (2008) claims that when a female *iSangoma* assumes a male position as a result of being possessed by an authoritative male ancestral spirit, she is called *Baba* (father) by other *iZangoma* and members of the community. *iSangoma* in this position impersonates a male figure to an extent that the ancestor possessing her is easily identified by members of the family. According to Morgan and Reid (cited in Mkasi 2016), this type of *iSangoma* may prefer to live a celibate life, choose not to marry, choose same-sex partners, or choose an ancestral wife.



According to Nkabinde and Morgan (2011), in another South African study of lesbian *iZangoma*, it appears that these *iZangoma* seem to have dominant male ancestors whom they believe command them to take wives. As a result, it is believed that these women use the institution of ancestral wives as a safe space in which they can have loving, intimate and sexual same-sex relationships with the assumed consent of their dominant male ancestors. Nkabinde and Morgan (2011) argue that they give credence to their same-sex relationships in the indigenous African framework by using the voices of their ancestors. This is also believed to be true of some male *iZangoma* and their dominant female ancestors who are assumed to command them to have husbands.

The obvious question, then, which this study aims to answer, is: can ancestral guides influence an individual's sexual identity? According to Mkasi (2016), this is not an easy question to answer, mainly because being possessed by ancestral spirits of the opposite sex does not necessarily mean that one will be in same-sex relationships. Also, to successfully answer this question, one needs to listen to individuals who are in same-sex relationships and who are open about their sexuality (Mkasi 2016), which is another important aspect of this study. It all comes down to agency and how *iZangoma* position themselves in their narratives. If they position themselves without any agency, then they cannot be blamed or ostracised for engaging in same-sex relationships. The question is whether their homosexuality and bisexuality is influenced by their ancestral guides or if it is their own choice to be in same-sex relationships.

### Theoretical framework: communitarianism and choice

In order to understand who (self or others) has a greater influence in the sexual identity of African Traditional Healers, it is important to study their culture and context (characteristics of the African culture) to gain insight on how African people as a whole are expected to make decisions about their lives (independently or collectively with the help of ancestors, family and community members). Africans, unlike Westerners, have a synthesising mind-set as opposed to the accidental analytic one, contended Desmond Tutu (cited in Kaye 2011; Llewellyn and Philpott 2014). According to Tutu, Westerners have a strong sense of individualism while Africans have a strong sense of community. Westerners are able to take personal initiatives because they have a strong sense of the value of the individual. However, when one is a community-minded person, it is not easy to go against accepted communal mores (cited in Kaye 2011; Llewellyn and Philpott 2014).

According to Greenfield (cited in Chirkov 2015), there are sharp distinctions between the knowing subject and the object of his or her knowledge in traditional Western ways of knowing. The knower is stripped of all particularities, such as his or her existence in space and time, culture, gender, position and the like (Rawls, cited in Majola 2009; Lesolang 2010). In traditional psychology, the self is seen as an autonomous, bounded entity that is not influenced by contextual and social factors but is defined by its internal attributes, such as emotions and thoughts (Mackintosh and Long, 2017). Discretionary choice establishes this entity where the social order and relationships with others exist. Mkhize (cited in Rogers 2011) argues that this view of selfhood is also known as the *independent view of self* or *self-contained individualism*. This view of the self is very different compared to non-Western cultures' and indigenous societies' conceptions of the self. In these societies, affirm Dzherelievskaya and Vizgina (2017), the self tends to be context-based in that one's relationships with others such as family, community and status within the group are what define the self. Harmonising one's interests with those of the collective, rather than being autonomous, is the goal of socialisation (Dzherelievskaya and Vizgina 2017). This view of selfhood is known as the *collectivist self* or *interdependent self-construal* (Kitayama *et al.* 2017).

According to Taylor-Smith (2009), in Africa, communitarianism can also be translated as belongingness. These are ties with, or a strong sense of belonging to, the family, community,

ethnic group or tribe, a clan, and a state or nation in the modern sense of the word. Taylor-Smith (2009) asserts that the African society is organised around the family, community, clan and tribal ties. As a result, in Africa, human community is vital for the acquisition of an individual's identity, personhood and sustenance of their existence (Kuye and Tshiyoyo 2015; Watadza 2016). John Mbiti (cited in Watadza 2016:5) captures this philosophy very well when he states, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. As a result, Mabvurira (2016:35) states that an African individual's identity 'is hinged on a collective identity'. According to Sanni (2016), rejecting one's traditional family religious practices can only lead to an identity crisis, a weak identity, or a complete loss of identity, mainly because an integral part of the African culture is religion. The reason for this is that it is only through relationships in the community of the living and the living-dead, and through a relationship with the Supreme Being or God, that one's identity can be expressed, claims Watadza (2016). Therefore, an African community is actually deprived of life in the present and the future, and of a life with God, if it is without the living-dead and ancestor shades.

Nkabahona (cited in Taylor-Smith 2009) maintains that the harmonious co-existence between the physical and spiritual, which in essence is a harmonious co-existence between man and spiritual beings, man and neighbour, man and nature or the environment, was an overarching and guiding principle for the traditional African. This guiding principle was so strong that the entire community would be negatively affected if there was interference in the harmonious co-existence (Udokang 2014). In general, chaos, suffering and disharmony in the community would be brought about by the bad deeds of an individual or group of people (Deezia 2018). According to Mkenda (2010), good acts by members of the community also brought about peace, harmony and livestock. The African philosophy of communitarianism has, to a large extent, a lot in common with Christianity and other world religions. In accordance with their perception of the universe as one, undivided, hierarchy of beings, physical and spiritual, Africans had a sense of sin, although this differs radically from the traditional Christian religion. While both attribute human suffering to the sins of man, resulting in some form of punishment from God, to a great extent African spirituality, according to Latif (2010) and Landman (2018), exonerates God from being responsible for human suffering. Instead, angry ancestors or individuals within the community are blamed for misfortunes and acts contrary to the sustenance and promotion of harmonious co-existence, peace and social order (Latif 2010; Deezia 2018). According to Manstead (2018), an individual's identity is shaped by pre-existing social structure and conditions. Identity is both individual and collective, being continually formed and reformed, created and shaped by the discourse of the individual and society or community (Persson 2010). From the above, one learns that the choices an African individual makes are not entirely influenced by the self but by the family community (relatives, both living and deceased) and general community. The implication of this understanding on sexual identity, it would seem, for an African and an African Traditional Healer and their sexual identity, is a complex and very nuanced one. However, Rudwick (2011) emphasises that South Africans' anti-gay sentiments result from the reasoning that homosexuality is against their culture, implying that gay-ness is simply a behavioural codex which one could choose to adhere to or not. What many South Africans do not acknowledge, claimed Rudwick (2011), is that homosexuality is not a matter of choice for most Black gay people, but a matter of identity. The above theoretical framework will assist in understanding how the select group of Traditional Healers define their own sexual identity, that being, if they view their sexual identity as shaped by the traditional African community (which includes ancestors), or if they believe it is influenced by the self.

## Methodology

This was a qualitative research study as it allowed the researcher to identify and understand the information categories emerging from the data (Anderson 2010), so as to explore phenomena

and understand social situations (Jamieson 2016). It used an exploratory approach in that it investigated a relatively unknown area of research and looked for new insights into phenomena (Davidsson 2016).

The study population was South African *iZangoma*, African Traditional Healers who are possessed by *idlozi* (spirit of the departed who had the gift of healing spiritually), and reach trance states through *ingoma* (drumming); who engage in same-sex relationships and are over the age of 18. *Sangoma* initiates (*amaThwasa*) and gay male *iZangoma* were not excluded. In total, five participants were recruited through the use of the snowball sampling (chain referral) technique.

Snowball sampling involves identifying and selecting participants that are proficient and well-informed about the phenomenon of interest (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim 2015). Interpersonal relations and connections between individuals are used in snowball sampling to access specific populations (Etikan, Alkassim and Abubakar 2016). This sampling technique was appropriate as it enabled the researcher to reach hidden and socially stigmatised populations so as to study problems existing among these populations (Kirchherr and Charles 2018). The researcher began by selecting initial subjects non-randomly; it is these subjects that determined how the ultimate sample is composed (Kirchherr and Charles 2018). Therefore, one lesbian *iSangoma* and one bisexual *iThwasa* (initiate) known by the researcher personally were selected initially and in turn they were asked to recruit other suitable candidates (homosexual or bisexual *iZangoma*). Each of these selected participants recruited one lesbian *iSangoma* that they knew, one of which recruited a transgender male *iSangoma*. Participants were from the KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Eastern Cape regions of South Africa.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. These are loosely structured interviews that consist of open-ended questions which allow viewpoints to emerge freely (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019). Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth questioning of participants' thought processes and motivations, and also allowed the researcher to follow up on particularly interesting issues that were brought up during the interview process (Silverman 2013). The researcher compiled two interview schedules, one in English and one in isiZulu. The interview schedule comprised 11 open-ended questions which covered the three study objectives. One face-to-face interview and four telephonic interviews (for participants who were not residing in KwaZulu-Natal) were conducted. All five interviews were audio recorded.

The results of this study were analysed using the social constructionist approach (discourse analysis). The focus of discourse analysis is language-in-use, which is language in either written or spoken form (Alsaawi 2016). Through persuasion, discourses, also known as rhetorical strategies, were applied in a strategic or unique way by narrators in order for the interviewer to embrace a particular belief (Xu 2014). Therefore, discourse is known as 'verbal art' in which meaning is shared (Johnstone 2018). Constructionist analysis was suited for this study as it focused on 'what do texts do?' rather than 'what do texts say?' because the analyst had to examine discourses for their effects not veracity (Testa and Armstrong 2012).

## Findings

### Q1: How do homosexual, bisexual and transgender Traditional Healers (*iZangoma*) define their sexual identity?

From the results of the study, it was noted that participants used various strategic discourses to define their homosexual, bisexual and transgender identities. All participants constructed their sexual identities as something that was due to biology or genetics. Other participants, in an attempt to shift the blame from themselves, drew on a collectivist view of their sexual identity by adding that the environment they grew up in, their ancestors, and witchcraft or poisoning may also be responsible for their attraction to the same sex, presenting sexual identity as something

that can be influenced by the family, ancestors and the community. Another way in which participants defined their sexual identity was by constructing it as a culture rather than a lifestyle, and as their pride, positioning it as something that is not just a façade or disguise but part of their being. This was done to encourage other *iZangoma* to not live in secrecy about their sexual identity, which is often discouraged and misunderstood in many African cultures. Defining their sexual identity as the result of biology and genetics informs the researcher that they believe that their sexual identity is something they are born with. It is in their blood; part of their being. This also informs the researcher that the idea of having a sexual partner of the opposite sex would seem a little far-fetched for homosexual Traditional Healers because attraction to the same sex is all that they know. It is who they are. The environmental and cultural factors indicate that their sexual identity is something they cannot move away from or neglect as it is who they are. The concept of ancestors as well as witchcraft having an impact on the sexual identity of Traditional Healers suggests that they have no control over it; instead, it is the ancestors or the ones who practise witchcraft who are in control of the sex they become attracted to, whether the Traditional Healer is aware of this control or not. Defining their sexual identity as their pride gives the impression that it is something that they are proud of. Normally, when one takes pride in something they do, it means they also treasure it and would not cease doing it. This indicates to the researcher that the participants would not be willing to change their sexual identities even if they had the opportunity to. This is mainly because being in a heterosexual relationship would not give them the kind of pleasure that they get in same-sex relationships.

## Q2: Do ancestral guides have an impact on a Traditional Healer's (iSangoma's) sexual identity?

Most participants were of the view that dominant ancestral guides do have an impact on the sexual identity of Traditional Healers, but not in all cases. Discourse analysis, which was used in this study, revealed that participants applied language in unique ways to persuade the interviewer to embrace the belief that ancestors can have an influence on sexual identity. Participants positioned ancestors as having valid reasons for causing a Traditional Healer to be attracted to the same sex, and also used various personal life experiences to convince the interviewer of this belief. This means that homosexual, bisexual and transgender identities can be influenced by ancestors. However, it is dependent on the ancestors' sexual identities as well as how strong their possession of the individual is. It is believed ancestors continue to live their past lives through the individuals they possess. Binary oppositions were also noted. One participant portrayed African people as being at fault for neglecting traditional and cultural practices, resulting in them being unaware of the role played by ancestors on their sexual identity because they have no close relationship with their ancestors. This participant presented herself as someone who has always been aware of her ancestors' influence on her sexual identity. From the study results, it seemed that the impact was forceful in most cases as it could lead or shape one to becoming homosexual, bisexual or transgender. This impact was also found to cause one to behave in a manner that is believed to be associated with the other sex (e.g. a female who behaves like a male with regards to the way they talk, walk, dress and the activities that they engage in). On the other hand, the study results revealed an intentional or deliberate impact by ancestral guides on the sexual identity of *iZangoma*, as some participants were of the opinion that the sexual needs or interests that they possess as individuals were possibly identified by their ancestral guides as similar to their own, which may have been a factor that resulted in them being 'chosen' by their ancestors. These participants created a discursive distance and set themselves apart from Traditional Healers whose ancestors have 'made' them homosexual, bisexual or transgender, with the aim of positioning their ancestors as blameless with regards to their sexual identity, claiming that their ancestors only 'add to' who they already are. The view

here is that a male ancestor who was sexually attracted to other males whilst still alive will possess a descendant who is a gay male or heterosexual female. Likewise, a male ancestor who was heterosexual will possess a descendant who is a lesbian female or a heterosexual male. They also emphasised that just because a healer is male and has female ancestors, that does not automatically make him gay; it depends on the ancestors' preferences and the way in which they lived their lives. Another important view expressed by some participants concerning this debate is that if the healer's sexual identity is the result of their ancestors' influence, then this will only be seen after initiation (*ukuthwasa*) as that is when the ancestors make themselves known, positioning ancestors as not being responsible if one is attracted to the same-sex before initiation. In contrast to the above, one *iSangoma* argued differently by insisting that this phenomenon has nothing to do with ancestors but God, because only God has ultimate power and control over all things, including one's sexual identity. This participant further maintained that ancestral guides can only obey or follow the individual that God has created one to be, and that ancestors cannot make you something that you are not, portraying homosexual, bisexual and transgender Traditional Healers, and their ancestors as blameless, with God having ultimate control.

### Q3: Is homosexuality, bisexuality and transgender identity amongst Traditional Healers (*iZangoma*) a chosen identity or is it 'imposed' by ancestral guides?

The discursive approach used in this study showed a common theme amongst most participants, which was that of an external locus of control, as these participants argued that being homosexual, bisexual or transgender is not a choice they made of their own volition, but is beyond their control. This indicates that attraction to the same sex is real, genuine and not something that can be denied or rejected. It seemed that sexual identity was generally imposed, although there were strong voices suggesting that choice still exists. Where it was imposed, participants communicated this by constructing an inflexible reality where the power and influence of dominant ancestral guides is unrelenting and incontestable, positioning themselves as having no agency; presenting themselves as individuals who are in a dilemma between being with the person they love and pleasing their ancestors; and portraying themselves as mere vessels that ancestors use to live their own lives. Where there was choice, participants communicated this by positioning their ancestors as spirits who can be understanding and accepting at times, constructing a reality where negotiation was a precondition. Some participants believe that the sexual preferences of their ancestral guides are imposed on them and that they have to live the same way that their deceased ancestral guides lived as ancestors bring harsh consequences to bear on their descendants if things are not done their way. Lastly, binary oppositions were noted when participants indicated that some Traditional Healers use their ancestral guides as an excuse for being gay or lesbian in order to gain acceptance in society. This was an attempt by participants to set themselves apart from dishonest healers, presenting themselves as honest healers who would never use their ancestors as an excuse if they knew that their ancestors have nothing to do with their same-sex attraction. Participants also drew on 'victim' discourses by mentioning the criticism and judgement that they experience because of their sexual identity, as well as the fear of 'corrective' rape and possible murder, to convince the interviewer that no sane person would choose to live such a life, positioning themselves as having no control and positioning their sexual identity as something that they cannot change.

## Conclusions

The main findings of the study were that participants defined their sexual identity as a biological or genetic construct, as their culture, their pride, a result of witchcraft or poisoning, as influenced by their environment and ancestors, and also as a misunderstood concept. This study also

revealed that dominant ancestral guides can have an impact on the sexual identity of Traditional Healers depending on whether the ancestral guide was sexually attracted to males or females when they were still alive. Lastly, for Traditional Healers, engaging in same-sex relationships seemed more forced or 'imposed' by ancestral guides rather than it being a choice.

No previous study has been conducted that interviews homosexual, bisexual and transgender Traditional Healers on how they define their own sexuality. This research study advances past research about Traditional Healers, sexual identity and ancestral guides. It addresses a gap in the literature and provides new insights; therefore, a unique contribution to overall research about the topic. This study was significant in that it elicited personal views about what Traditional Healers believe to have impacted on their sexual identities.

Studies that investigate the possibility of witchcraft or black-magic as a cause for homosexuality in Africa are recommended. Future studies on this topic should prioritise obtaining data from gay male African Traditional Healers, as failure to secure gay male participants limited the study in that the results and conclusions made represent one demographic (female) sector of the interest population for this study.

This study suggests a different approach to African sexuality using existing knowledge of ancestral spirits in Africa and the discourses and experiences of LGBTQI+ *iZangoma*. It encourages homosexual, bisexual and transgender individuals to dig deeper and find answers for themselves in order to understand the influence on their own sexual identity. It is significant as it encourages not only Traditional Healers but African people as a whole to have a closer relationship with their ancestors to better understand their sexuality, as well as the challenges they face in other aspects of their lives. It challenges the African Traditional Religion, Psychology/ Social Sciences and their views, approaches and assumptions on African sexuality that hinder the development of society, resulting in double stigmatisation against LGBTQI+ Traditional Healers. This may help individuals gain deeper knowledge and understanding and also reduce the double-stigma experienced by LGBTQI+ Traditional Healers in South Africa, thereby ensuring communities of trust and unity.

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