

Defying a Myth: A Gay Sub-Culture in Contemporary South Africa

Stephanie RUDWICK

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses contemporary proclamations of Zuluness among a sub-group of gay Zulu men in South Africa through an inter-disciplinary methodological approach. Against the socio-historical manifestations of the myth of homosexuality as un-African, this paper addresses the reconciliation of *Zuluness* and *Gayness* among members of a particular gay Zulu sub-culture. The re-interpretation of traditional Zulu ethnicity and African/Zulu culture among gay Zulu men in contemporary KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) offers new insights into the fluid and flexible constructions of contemporary African ethnicities and suggests that Zulu essentialism is being challenged. I argue that there are three main pillars upon which Zulu gay men in the KZN region primarily build their Zulu ethnic consciousness: firstly, the linguistic variety of *isiNgqumo* which derives its lexicon from an ancient isiZulu, secondly, the belief in the power of the *amadlozi* [ancestors] and lastly, the adherence to the traditional custom of *ukuhlonipha* [to show respect].

Keywords: Zuluness, homosexuality, ethnicity, language, sub-culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

At a conference in Kampala at the beginning of last year, which ironically focused on human rights, a Ugandan parliamentarian stood up and claimed that if his son would be gay he would have to kill him. Many African leaders are openly homophobic¹, but South Africa's constitution grants gay rights and since 2006, even same-sex marriage. Hence, at least from a legal studies perspective and on paper, South Africa holds quite a unique position on the African continent when it comes to the 'official' acceptance of homosexuality. Against this background, it is not surprising that it is argued that the gay liberation movement in South Africa has contributed to the country's democratization process².

'Gay liberation', however, is a political goal, which is endorsed through legislation but supported very little by the average South African. In how far gay people, especially in the black communities and on the grassroots level, consider themselves actually to be 'free', is questionable. South Africa's democracy

¹ To the extent that almost 30 countries criminalize homosexuality and some punish repeated offenders (of same-sex practices) with death.

² For more substance to this argument, see Croucher (2002).

remains 'fragile' (Bell, Gelb and Hassim, 2005) and so-called 'corrective rape'³ and general hostile violence towards many gay and lesbian people in South Africa give testimony to this fact.⁴ Specifically reporting for the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, a local newspaper (*The Witness*) article states, that in a 2005 survey, 20% of gay and bisexual men and 19% of lesbian and bisexual women reported having been raped or sexually assaulted when they were at school⁵ (Barnes 2006). Furthermore, it has been argued (ibid.) that black gays and lesbians in KZN were victimised more severely, and had greater fear of homophobic hate crimes than gay and lesbian people in other provinces, because of the highly patriarchal values among Zulu people in the province. All in all, there is really no doubt that homophobia is still ripe in contemporary South Africa, and in KZN in particular⁶.

One of the basic reasoning behind South Africans' anti-gay sentiments is that it is 'against their culture', as though gay-ness was simply a behavioural codex which one could adhere to or not. What many South African people do not acknowledge is that, for most gay people, their sexual orientation is not a matter of choice, but a matter of identity. In this study, all but one of the participants claimed "to have been born gay" and some of them stated, "never to have been in the closet", despite the fact that many have conservative 'traditional' Zulu backgrounds. While it needs to be acknowledged that the term 'gay' is problematic in its usage in South Africa as homosexuality has quite a unique and complicated colonial and apartheid history (Tucker 2009: 33), I nonetheless employ the label 'gay' in reference to the participants of this study as it was the English sexual identity label they all used in order to describe themselves. The reasons for avoiding the term 'queer' in this paper are two-fold. Firstly, the methods and analysis in this study are largely based on an *emic* approach, and none of the informants of this research employed the term 'queer' as an identity label for themselves. Secondly, Queer Studies is a broad and diverse research field primarily developed in the West and has limited relevance to the *emic* and African perspective of the paper. However, I include the work of some scholars, who have contributed valuable work located in African Queer Studies.

³ The term 'corrective rape' was first used in the late 20th century to describe rape incidents that targeted specifically South African lesbians. 'Corrective' implies that those who are the perpetrators of the crime have the atrocious illusion that lesbians could be 'corrected' to become 'straight' women. For more detailed and activist issues, see Reddy, Potgieter and Mkhize (2008).

⁴ For recent general discussions of homophobic hate-crimes and -speech, see Wells and Polder (2006).

⁵ Alarming, according to the study, the perpetrators of these assaults were not only peers but also teachers and principals (Barnes 2006).

⁶ During the teaching of a first-year interdisciplinary module at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, between 2003-2006, I was repeatedly astonished about homophobic statements made by students. And worth so, it seemed that it was homophobic statements, which were accepted by the class community at large, while outing oneself as a gay man, or lesbian woman was frowned upon.

In this paper, I present evidence of a specific sub-culture of gay Zulu men in South Africa. The findings show that the members of this sub-culture do not only construct their own linguistic code, as already argued elsewhere (Rudwick 2008, 2010), but also negotiate their own re-defined Zulu ethnicity and culture by upholding paramount Zulu cultural traditions. Although many Zulu people endorse the myth that homosexuality is un-African, many gay Zulu men have found specific ways to reconcile their same-sex orientation with Zuluness. This study draws from qualitative interviews and observation data gathered in the eThekweni region of the KZN province⁷. There were thirty-eight male Zulu participants⁸ between 18 and 38 years of age, one single female interviewee who is 76 years of age⁹, and two students who can be considered the main informants of this study. All individuals, except the female respondent, were homosexually active but not all of them live an openly gay lifestyle. Essentially, the research is based on snowball sampling, and many of the interviewees are acquaintances of acquaintances. Researching people whose identities are stigmatized in mainstream society requires a great effort into negotiating access, developing trust and building rapport (Cameron & Kulick, 2003: 137) but at the same time, members of a sub-culture may also welcome the interest of a researcher in their lives because of their otherwise marginalised positions in society. My research assistants and I experienced remarkable friendliness and hospitality among our participants who, at times, continued talking when exhaustion on our side set in. The data of this research project is rich and comprehensive. While there is a dense linguistic component, the interview and observation data was primarily analyzed with respect to formations of sub-culture and what we term 'proclamations of Zuluness' for the purpose of this particular paper.

In the next section I provide some brief socio-historical background information on the myth that homosexuality is un-African. Recently, Gunkel (2010) has analysed most aptly how homophobia in South Africa is inextricably linked to complicated technologies of racism, (post)-colonialism and gender regimes. The scope of this paper does not give these complicated dynamics adequate attention. However, it is not so much the reasons behind African homophobia that is the focus here, but rather a mere discussion how this African homophobia manifests itself.

⁷ The first patch of the information was gathered between February 2007 and January 2009, and then again in November and December 2009 and 2010.

⁸ When quoted in the text the interviewees are all given pseudonyms in order to assure their anonymity.

⁹ This particular female has special knowledge about the gay homosexual sub-culture which was thriving in the middle of the twentieth century in the Zulu township Mkhumbane, in Durban.

2. BRIEF SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When and how exactly the myth that homosexuality is un-African emerged is difficult to ascertain, but several scholars (Epprecht 2004, Gunkel 2010, Murray and Roscoe 1998) have demonstrated how the legacies and cultural imperialism of (post)-colonialism and apartheid have shaped the complicated relationship between race, gender and sexual dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. There is no doubt that this devastating myth has caused much misery to Black gay and lesbian people all over the country and, in fact, continues to do so today. While European colonisers and anthropological scholars have largely contributed to the populist idea of homosexuality as un-African by arguing that same-sex practices were absent or incidental in African societies, regrettably, there is also a long tradition among African leaders and opinion makers to be openly homophobic. Reddy (2001) succinctly sums up how leaders of various African countries have publicly denounced homosexuality as Un-African, inhuman and ultimately devastating for the African states. In the South African context and in reference to male homosexuality it has been argued that the idea that homosexuality is un-African “has its roots in the patriarchal notion that colonialism emasculated or feminized the black man” (Gevisser 1995: 69). Furthermore, the apartheid government regulated its race theory through heterosexuality (Ratele 2001) and created a kind of unquestioned heteronormativity.

Although Gaudio’s (1996, 1997) work in northern Nigeria demonstrates that homosexual behaviour and heterosexual marriage and procreation is by no means always exclusive, it can be argued that more and more gay African men resist the pressures of a hetero-normative lifestyle. It is, undoubtedly true that colonialism and apartheid severely damaged black male¹⁰ pride and masculinity and had consequences for the politics of sexuality and gender in current South Africa. The myth that homosexuality is un-African, however, is also perpetuated by the fact that recognition in most African societies is largely based on producing one’s offspring¹¹. Not long ago, the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini has argued in this vein by referring to homosexuality as a “problem” by saying “this new [homosexual] behaviour is quickly becoming a threat in our nation because it encourages people not to have proper families that have children”.¹² Since gay couples cannot naturally procreate, traditionalist and Christian Africans for whom manhood and womanhood is largely defined by raising children, condemn lesbian and gay people to being un-African.

¹⁰ Of course, not only male pride was affected by apartheid. Black women undoubtedly suffered the most during colonialism and apartheid, because they were not only suppressed by the state but also within the patriarchal structures of their own communities. This paper, however, focuses on a specific male sub-culture in South Africa and will hence, neglect the role of women in this instance.

¹¹ See, for instance, Buthelezi (2010).

¹² Also see Tolsi (2006).

In South Africa specifically, homophobia was institutionalized in colonial and apartheid history. Until the early 1990s, it was illegal to act upon same-sex desire. And, ironically, with the official acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle, further homophobia emerged in the early 1990s. The banner with the words: “Homosex is Not in Black culture” was widely employed by supporters of Winnie Mandela during her assault trial in 1991 and has continuously been used by homophobic people and associations all over the country since. Black gay men in South Africa have been and, in fact, still are, in what has been termed an ‘identity crossfire’ (Kleinbooi (1995). To be Zulu and to openly express a gay or lesbian identity in South Africa was and still is, in many ways today, ‘dangerous’.

While the Immorality Act, one of the key components of apartheid legislation, outlawed sexual activity among people of separate races from 1957, anti-gay legislation only was enforced after a 1966 police raid on a private party in Johannesburg. It was against this background that gay sub-cultures grew their roots. Importantly, the political activity among black gay men, however, was suspended until the early 1980s when an enormous upsurge of black liberationist movement swept through the townships (Gevisser 1995: 29, 48). One of the leading personalities in black gay liberationist politics was Simon Tseko Nkoli, who when released from prison in 1988, pivotally influenced the black gay liberation movement within the African National Congress (ANC). Other less known Zulu gay activists, such as Alfred Machela, instigated the first gay meeting point in Soweto in the late 1980s by befriending a shebeen queen¹³ and convincing her to make every Sunday “Gay Day” (Talbot 1990: 39).

Without a distinct African gay sub-culture emerging during apartheid, the above-mentioned activism would have hardly been possible. After all, it has to be remembered that the homosexual community in South Africa was as segregated as the heterosexual one. Within the sub-cultural spaces in the townships, black homosexual men were given the opportunity to deal with gay issues, to receive counselling, and to learn, if they wished, to promote a gay identity. Although gay township activity became more visible and committed during the early 1990s, a backlash emerged from black nationalists within the liberation movement during this time (Gevisser 1995: 69). The before-mentioned Winnie Mandela’s defence case, which characterized homosexual activity not only as a white import and ‘colonising depredation of heterosexual black culture’ but also as sexual and colonial [white] abuse (Holmes 1995: 284, Tucker 2009: 111) is an examples of this backlash. Importantly however, “within the biopolitics of the post-apartheid nation-state heterosexuality if not linked to the concept of whiteness but to a form of nationalism that links sexuality to culture” (Gunkel 2010: 50). This post-colonial nationalism and Africanism is largely based on reproduction as a key to the society, and does not accept an alternative to the heterosexual norm.

¹³ *Shebeens* are unlicensed African drinking places that are frequently run by a woman who is generally referred to as the *shebeen queen*.

Therefore even today, some political leaders in South Africa continue to make statements along the lines of the argument that homosexuality is un-African. Contrary to this, Reddy (2001: 82) asserts that it is not homosexuality but homophobia that should be considered un-African, “as it undermines the rights of the sexual citizen in a way more reminiscent of colonial oppression than post-independent freedom”. Homosexual relations and activities existed in pre-colonial African societies (Epprecht 2004) and it is assumed that these activities only became ‘interrupted when missionary and colonial activity condemned them as ‘perversions’ (Patton 1999: 399). Many South Africans simply do not take proper cognizance of the fact that same-sex practices have always existed in Africa and are not incompatible with African culture and spirituality (Swidler 1993, Dlamini 2006). Morgan and Reid’s (2003) recent work on same-sex identified traditional healers [*izangoma*] in South Africa’s biggest township Soweto has been the first primary study to demonstrate that homosexual activity is prevalent among South African *izangoma*. Their research portrays aptly how expressions of what is regarded as ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ do not result in a dichotomy but rather in a binary blend. Similarly, the gay sub-culture on focus here blends a traditional understanding of culture with a modern gay identity. How this sub-culture emerged and what are its characteristics will be discussed in the next section.

3. GAY SUB-CULTURE: AN EXAMPLE FROM ZULU SOCIETY

All over the world sub-cultures have emerged for probably as long as the human race has existed. While the term sub-culture is not a clear-cut explanatory concept I loosely define it for the purpose of this paper as a social group of people that differs by virtue of its heightened sharing of values, artifacts, and identification. South Africa offers various examples of subcultures, for instance the urban-mixed code Tsotsitaal, is associated with a “sub-cultural urban youth identity particular to South African society” (Hurst 2009). It has been argued that a sub-culture is defined as a group of people “excluded from the dominant culture, either by self-definition or ostracism” (Bronski quoted in Isaacs and McKendrick 1992: xiv). Importantly, however, while the culture this sub-group develops is distinct and often opposed to societal norms and traditions, e.g. in the context of homosexuality it is not based on heteronormativity, there is usually still an urge by the members of the sub-culture to seek acceptance. These considerations are particularly applicable to the Zulu gay sub-culture investigated here, as most Zulu gay men find it paramount to be accepted by their friends and families. It has been argued that a sub-culture provides a comfort zone whereby an individual can find and negotiate his/her identity (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992: 70).

It is impossible to precisely re-construct when, where and how the first black or Zulu gay sub-culture emerged in southern Africa. What we do know is that

pre-historical cave paintings in South Africa document homosexual activity from the earliest of times. The first written documents of incidents of African homosexuality are from the beginning of the 20th century (Epprecht 2004; 2006, Louw 2001). The South African mines¹⁴ are documented to have been thriving environments for black and primarily Zulu same-sex activity and it can well be argued that a certain qualified acceptance of homosexuality was in place in this particular context. Elder (1995: 60) argues for instance that, among other things, the lack of access to women, may have contributed to a kind of ‘homosexual tolerance’.¹⁵ In general, it can be assumed that “there has been an identifiable and public black gay sub-culture since at least 1950” (Gevisser 1995: 72). This has also been noted for a township in the eThekweni region (Louw 2001). In townships and ‘black’ areas in South Africa, people who were known as desiring same-sex were known as *isitabane* or *ungqingili*, but mistakenly were often also thought to be hermaphrodites (McLean and Ngcobo 1995, Nkoli 1993), a misconception which prevails in many rural KZN areas and townships to this day.

Little is known about the historical specificities of gay life and sub-cultural developments in the KwaZulu-Natal region and among Zulu people in particular. One of the few sources that describe homosexual activity in the beginning of the last century and could be regarded as an initial emergence of Zulu gay sub-culture, is Louw’s (2001) contribution in the collection *Changing Men in Southern Africa*.¹⁶ Accordingly, an area called Esinyameni in Mkumbane, today known as Cato Manor Township, has been known to be the home of much homosexual activity. One of our informants, a 76 year old Zulu female who still resides in the same township, said that when she was a child in the 1950s, she and her friend often went over to the “men who were known to be different” and watched their extravagant and lavish marriage ceremonies. She also claimed that the lifestyle of these men was reasonably tolerated, if not even accepted by the rest of the Township community. According to this informant many women, were particularly fond of the ‘strange men’, because they were always helpful (carrying things, for example), very artistically talented and never caused any harm to anyone (as was the case with some ‘normal’ [heterosexual] men, she claimed).

¹⁴ Epprecht (2004) argued that up to 70-80 per cent of men in the mines engaged in homosexual activity. A certain ‘husband-wife’ set-up, known as the ‘Law of Sokisi’ (Sibuye 1993) was common between older mineworkers and their younger ‘boywives’, [*hlobongo*]. Also, see Moodie, Ndatshe and Sibuyi (1988) for a seminal article on the topic.

¹⁵ It needs to be noted that, during apartheid the homosexual community was just as divided as the heterosexual one (Cage 2003). White gays and lesbians have had their own sub-cultures which were substantially more developed in the early part of the 20th century, due to established, albeit underground, city cruising spots, and lesbian gatherings for ‘white-only’ people. The only exception for some ‘inter-racial’ interaction was probably the coloured neighbourhood in District Six, Cape Town.

¹⁶ Although it would be a worthwhile historical project to scan all archival sources for possible references to homosexual practices in Zulu society.

While there was undoubtedly much homosexual sub-cultural activity in KZN during the past century, Zulu gay activism has been rather feeble. A milestone was undoubtedly the stalwart statement of the Durban Lesbian & Gay Community & Health Center, headed by Nonhlanhla Mkhize in the end of 2005 which was triggered by the previously mentioned homophobic outburst of King Zwelithini. Mkhize said

Zulu lesbian and gay people are women and men, they were born Zulu and would die Zulu. King Zwelithini can never take that away from them even if he wanted to. Being Zulu is part of their identity. I am a proud black, lesbian Zulu woman. I am fundamentally in tune with my culture. I do not need prayer or an *Inyanga* to heal me. I am healthy, intelligent and beautiful. My family, partner and community are proud of me.

Mkhize's words unshakably pronounce the reconciliation with a gay and Zulu identity. Because it is not uncommon that in South Africa, modern gay and lesbian movements co-exist with traditional forms of expression (Morgan and Reid 2003: 376), I demonstrate in this paper how this manifests itself specifically among a group of gay Zulu men in the KZN province and in the eThekweni region, in particular. It is not surprising that the 'homosexuality is un-African myth', and the homophobic outbursts of several Zulu cultural leaders¹⁷, have given rise to a distinct Zulu gay sub-culture in this area. Many Zulu gay men¹⁸ have felt pushed outside of their ethnic culture by Zulu homophobes. But because they 'feel Zulu' and feel proud of the Zulu language and cultural roots they have created their own isiZulu-based sub-culture in KZN. For a homosexual Zulu man, 'living' an openly gay lifestyle has far reaching implications. Although homophobia is also a problem in countries such as Germany or France, it does not compare to the hostility and criminal attacks on homosexuals in Zulu townships. To be openly gay in Zulu society is to give expression to a potentially "dangerous" social and political identity. It is, hence, not surprising that many gay Zulu men search places where they can freely express themselves and where they can socialise with other gay people and as one of our participants expressed it "to fit in". Since many Zulu gay men experienced marginalisation in their early lives, they understandably turn to each other for comfort and support.

Hence, the Zulu gay sub-culture can be understood as what metaphorically was termed the 'procreative factor' that gives rise to the gay identity (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992: 70). Importantly, however not every Zulu gay man in KZN is part of the sub-culture I am describing here. Sub-cultures owe their existence to the fact that they offer "some solutions to problems of adjustment shared by a

¹⁷ Not only King Zwelithini, but even the current president Jacob Zuma, as well as KZN Premier Sbu Ndebele and eThekweni mayor, Obed Mlaba, have been noted to lash out against homosexuals in the past few years.

¹⁸ While this may well account for Zulu women also, it is exclusively gay Zulu males I focus on in this article for reasons of scope and argument.

collective of individuals” (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992: 86). The Zulu gay sub-culture I am describing here is not a panacea for the sexual and cultural identity needs of all Zulu homosexuals. As before mentioned, most middle and upper class gay Zulu men use extensive English as main medium of communication and do not speak much *isiNgqumo*. It is a township identity, which is, most often, intertwined with the sub-culture described which is thriving in the eThekweni region of KwaZulu-Natal. Many of its members live in the surrounding townships, such as Claremont, Umlazi, KwaMashu, or Newlands, but some have also moved from rural areas into the Durban CBD (Central Business District). More details concerning the ethnic identity expressions of this sub-culture are discussed in the next section.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The gay Zulu men interviewed were all acutely aware of the widespread populist notion of ‘homosexuality as un-African’, particularly in their own society. Perhaps this is why most of them strongly emphasized that they did not choose to feel attracted to other men and have same-sex desires. Several explained that they even attempted a sexual act with a female or that they tried “everything” to get rid of these unwanted feelings. Some of those who grew up in strict Zulu traditional or Christian homes also stressed that their coming-out was extremely difficult and that they initially had felt that something was wrong with them¹⁹. However, at the time of the interviews all participants of this study claimed that they had come to terms with their sexuality and felt that in order to be true to themselves they needed to be with a same-sex partner. Statements, such as “gay is what I am, there nothing people can do about it” and “God knows how I am [homosexual] and he would not want me to pretend to be anyone else”, and “I cannot have a girlfriend, I cannot live a lie”, exemplify this situation. It is evident from the interviews that homosexual activity is not a choice for the interviewed men but their natural way of being. It transpired, however, that many of the interviewees are struggling to harmonise the external worlds of their lives as Zulu men and their lives as gay men in Zulu society. Importantly, however, all the Zulu gay men interviewed feel that their traditional culture is ‘Zulu’, it is only that their ‘sexual culture’ is different from the ‘norm’. Themba, for example, explained: “you know, we go to bed with men, but that does not make me any less Zulu”. What transpires from the analysis of the interviews is that the respondents give expression to their Zuluness in three ways: Firstly, they all speak a particular isiZulu variety called *isiNgqumo*, secondly, they

¹⁹ To the extent that two of our participants had attempted suicide because they had felt that they cannot come to terms with the ‘wrong’ feelings they had for other men and the pressure their families and immediate surroundings put on them by expecting them to resist homosexual temptations.

believe in *amadlozi* [ancestors]²⁰, and thirdly, they all strongly subscribe to the Zulu custom of *hlonipha* [respect].

The gay Zulu sociolect *isiNgqumo* and some of its linguistic and social features have found adequate attention elsewhere (Rudwick and Ntuli 2008, Rudwick 2010). Its paramount role in the formation of a particular Zulu sub-culture, however, has largely been neglected and shall receive attention here.

4.1 ISINGQUMO

Cage (2003: 19) who researched Gayle, the gay linguistic variety spoken by white men in South Africa, argues that “the gay community in South Africa has always been relatively cohesive because of its “outsider” status, and social bonds have been particularly strong between gays in the major cities”. While this may be true, it refers only to individuals within the same racial group, because to this day, there are only few public spaces in South Africa, particularly in KZN, where white and black people [whether gay or ‘straight’] socialize together. While the feeling of unity in the gay community is obviously only “imagined” (Anderson 1983), gay men within the same racial or ethnic group, nonetheless share a strong sense of belonging to each other. And it is often a linguistic variety or code that gives further strength to this feeling. McLean and Ngcobo’s (1995: 183) already argued 15 years ago that “isiNgqumo is an indication of the developed nature of black gay subculture” and it is clear that speaking the linguistic variety creates solidarity and a sense of community.

In reference to gay linguistic varieties, Halliday’s (1978) concept of the “anti-language’ has been mentioned and employed by some researchers (Baker 2002, Cage 2003, Rudwick and Ntuli 2008) in reference to gay codes. The anti-language is the linguistic medium of a subgroup, a kind of anti- or contra-society whose culture is different from that of the ‘norm’. The remarkable characteristic of *isiNgqumo* is that it is an archaic linguistic Zulu variety that could be compared to speaking Shakespearian English in Britain today and this is where the language-culture link has its roots. The fact that most lexical items in *isiNgqumo* are derived from archaic isiZulu and as such are culturally meaningful (Rudwick 2010), it is a medium through which gay Zulu men express Zuluness. At the same time, it is also an attempt by gay Zulu men to convince heterosexual Zulu people of the legitimacy of their identity and lifestyle within Zulu tradition. Speaking *isiNgqumo* is not only giving expression to one’s gay identity but is also, by virtue of its culturally rooted

²⁰ It needs mentioning, however, that the belief in *amadlozi* does not necessarily exclude Christianity among Zulu people. Several South African churches follow belief systems that are fundamentally built on syncretism between Christianity and Zulu spiritual elements. Several of the interviewees belonged to the *Shembe* and *Zionist* churches that are examples of this African Christianity.

linguistic lexicon, a proclamation of Zuluness. Murray (2004) argued that the term *takatapui* is used in New Zealand, instead of 'gay', to identify oneself as both homosexual and Maori. Unlike in Zulu society, however, the vast majority of Maori homosexuals are English mother-tongue speakers and only have rudimentary knowledge of their ancestral language. In Zulu society, one who has lost his/her mother-tongue or speaks excessive English is quickly regarded an 'outsider' of the community (Rudwick 2008). Language, i.e. isiZulu, is hence inextricably linked to a Zulu identity.

Importantly, however, not all Zulu gay men speak *isiNgqumo*. It seems that most *isiNgqumo* speakers share a fairly low socio-economic upbringing in a township. Although, there are exceptions to this, most middle and upper class gay Zulu men use extensive English as main medium of communication and do not speak much *isiNgqumo*. In *isiNgqumo* there is, as has been mentioned already, much re-contextualisation of archaic isiZulu words, which many urban Zulu people are not even familiar with. While the linguistic analysis of *isiNgqumo* is still in a rudimentary state (Rudwick and Ntuli 2008: 449), it is clear that there are relatively little foreign language lexical borrowings. The same affixation and derivation processes common for isiZulu are also characteristic for *isiNgqumo*, i.e. *ukufundisa* (to teach) becomes *umfundisi* (teacher) in isiZulu, while in *isiNgqumo*, *ukujuketisa* (to teach) becomes *umjuketisi* (teacher) (ibid.). Furthermore, it is not the case that *isiNgqumo* speakers refer to themselves and other gay men as 'she', as is the case in many gay languages, because in isiZulu the third person singular pronoun (*yena*) is not gender-specific. Some interviewees suggested, however, that the common gay English usage of the female pronoun [she] in reference to men among some gay males is employed to some extent by 'upper-class' black gays who rarely make usage of *isiNgqumo*. This is not to say that members of the Zulu gay sub-culture in Durban refrain from speaking English. Of course, especially in the city, the power of English is encompassing and there are certainly many domains or situations in which African language speakers have to make usage of English. I merely argue here, that *isiNgqumo*, when it is spoken, gives expression not only to one's gay status but also to one's ethnicity.

In Africa, speaking an indigenous African language variety in an urban environment is often interpreted as demonstrating one's African roots. In this sense, speaking *isiNgqumo* is for gay Zulu men an opportunity to 'show-off' their cultural roots. Remarkably, some lexical items of *isiNgqumo* even derive the lexicon of an isiZulu linguistic variety termed *hlonipha* language [language of respect]. This linguistic variety consists of a particular vocabulary, which, in particular, Zulu females employ to show special respect to their male relatives and in-laws²¹. Knowledge of these words among Zulu people is considered a symbol of propriety in Zulu culture. But *hlonipha* [respect] is also a social custom in Zulu culture which includes a whole range of behavioural rules one should obey to be considered a respected and respectful Zulu person. This

²¹ For more detail, see Finlayson 2002, Herbert 1990, or Zungu (1984).

custom of respect plays a paramount role for most Zulu gay men in the *eThekwin*i region.

4.2 *HLONIPHA* [RESPECT]

Dlamini (2001: 206) argues that “in Zulu households, children are brought up with a strong emphasis on *ukhlonipha abadala* (respect for adults) and a non-confrontational way of disagreeing with adults”. *Hlonipha* refers to showing respect by social as well as linguistic behaviour. It is unheard of, for instance, to address an older Zulu male with his first name, for instance, even if he is a close relative or friend. *Ubaba* [Father/Elder] is the correct naming in this instance. For a young person to look an older person directly in the eyes while speaking is equally inappropriate in Zulu *hlonipha* and for prospective wives there is a whole catalogue of proper social and linguistic behaviour²².

During the interviews many Zulu gay men flagged how paramount it is for them to uphold the custom of *hlonipha* and how they always behave respectful, especially towards their older family members, their fathers, if present and the elderly in the community. This type of respectful behaviour also includes, for instance, not bringing one’s lover to the home if this was unsupported by the family. While most participants declared that they had an exceptionally close relationship with their mothers, many indicated that the relationships with their fathers were rocky and inharmonious. Without showing respect they would not be able to live under the same roof as their fathers, I was told. *Sbu*²³ said: “To show respect is my culture, me being gay does not change that. “My culture means everything to me, that’s why I have to show respect”, claimed *Sfiso*. “Respect is normal for us Zulus”, asserted *Dumisani*.” *Mduduzi* was the only one of the interviewees who also said that if he had to choose between his culture and him being gay, he would choose his culture. He made this statement in a group interview with two other individuals who were furious about what he said. Both others were adamant that one does not have to make a choice but can, or rather, ‘has to’ live it both in order to be true to oneself. This suggested reconciliation between *Zuluness* and *Gayness*, is what is echoed in the main argument of this paper.

The notion of *hlonipha* is also significant from a gender perspective in gay relationships. In isiZulu, male homosexuals are distinguished into *skesana* and *injonga*, which marks the gender division, as the female identified partner (*skesana*) and the male-identified partner (*injonga*). The distinction between the ‘active’ (*injonga*) and the ‘passive’ (*skesana*) participants in sexual intercourse (McClellan and Ngcobo 1994) also includes, at least in many cases, the stereotypical association with female submission in Zulu society. It has been

²² For more detail on the general custom of *hlonipha* among Zulu people, see Raum’s (1973), albeit dated, but most comprehensive work.

²³ All names are pseudonyms in order to assure the anonymity of the participants.

noted that it is primarily *skesana* men who make usage of *isiNgqumo* (Rudwick and Ntuli 2008, Ntuli 2009, Rudwick 2010) and while *injongas* would have passive knowledge of the variety, only few actively speak it. Unsurprisingly then, *skesanas* frequently desire ‘straight’ men, which is “a reference to stereotypically masculine looks and behaviour, carrying with it the notion of being tough and streetwise” (Reddy and Louw 2002: 91). Hence, many *skesanas* and hence, *isiNgqumo* speaking gay Zulu men, desire a man who conforms to what are considered typical Zulu virtues of masculinity, such as strength and authority, for instance. Hence, *skesanas*, as the female partners, “may be subject to the demands of their partners” just as women are often in heterosexual relationships (Reddy and Louw (2002: 91) which essentially also requires them to *hlonipha* towards their partner.

Leap (2004: 152) provides an example from EXIT, South Africa’s only gay and lesbian newspaper, where a Zulu (male) writer is proposing marriage to an *indoda* [man] which would include the payment of *ilobolo*, in order make him *ukhosikazi* [a respectable woman] and the consequence would be: “*ngiyoku hlonipha*” [I will show respect to you]. As Leap (ibid.) rightly argues: “By proposing to practise *hlonipha* on the indooda’s [sic] behalf, the writer suggests a powerful strategy to asserting the legitimacy of their relationship within Zulu tradition. Similarly, several of our interviews explained that *hlonipha* is something that should be extended to the family of ones lover as well. Gay Zulu men who get married would like to pay [or be paid for] *ilobolo* if they want to marry one another. According to several participants customary weddings have already been taking place between township gay men that are not much different than those of heterosexual couples. As Morgan and Reid (2003: 382) have argued: “nowhere is the interaction between traditional and modern forms more apparent than in the play of gender” in homosexual relationships. It has to be mentioned that prior to the official legalization of Gay Marriage in South Africa, the National House of Traditional Leaders (NHTL) condemned the Constitutional Court decision primarily on the basis that gay marriage would go against *ilobolo* practices.²⁴ However, African same-sex activities accommodate heterosexual gender roles, in other words, in traditional African homosexual ‘marriages’ there are generally a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’. (Gevisser 1999: 961). Understandably then, most participants of this study, see no reason why gay men would not pay *ilobolo*, since, according to them, there is a feminine and a masculine partner. By referring to Connell’s (1987, 1995) work on masculinities, Hunter (2005: 400) argues that women and men, whether straight or gay “contest and produce a plurality of masculinities” and if applied to Zulu culture one can be sure to find no one-dimensional and static logic to Zulu sexuality. *Hlonipha* plays a crucial part in this gender dynamic, as it is most often the *skesana* that is expected to pay greater respect than the *injonga*, just as, in a heterosexual relationship, a Zulu female traditionally has a stricter conduct of behaviour as the male. When it comes to *amadlozi* [ancestors], however,

²⁴ Also, see Mahlangeni (2009) for more discussion on this issue.

males and females have to *hlonipha* to the same extent. Ancestors are considered an extension of the family unit and of paramount importance in Zulu culture as they take up the role as moral guardians.

4. *AMADLOZI* [ANCESTORS]

Perhaps most significantly for this paper and the construction of a Zulu ethnic consciousness is the fact that *ukuhlonipha* also entails not to question authority, especially not the authority of the *amadlozi* [ancestors]. For this reason, several of our participants have undergone or are still in the process of undergoing ceremonial procedures with a ‘kind of sexuality reassignment’ in mind, despite the fact that they knew that the ancestors could not dispose of their same-sex desire. Mandla explained that

Yeah, this is my *isiphandle* [traditional bangle made of the skin of the slaughtered animal]. We did this a couple of weeks ago. We slaughtered a goat and all. It was important to my family to show the ancestors that I was willing to try to change. But of course I know that the ancestors cannot change me.

Many of the informants of this study underwent some kind of slaughtering ceremony calling up on the ancestors to ‘normalise’ their ‘deviant’ sexuality. Unsurprisingly, none of the gay Zulu men believed that it could make them ‘straight’, but all but one of our interviewees felt that this was a way to respect their families and the ancestors. Nel (2007) recently argued that ancestors function quite significantly in restoring emotional balance in Zulu families which may be disturbed by an anxiety. This anxiety can well stem from the concern about other family members’ ‘strange’ behaviour or what other people think about them. Most people who live in a township have a strong sense of community, which often refers to their immediate surrounding. In other words, people deeply care about what neighbours think about them and having a gay son or lesbian daughter is a challenge to most Zulu parents. Calling up on *amadlozi* by means of a ceremony that could help the ‘deviant’ offspring become ‘normal’, is, hence, a common undertaking (see, also Schaff 2010). Almost all our participants believe in the power of the ancestors and do not think that their gay sexuality is perceived negatively by any of their significant or dominant *amadlozi*. Schaff’s (2010) recent report on interviews with gay and lesbian people in Durban also indicates that the Zulu participants all expressed concern of showing respect towards the ancestors. Some of our participants are even convinced that it is the ancestors that influenced their sexuality to some extent. Mandla, for instance, said “how could there be anything wrong with me as a Zulu person if my *gogo* [grandmother] works inside me”. The presence of the *amadlozi* is believed to be encompassing and their power and influence cannot, under any circumstances, be ignored.

Not directly linked to ancestors, but yet somehow related, is the issue of one's blood line. Several of the participants flagged that their commitment to Zuluness was largely based up on their roots and their bloodline and this included the wish to procreate despite their homosexuality. Bongz, for instance, who would also like to get married one day, said "I definitely want to have my 'own' child". This is not surprising in light of the fact that ancestors are likely to become angry by a Zulu couple not producing children following marriage (Hammond-Tooke 2008: 66). On being questioned about how he is planning to go about procreation as a gay man, it became clear that he had done sufficient research on the issue in order to give an informed response. Surrogacy by in-vitro fertilization (IVF) offers gay couples the opportunity to have a biological child and seems to be something that many interviewees consider for themselves. The topic of the surrogate mother came up in various interviews with about one half of the participants feeling that they want to procreate, if financially and socially possible. Adoption does not seem to have great popularity among Zulu gay men, as many cultural rituals a child undergoes in Zulu culture would not be applicable to an adopted child because s/he would have a whole different set of ancestors.

Ngubane (1977) has already long ago, pointed out that within a Zulu indigenous belief system, there are spaces for same-sex relationships. Sangomas are persons who derive knowledge and power from the *amadlozi* and capable of giving divine medical diagnoses. Some traditional healers enhance their healing ability partly through gender ambiguity (Reid 2006: 139). *Sangomas* occupy a respectful position in Zulu society, and those who are lesbians [or gays] are not likely to be harassed by community members as other lesbians are (Nkabinde and Morgan 2006, Nkabinde 2008, Morgan and Reid 2003). Three of our male participants are currently in the process of undergoing training as *sangomas* and all of them attribute homosexual desires, to some extent, to dominant female ancestors who are working in them. Morgan and Reid (2003: 387) write:

As a *sangoma*, women have the opportunity of turning the marginal status of 'lesbian' into something that is valorised and feared-transforming marginality into power. This is apparent in the way in which *sangomas* speak about themselves. The male ancestor brings a male authority to bear on decisions, actions and behaviours of the *sangoma*.

Similarly to what is argued above, only with the gender opposite constellation, can be said for the three Zulu gay men who underwent training as *sangomas*. Although not all of our participants felt that *amadlozi* were the source of their same-sex desires, every single Zulu gay man I interviewed believed in the power of the ancestors and considered their presence an essential spiritual aspect of his life. In summary, the Zulu cultural and spiritual belief system is thoroughly maintained among the members of the investigated homosexual Zulu sub-culture and gives expression to one of the primary elements of Zulu ethnicity and *Zuluness*.

5. CONCLUSION

The way Zulu culture was recently politicized during Jacob Zuma's rape trial and the manner in which Zulu masculinity²⁵ was portrayed set a patriarchal sexual climate for Zulu males and females that even some homosexual men appear to subscribe to.²⁶ This resonates strongly with Potgieter's (1997, 2006) argument that although alternatives to 'traditional' and dominant femininities and masculinities exist in the post-apartheid state, people in same-sex relationships often do not challenge these hegemonic structures. Many of the Zulu gay man I interviewed, are apparently looking for what they described as a 'real man', i.e. a 'masculine' partner. Perhaps one explanation for these traditional gender roles in sexuality is the fact that most African homosexuals do interpret their African cultural roots in a rather 'traditional' way.

The members of the gay male sub-culture I have been describing here do not only identify themselves as Zulu, but also subscribe to many traditional and hegemonic cultural elements of Zulu culture. Their self-conscious and proud sense of Zuluness and their commitment to selected aspects of Zulu language and culture demonstrate that a homosexual identity is, by no means, 'un-Zulu' or, by extension, 'un-African'. Zulu gay men defy the myth that 'homosex is not in African culture' and instead, celebrate Zulu consciousness and pride by, firstly, speaking the isiZulu-based sociolect *isiNgqumo*, secondly, through their unshakable belief in *amadlozi* [ancestors], and thirdly, by their obedience to the traditional laws of *hlonipha* [respect].

Hopefully, other studies will explore how homosexuality and African cultural expressions give new meanings to what it means to defy the myth that homosexuality is un-African. While this study merely focused on a particular region in South Africa and Zulu gay men in particular, there is little doubt, that one could find similar intersections and blends of gay lives and traditional orders in other parts of Africa.

²⁵ For more information to the Zuma rape trial and its Zulu cultural construction in terms of gender relations and sexualities, see Robins 2006, Skeen 2007, Mkhwanazi 2008, or Waetjen and Mare 2010.

²⁶ Hence, it has been argued that *skesanas* are equally vulnerable as Zulu females in their sexual relations (Reddy and Louw 2002).

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About the author: *Stephanie Rudwick* (Ph.D) has been employed as is a Senior Researcher in the School of Development Studies and also is an Honorary Lecturer in the Linguistics Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She has published on a wide range of ethnolinguistic and anthropological topics, including language, race, gender and identity, urban variation, language planning and policy. More recently, her research interest has shifted specifically to Zulu respect customs, practices of ilobolo [bridewealth] and attitudes towards these customs in contemporary South Africa. Stephanie received her MA in anthropology from the Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich and her Ph.D in Linguistics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.