Izitabane, ubutabane: Decolonising and indigenising gender-diverse identities through Zulu Indigenous terminologies

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ABSTRACT

Despite South Africa's progressive constitutional framework, queer and gender-diverse individuals continue to experience discrimination, exclusion, and hate crimes. Dominant narratives frequently position queerness and gender diversity as "un-African", reinforcing the misconception that diverse sexual and gender identities are incompatible with African cultural values. This article examines the limitations of the LGBTIQA+ acronym within indigenous African contexts where it is often perceived as a foreign construct that fails to adequately represent local understandings of sexuality and gender diversity. The reliance on English terminology further complicates representation as meanings are often distorted or lost when translated into indigenous languages. Guided by a qualitative research framework, the study draws on African feminist, decolonial, and indigenous knowledge systems perspectives. Critical discourse analysis explores how language and terminology reproduce and sustain structures of dominance, power, discrimination, and social control. The article argues for the reclamation and revitalisation of Zulu indigenous gender terms, including isitabane, inkonkoni, ungqingili, and uncukumbili, to challenge the dominant discourse that frames queer identities as foreign to Africa. Reclaiming these terms restores their explanatory and historical significance, localises queer identities within indigenous cultural contexts, and affirms the longstanding presence of gender and sexual diversity in African societies.

KEYWORDS
Izitabane, Identity, Zulu indigenous, decolonisation, gender, sexuality

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Introduction

Within the Zulu society, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer people are best known as izitabane.[1] Effeminate presenting men and masculine-presenting females, gender non-conforming, and gender-queer individuals in South Africa are often called izitabane to humiliate and discriminate against them.[2] There is the persistent question of conforming to the "norm". This insistence on seemingly stable standards of normalcy and the subsequent questions raised about LGBTIQA+ people's sexuality, gender identities, gender expression, and presentation unveil how izitabane bodies challenge the script of sex, gender, and sexuality that is ever present in the society, church, and spirituality landscape.

Human beings are categorised as male or female based on their external genitalia. However, more flexible, complex, and non-binary understandings of gendered and sexual possibility have been made possible by the rise of standalone, umbrella queer-inclusive terms and the steady, so-called evolution of "queer" and "gender-diverse" as catch-all terms for a wide range of gender-nonconforming identities and experiences.[3] Davids et al. unpack the notion of izitabane and argue for its appropriation. "Nasi les'tabane or lezitabane", which literally translates into "here come these homosexuals, lesbians or gays", are words often directed at LGBTIQA+ people walking the streets in local townships.

Isitabane is applied to intersex individuals, gender non-conformance, and same-sex desire. At times, it is used interchangeably with words such as ungqingili (singular) or ongqingili (plural), inkonkoni (singular) or izinkonkoni (plural), and uncukumbili (singular) or oncukumbili (plural).[4] The term

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1 Isitabane is the singular term referring to queer/LGBTIQA+ people. Izitabane is the plural. Ubutabane is the verb referring to queerness.

2 See Thabo Msibi, "Angeke ngibe isitabane: The perceived relationship between dress and sexuality among young African men at the University of KwaZulu-Natal," in *Was it something I wore? Dress Identity Material*, eds. Relebohile Moletsane, Claudia Mitchell, and Ann Smith, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2012), 242-258.

3 J. Nagoshi and S Brzuzy "Trans Theory: Embodying Research and Practice," *Journal of Women and Social Work* 25, no. 4 (2010):431-443.

4 See Hanzline Davids, Abongile Matyila, Sizwe Sithole and Charlene van der Walt, *Stabanisation: A Discussion Paper about Disrupting Backlash by Reclaiming LGBTI*

isitabane originates from conceptual engagements with intersexuality and articulates something of the understanding of intersex people as people who possess both sexual organs traditionally associated with being a female or male.[5] Despite the populist argument, especially from African leaders, that "homosexuality" is a Western import, research highlights that, in the Southern African context, ubutabane relationships were historically well established and documented.[6]

Colonial empires and frameworks introduced anti-sodomy laws in African colonies that upheld the heterosexual matrix as the "natural" way of being. These anti-sodomy laws persist in African countries today.[7] A decolonial turn on queer identities requires unlearning colonial frameworks of gender and sexuality while simultaneously reclaiming and restoring indigenous sexual fluidity and ambiguous gender expressions. To build sustainable liberation, the indigenisation of queer and gender-diverse identities must centre local gender terminologies, culture, tradition, and spirituality. Reclaiming vocabulary by using indigenous terms to describe queer and gender-diverse identities makes queer existence relatable and indigenously relevant. Reviving the spiritual element of gender fluidity reclaims the sacredness of queerness in indigenous spirituality.

Voices in the African Church Landscape, (Johannesburg: The Other Foundation, 2019), 10; Lindiwe Mkasi. A threat to Zulu patriarchy and the continuation of community: a queer analysis of same sex relationships amongst female traditional healers at Inanda and KwaNgcolosi. (Masters diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013).

5 Amanda Swarr, "*Stabane,*" Intersexuality, and same-sex relationships in South Africa.' *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 524-548.

6 See Stephen Murray, Will Roscoe, and Epprecht Marc, "Africa and African Homosexualities: An Introduction," in *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*, eds. Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe, 1- 18, (New York: State University of New York Press,1998). https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/163/oa_edited_volume/chapter/2866766; Lindiwe Promise Mkasi, "A Threat to Zulu Patriarchy and the Continuation of Community': Traditional Healing as Sacred Safe Space for Female "Sangomas" in Same-Sex Relationships," *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2012): 139-156; Veronica Sigamoney, and Marc Epprecht, "Meanings of Homosexuality, Same-Sex Sexuality, and Africanness in Two South African Townships: An evidence-Based Approach For Rethinking Same-sex Prejudice," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2013): 83 – 107.

7 John Kaoma, "An african or un-african sexual identity? Religion, globalisation and sexual politics in sub-Saharan Africa," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Adriaan Van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, (London: Routledge, 2016).

South Africa, specifically the Zulu language, serves as the study's background. The emphasis was chosen due to recent online trends in which a well-known, former radio personality, Ngizwe Mchunu, expressed violent emotions against izitabane who were being married in traditional Zulu attire. Hiding behind cultural justifications, he declared that izitabane had no right to wear indigenous clothing. He referred to izitabane as those who were judged unworthy to wear traditional regalia in his argument. This article's argument is not to elaborate on vocabulary but rather reclaim and indigenise izitabane, izinkonkoni, and oncukumbili as approachable and indigenously relevant bodies.

The theoretical framework

To understand indigenised sexualities discourse in African communities, the research adopts feminist approaches framed in indigenous knowledge systems (hereinafter referred to as IKS). Additionally, the article employs the African feminist decolonial theory (herewith referred to as AFDT).

African Indigenous knowledge system and African feminist decolonial theory

Indigenous scholars, such as Chilisa Bagele and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, have scrutinised traditions of Western research. These scholars advocate for the decolonisation of Western research methods and emphasise the importance of adopting indigenous knowledge systems to strengthen the voices of historically marginalised communities within their cultural contexts.[8] These scholars, in their advocacy for decolonisation of Western research methods, remind us of the impact of imperialism where classifications of humanity through racial hierarchies and societal typologies were systematically applied. These classification schemes, along with imperial power and "science", influenced how indigenous societies and colonial powers

[8] See, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: University of Otago Press, 1999); Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (United State of America: Sage Publications, 2012); Karen L. Martin and Booran Mirraboopa, "Ways of knowing, being and doing: A theoretical framework and methods for indigenous and indigenist re-search," *Journal of Australian Studies* 27*,* no. 76 (2003): 203-214. https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050309387838

interacted.[9] Smith's argument is a reminder that imperialism and its entanglement with the indigenous people and the process of decolonisation cannot be overlooked when conducting indigenous research on indigenous communities or indigenous cultures and traditions.

The indigenous approach, as advocated by the scholars above, relies on the lived experiences, ancestral traditions, and localised traditions of indigenous people. This makes the indigenous approach culturally safe and respectful and comprises principles of resistance as an emancipatory imperative that ensures political integrity in indigenous research and privileges indigenous voices in indigenous studies.[10] Therefore, Smith's claim makes sense that the "indigenous people have to use their ways of thinking and doing things to challenge and change the knowledge and methods imposed on them".[11] Based on the information above, the indigenous approach we adopt in this study focuses on the ontological and epistemological frameworks of indigenous people as defined by their relationality and interconnectedness. As noted by Martin and Mirraboopa, it is through ontology that awareness, sense of self, sense of belonging, sense of human responsibility, and other ways to relate to the self and those around are developed. It is also through epistemology that experiential and embodied knowledge is acquired, shared, and validated.[12] Therefore, this article draws upon the knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, experiences, and realities of izitabane to illustrate and understand how these terms are applied, associated, and used for self-identification as well as examining how communities use, apply, and associate these terms with izitabane.

The issue of naming and terminology of izitabane does not solely reside with the izitabane but, rather, also involves contemporary society's attempts to comprehend gender identity and sexual orientations that differ from their own. Naming and identifying izitabane follows a three-way process: naming by the izitabane community, naming by the heterosexual community, and self-naming. All three categories are important as they impact the lives of

9 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 25

10 Lester-Irabinna Rigney, "The First Perspective: Culturally Safe Research Practices on or with Indigenous Peoples," paper presented at Chamcool Conference, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 1999.

11 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 25.

12 Martin and Mirraboopa, "Ways of knowing, being and doing" 206.

izitabane.[13] As the phenomenological approach indicates, the outsider's interpretation differs from that of the insider. To bridge the gap between izitabane and heterosexual communities, it is essential to understand how both communities identify and name sexual identities. African communities have their own terms to refer to gender non-conforming individuals. However, the known Zulu terms used (by civil society) are perceived (by izitabane) as derogatory and discriminatory. Terms such as isitabane are used to dehumanise and shame gender diverse individuals in South Africa.[14] Nevertheless, we argue that reclaiming the explanatory meanings of inkonkoni, uncukumbili, and ungqingili offers a way to appreciate ambiguity and gender diversity as a decolonial turn.

We agree with Owusu-Ansah that,

> considering that culture is the "lens" through which a person perceives, interprets and makes sense of his or her reality, if we speak of the inclusion of African indigenous knowledge in any investigation, we would be speaking about the examination of African reality from the perspective of the African and not with the African on the periphery.[15]

Olsen believes that "both gender and indigeneity are terms and topics often disagreed on and cause conflicts".[16] The aim of using an indigenous approach is not to replace the Western research system but to question and challenge its research methods and offer alternatives. The main objective is to involve indigenous people in creating and sharing knowledge about their

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13 Theo Sandfort et al. "After-nine, 429, he-she, stabane, and gay, bisexual and other men sleeping with men: diversity in black South African MSM identities and implications for HIV prevention," (Poster presented at the XIX International AIDS Conference, Washington, USA, July, 2012).

14 N. Pakade, "What's in a name? Exploring the sexual identity of Black Women-Loving-Women in Soweto," *Agenda* 27, no 2 (2013): 123, https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2013.809928

15 Frances Owusu-Ansah, and Gubhela Mji, "African indigenous knowledge and research," *African Journal of Disability* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1-5, http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ajod. v2i1.30.

16 Torjer Olsen, "Gender and/in indigenous methodologies: On trouble and harmony in indigenous studies," *Ethnicities* 17 no. 4 (2017): 509-525, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816673089.

communities to meet the specific needs of indigenous peoples, especially izitabane, as discussed in this article.[17]

Drawing on insights from indigenous knowledge critique, the article also draws on African feminist decolonial theory to challenge the binary imposition of colonialism. Both the Indigenous knowledge system (IKS) theory and African feminist decolonial theory (AFDT) disrupt the narrative that queerness is "un-African" and offer ways to indigenise and root queer identities within African spirituality. Reclaiming the explanatory nature of isitabane, uncukumbili, ungqingili and inkonkoni terminology challenges the dominant narrative denying the historical existence of izitabane in indigenous discourses. The explanatory nature of the ungqingili, uncukumbili, and inkonkoni terminologies focuses on the circumstances of the birth of izitabane rather than on sexual labels.

Going back to the time before colonialism is impossible, however, IKS and AFDT offer a way to localise and humanise variant identities and reclaim their existence to a time before the imposition of Western, binary constructions. Decolonial feminist scholars contend that the idea that indigenous traditions cannot align with feminism is false.[18] Therefore, a call for indigenous knowledge systems and decolonial theory to work hand-in-hand with feminism opens an opportunity for a methodological turn that Driskill et al. narrate as a turn "opening up accounts to the multiplicity, complexity, contestation, and change among knowledge claims by indigenous people".[19]

By shifting the focus from a currently Western-centred research approach that uses Western terminology for gender and sexuality to an African indigenist approach, the paper aims to highlight the importance of using African indigenous terminology as a radical strategy to decolonise African

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17 Olsen, "Gender and/in indigenous methodologies," 509.

18 Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender: The Euro Centric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and The Challege of African Epistemologies," *A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies,* 2 no. 1 (2002): 1-9, http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?000.2.1.8; Maria Lugones, "Toward a decolonial feminism." *Hypatia,* 25 no. 4: 742–759; Nyeck, *African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61225-6

19 Qwo-Li Driskill, et al., "Introduction," in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, eds. Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Gilley, Scott Morgensen (United States of America: The University of Arizona, 2011).

izitabane identities. Terms such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “transgender”, and “queer” are historically specific. An indigenous approach asks whether these categories adequately capture local experiences. It allows for indigenous gender and sexual identities that may not fit Western taxonomies and resists the assumption that Western categories are universally applicable.[20] We are aware of the role played by the Western human rights approach in advocating for the rights of izitabane and its universal fight for recognition of izitabane in Africa. The human rights approach is a framework that has allowed gender activists and African feminists to openly raise and challenge the pervasive patriarchy and binary gender construct that continue to marginalise, discriminate, and exclude izitabane in essential spaces. However, its advocacy of an individualistic approach has been criticised for failing to address the African communal approach embedded in the African indigenous worldview. African scholars argue that the African indigenous worldview rests on communal living, whereby an individual is valued for the greater good of society. The value, respect, and dignity of a human being are appreciated through their involvement in communal life.[21] This article argues for an indigenous framework that places a greater emphasis on relationships among people, ancestors, land, and the more-than-human world. This shifts the focus from identity alone to obligations, reciprocity, belonging, and collective well-being.

Research Design

The qualitative research approach is used to investigate the indigenous terminology and terminologies of izitabane in South Africa. This paper's contribution is a reflection and analysis of the secondary data. Additionally, the article analyses the authors’ findings from their Master's and PhD studies. In 2012 and 2019, Khuzwayo conducted semi-structured interviews with LGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming people in KwaZulu-Natal. Khuzwayo’s main focus is on same-sex relationships. Between 2017 and October 2024, Sithole conducted interviews with transgender and gender-diverse individuals in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Sithole’s main focus is on transgender and gender-diverse individuals. Authors share an interest in

20 Pakade, “What’s in the name,” 123.

21 Ziyad Motala, “Human Rights in Africa: A Cultural, Ideological, and Legal Examination,” *Hastings International Comparative Law Review* 12, no. 2 (1989): 373-410.

the lived realities of LGBTIQA+ people in indigenous, spiritual, faith, and religious spaces.

Positionality

The authors are both Zulu-speaking individuals, born and bred in KwaZulu-Natal, identifying as izitabane and indigenous healers. Khuzwayo graduated with her PhD in 2021 and her research project focused on African Indigenous same-sex sexualities in a democratic society, examining a case study of rural women in KwaZulu-Natal. Sithole's project focused on exploring the Nguni indigenous rituals and practices that affirm transgender and gender-diverse individuals in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng Province. He recently graduated with his PhD in May 2026. The authors share the passion for research on izitabane identities in the rural and spiritual landscape in South Africa. Their passion is born out of their personal experiences with ubutabane that constantly push against the odds of discrimination, exclusion, and violence. They are currently working on a project promoting inclusion by addressing the challenges of sexual and gender diversity in educational and cultural spaces in South Africa. The aim of the project is to identify and propose strategies that will foster safe and open dialogues and strengthen cooperation between educational institutions in rural areas, indigenous leaders, indigenous healers, and faith and spiritual leaders to reduce tensions of stigma, exclusion, and discrimination and promote mutual understanding. In positioning ourselves, we are claiming and declaring our identities and positions as local people first, and as researchers second. This positionality presents the assumptions upon which our research is formulated and conducted. This also openly acknowledges the relations that may exist as we conduct this research.

Critical discourse analysis is applied to tease out "the non-transparent and the transparent structural relationships of dominance, power, discrimination and control as manifested in language".[22] According to Blommaert and Bulcaen, critical discourse analysis focuses on the intersection of language, discourse, and social structure. It involves identifying how social structure influences discourse patterns, relations, and models through power dynamics, ideological effects, and other factors. It is not enough to reveal

[22] Ruth Wodak, "Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis," in Handbook of Pragmatics, eds. Jeff Verschueren, Jan-Ola Ostman and Jan Blommaert (John Bejamins Publishing Company, 1995), 204.

the social aspects of language use. These dimensions are the subject of moral and political examination, and analysing them should have societal consequences such as strengthening the powerless, giving voice to the voiceless, exposing power abuse, and mobilising people to correct social injustices.[23]

This article aims to avoid perpetuating these very colonial power imbalances of the Eurocentric framework. Therefore, applying critical discourse analysis to izitabane identities refuses the use of binary male/female language. By paying attention to the voices of izitabane and their preferred identity names, we argue for the limits and partiality of Western queer terminology in capturing local experiences and push for terminologies and discourses that view izitabane beyond the binary of male/female. Additionally, this article links ubutabane to spirituality, community, and sacredness. Spirituality is understood in this study as a multidimensional human experience that provides meaning, purpose, connection, transcendence, identity, and a sense of belonging.[24] Spirituality is not merely a private belief system but also serves as an important social and cultural function, helping individuals affirm their integrity while strengthening community identity. It is, therefore, both a personal and communal resource that contributes to human flourishing and well-being. African spirituality, then, is not a religion but a way of life. African people do not need to believe to understand African spirituality, but they know that spirituality surrounds them and lives in them.

Reclaiming the indigenous gender terminologies empowers izitabane and gives them a voice that indigenises their identities and places them in indigenous spiritual spaces within their communities. Thus, indigenous terminologies challenge the universality of the lesbian, gay, queer, transgender, and intersex terminologies. Through our analysis, we question

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23 Jan Blommaert, and Chris Bulcaen, "Critical Discourse Analysis," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29 (2000) 447-466. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.447

24 See, Kenneth Pargament, *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy*. (Guilford Press, 2007); Froma Walsh, "Spiritual diversity: Multifaith perspectives in family therapy," *Family Process* 49, no. 3 (2010): 330-348.; Joseph Goh, "Trans/imagining God: Articulations of individualised spirituality among Muslim and Christian transgender men," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 11, no.1 (2021): 38; Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid, "'I've got two men and one woman': ancestors, sexuality, and identity among same-sex identified women traditional healers in South Africa," *Africa, Culture, Health and Sexuality* 5 no. 5 (2003): 378.

the knowledge production of LGBTIQA+, queer terminology, and the erasure of indigenous terminologies whilst simultaneously pushing for an inclusive sociolinguistic framework.

Literature on queer naming practices in South Africa

Research highlighting the lived realities of queer individuals in Southern African countries have been widely published. Queer and gender scholars have challenged the dominant narrative that queerness is un-African. Currently, about 31 African countries criminalise the LGBTIQA+ community, with sentences of imprisonment and even death penalties. In Africa, the anti-LGBTIQA+ movement is financially sponsored by the American right wing, the conservative-Christians.[25] As this may be devastating, South Africa is praised for its liberal view on gender and sexuality. The country is praised for its inclusion of the LGBTIQA+ rights enshrined in the constitution. Though the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ rights is applauded, the pervasive, gruesome killing of members of this community makes it difficult to celebrate freedom.

Self-identification and queer labels have been extensively researched, and it has been highlighted that queer naming and terminology present a challenge to this process, as people often confuse the terms used to refer to sexual orientation and gender identities.[26] This confusion does not end with local communities alone, but also extends to the izitabane.[27] Pakade's research highlights that terms such as "Dyke, Butch, Femme and Queer work as in-group identities. However, she contends that isitabane remain common in the broader context. Additionally, Pakade argues that the term isitabane, a township slang for gender non-conforming persons, is widely

[25] See, Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken, eds., *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[26] See Vasu, Reddy. 2002. 'Perverts and Sodomites: Homophobia as Hate Speech in Africa.' *Southern African Linguistics and Language Studies*, 20 no. 3(2002):163–175; Zethu, Matebeni, Monro, Surya and Vasu Reddy, eds. *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI identities, citizenship, and activism*. Routledge, 2018; Thabo, Msibi, "The lies we have been told: On (homo) sexuality in Africa." *Africa today*. 58 no. 1(2013): 55-77.

[27] African Commission for Human's and People's Rights Report (ACHPR, 2014), 5-6. https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/273-resolution-extending-scope-mandate-special-rapporteur-hu

used but carries stigma despite being more accepted than other local terms, like ungqingili, which still contribute to homophobic attitudes."[28]

Decolonising and indigenising queer identities calls for indigenous methodologies that address existing knowledge gaps. Therefore, this paper discusses indigenous-framed terms for individuals identifying as izitabane, fostering inclusivity and understanding within the indigenous framework from which these identities emerge. We do not deny that re-appropriating these terms may evoke or recall painful experiences and encounters for those involved in this context. We do, however, believe that it constitutes a promising tool in the pursuit of radical sexual identities in South Africa and gives the spiritual affirmation of izitabane bodies. Moreover, it may further affirm the indigeneity of *izitabane* and their spiritual identities.

According to research, African sexual diversity is acknowledged within African spirituality, grounded in indigenous African ways of knowing.[29] Indeed, according to current discussions on sexual variety, African spirituality is more tolerant than Christianity. Western religions, like Christianity, label these identities as sinful, evil, or cursed, resulting in the majority of Africans to deny their existence. In contrast, African spirituality is built on indigenous knowledge systems that do not define or characterise gender and sexuality in the same identity-based and categorical manner as Western epistemologies. Spiritual callings frequently go beyond strict gender binary distinctions, according to Khuzwayo who researches sexual variety within the ubungoma milieu. She also emphasises how gender identities and queer identities' interactions are viewed differently in various cultural and spiritual contexts, examining how spirit possession can transcend gender limits. This clarifies why, in indigenous spirituality, men may be referred to as "Gogo" (grandmother) and women as "mkhulu" (grandfather), signifying ancestral embodiment and spiritual power rather than biological sex.[30]

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28 Pakade, "What's in the name," 121

29 Morgan, and Reid, "'I've got two men and one woman,' 382; Kendall (1998) 'When a woman loves a woman' in Lesotho: love, sex, and the (western) construction of homophobia. In *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities* eds. Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe, 221- 241, (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998).

30 Lindiwe Mkasi, "'A Threat to Zulu Patriarchy" 147.

Discussion

Queer and gender diverse studies silently entangle issues of race, class, religion, culture, and ethnicity. It is at this intersection that African queerness is often marked and perceived as a Western import. Employing the LGBTQIA+ acronym without attention to its Western origin often renders this acronym insufficient to capture the experiences of African queer people.

Izitabane terminology has been examined from a variety of angles, including in its confrontation of discrimination and exclusion as well as Western queer terminology. To indigenise and decolonise izitabane identities, this article argues for the reclamation of Zulu gender terms. Adopting a decolonial and indigenous approach forces us to acknowledge the discomfort these labels cause for izitabane and to reclaim control of the vocabulary to appropriately and centrally represent their views. We contend that terminology is a system for symbolically storing and retrieving information, as argued by Mkhize and Muthuki.[31] Gender terminology has changed significantly, in much the same way that culture and tradition are dynamic. Ungqingili, inkonkoni, and uncukumbili are Zulu gender terms whose origin, we argue, was the illustration of birth circumstances. However, these terminologies have evolved to exclude and discriminate against izitabane. To understand the explanatory nature of these terms, we break them down into their component words:

- Ncukumbili: A Zulu term born from the combination of two words.
- Ncukumbili = Izicubu ezimbili (two pieces of flesh). Ncuku = isicubu/ izicubu (flesh), Mbili = bili(two).
- Ungqingili: = Ngqi (full stop), Ngili = Ngini (disability).
- Inkonkoni: The name of a wildebeest that expresses and engages in male-male sexual acts.[32]

Ncukumbili originates from the understanding of intersex bodies that are believed to possess two sexual genitalia. Uncukumbili has become the container term for all individuals identifying with gender and sexual difference. In Sithole's study, a transgender participant shared that,

[31] Zamambo Mkhize and Janet Muthuki, "Zulu names and their impact on gender identity construction of adults raised in polygynous families in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Nomina Africana.* 33 no. 2, (2019): 87-98.

[32] Veronica Sigamoney, Marc Epprecht, "Meanings of homosexuality" 91.

> If we look at the names such as ncukumbili, it is based on intersex persons, but I can say it was widely used for transgender persons because at times a person would present feminine and sometimes present masculine, and they would be understood as two-spirited persons. So, for me, I would say we are partly represented and partly not.[33]

The late Credo Mutwa,[34] one of the well-known Zulu sangomas, shares the Zulu creation story where human beings originated from the cave and the first person to come out of the cave displayed elements of what in contemporary terms is referred to as "intersex", which he refers to using the isiZulu term "ncukubili". This then suggests that some Nguni creation stories acknowledge that the human body transcends the gender binary. Indeed, such creation stories provide knowledge that contests the ideology that izitabane are without history.

The originality of the ungqingili terminology is not evident in research. Further, contemporary society is reluctant to use this term as it is perceived as derogatory. Khuzwayo-Magwaza points out that speculations around the originality of this word may be around giving birth to an intersex child, where the elders would exclaim, "We have come to an end! We would not know how to name this child, but we know we have seen it all".[35] However, in Khuzwayo-Magwaza's study, one participant shared his views on its emergence, drawing from the term's structure as illustrated above.[36] Drawing on the two components of the word ungqingili, the participant indicated that the word may mean "the one living with the disability." The participant used the illustration of a teapot without handles (ingini), suggesting that the personification of ingini "oyingini", the literal translation of which is understood as an amputated person.

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33 Sizwesamajobe Sithole, "Being transgender and spiritual: an in-depth exploration into Nguni indigenous practices and rituals that contribute to affirming the spiritual identities of trans and gender-diverse people in the Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces," (PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2026).

34 https://youtube.be/sPeOCouZ9x4

35 Lindiwe Promise Khuzwayo-Magwaza, "African Indigenous same-sexualities in a democratic society: A case study of rural women in KwaZulu-Natal," (PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2021).

36 Khuzwayo-Magwaza "African Indigenous same-sexualities" 132

Dennis, a transgender participant in Sithole's research, called himself inkonkoni, narrating his identity by saying:

> Igama ngingu Dennis P. Mayaba. I am a transman. Ngokuqonda kwami ngiyinkonkoni. To umuntu ongayazi inkonkoni may think inkomo, or angabona engathi inkomo, kodwa uma esebona inkomo efuywa emakhaya and ebona inkonkoni iyavela, lento yokuthi inkonkoni islwane ongeke usibeke esibayeni esisodwa nezinkomo. Okungukuthi ekukhuleni kwami abazali nabobonke abangemele impilo yami bebengifaka namantombazane ngoba becabanga ukuthi ubulili singamantombazane ngokubona nokucabanga kwabantu abadala kodwa bebekubona futhi bekwazi ukuthi angiyona intombazane uma sengiphakathi kwamantombazane bafake indoda phakati kwamantombazane. Kimina igama elithi inkonkoni alisona isithuko.
>
> My name is Dennis P. Mayaba. I am a transman. In my understanding, I am "inkonkoni" to someone who does not know the wildebeest; they may mistake it for a cow, but the moment they see the real wildebeest, they will realise it is a wild animal. That is, when I was growing up, my parents and everyone in charge of my life would put me with girls. Because they thought that gender was girls according to the perception and thinking of adults, but they saw and knew that I was not a girl when I was among girls, and they put a man among girls. The words "inkonkoni" and "ncukumbili" are not an insult or a slur.[37]

The above provides an explanatory account of these terms, focusing on the circumstances under which one is born. Ncukumbili explains the birth of an intersex person, ungqingili gives an account of a person born with an unexplainable disability, and inkonkoni illustrates an account of self-identification from a transgender person's understanding of their difference from cisgender people. Understanding these indigenous terminologies within their descriptive and explanatory nature challenges the discrimination attached to them as derogatory terms. By assuming an explanatory nature, the focus shifts from sexual orientation/identity and gender identity to the

[37] Sithole, "Being transgender and spiritual," 151

circumstances of birth. Given the explanatory nature of the terms uncukumbili, inkonkoni, and ungqingili, we retrieve information and knowledge that acknowledges indigenously relatable identities in our history.

The primary understanding of uncukumbili, inkonkoni, and ungqingili as that of a person who is intersex gives birth to the universal understanding that all people identifying as izitabane are intersex. This understanding, we argue, contributes to the ongoing singular presentation of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) categories. This contributes to the erasure of some izitabane identities. Hence, we argue for the reclamation of these terminologies as explanatory terms describing the circumstance of birth as a way to transcend the binary in understanding sexuality and gender.

Reclaiming of izitabane/ uncukumbili/ inkonkoni/ ungqingili terms: a decolonial-indigenous act

In South Africa, izitabane live with feelings of shame, secrecy, and isolation due to the stigma surrounding their bodily differences. The prevalence of stigmatisation in families and in communities can be argued as the beginning of ritual killings. Turrell points out that ritual murders committed to produce muti in black Zulu communities date back to the 1900s. These murders occurred because of myths of believing that such rituals provide riches, protection, fame, and power.[38] The irony is believing that ritual killings bring luck and wealth, because different, ambiguous and fluid bodies have spiritual powers, whilst holding the belief that such bodies are not accepted in spiritual spaces and are not indigenous. People living with albinism have gone through similar experiences in South Africa. Moreover, ritual killing was not the only thing contributing to the shame and secrecy around izitabane bodies. Indeed, families would hide their izitabane children and, in some instances, surgeries were performed to ensure the child was able to "fit" into the categories of female/male. Sgaqa, a participant in Sithole's study, pointed to this:

> I was born intersex. How I came to know that I was born an intersex was after seeing a lump in my private part. It wasn't caused by

[38] Rob Turrell, "Muti Ritual Murder in Natal: From Chiefs to Commoners (1900–1930)," *South African Historical Journal* 44, no. 1 (2001): 21-39

> shaving, so I was not sure what had caused it. I think it developed after certain surgeries were performed on me. I went to the clinic and told the nurses that I have a lump that I don't understand developing in my body. The nurse asked to check it up and realised that my private part was not usual, and I thought, well, every VG is different. She asked me to take off the t-shirt, which I did, and then asked, "Are you sure that you are a female born?" That question was a turning point in my life, because it came from someone outside who didn't know me. I started researching more and asking questions about my birth at home. I knew that there was a file at home that mom used to hide, and for every surgery I went through, she kept a copy. I thought growing up, every child had a file that they kept for themselves as well.[39]

Traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity are limiting. Instead, we argue that reclaiming the explanatory nature of izitabane, uncukumbili, and inkonkoni allows us to roll back the dice and embrace those who are born different and do not "fit" neatly into traditional binary. Reclaiming izitabane, uncukumbili, inkonkoni, and ungqingili in their explanatory capacity shapes how we process experiences, influences our mental resilience and communication effectiveness, and offers a productive approach to problem-solving. Reclaiming these explanatory terms can boost our psychological resilience. This challenges the pervasive, communal negative language that disrupts the personal and internal experiences of the self. It offers a deeper, more comprehensive vocabulary of existing knowledge and provides a logical understanding of sexual variant bodies. The explanatory nature is rooted in the understanding that izitabane is not a new phenomenon, and these terms existed to explain their very existence.

Reclaiming isitabane, inkonkoni, ungqingili, and uncukumbili terminologies in their explanatory nature affirm the existence of potentially gender positive phrases and terms that better fit and validate the lived reality of izitabane. Additionally, it highlights the fluidity and ambiguity of gender and sexual identity in the indigenous landscape, challenging the dominant narrative that displays ambiguity and fluidity as alien in the African worldview. Such reclamation problematises the idolisation of the gender binary as the "authentic" mode of African gender and sexuality reality. Therefore,

[39] Sithole, "Being transgender and spiritual" 145

reclaiming these terms asserts that being isitabane and indigenous is deeply connected to African ontologies, concepts of spirituality and well-being.[40]

The reclamation of these terminologies, in contrast to the adoption of the term "queer", does not only refer to non-normative sexualities but, in its literal definition of an intersex individual, semantically embodies the blurring of the male/female boundary, bringing them together in a unique wholeness.[41] The appropriation of indigenous gender terms and terminologies thus "takes the bull by its horns", whereby the appropriation of these gender terms moves power from the perpetrators who use these names to shame and dehumanise izitabane. Through the re-appropriation of indigenous gender terms, izitabane do not ask to fit in but, rather, claim their place at the table of indigenous communities and in spaces where they are often met with hostility. Reclaiming and appropriating the indigenous gender terms challenges the narrative that the queer, transgender, lesbian, and gay individuals do not have indigenous equivalents and, additionally, works to dismantle the colonial Western heterocentric roots of gender terms.

Conclusion

Naming in Africa is a significant spiritual process because what and how people name you is closely tied to who you are and is believed to influence who you become in the future. As Mbiti argues, almost all African names are meaningful.[42] Mkhize and Muthuki contend that in Zulu tradition and culture, names highlight the bearers' historical and social backgrounds as well as the circumstances surrounding their births. [43] It is with this understanding that this article argues for the reclamation of indigenous gender terminology.

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40 Ansloos Jeffrey, Zantingh Deanna, Ward Katelyn, McCormick Samantha, and Siriwattakanon Chutchaya, "Radical care and decolonial futures: conversations on identity, health, and spirituality with indigenous queer, trans, and two-spirit youth." *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies,* 12 no. ¾ (2021), 74–103.

41 See, Tomaso Milani "Querying the queer from Africa: Precarious bodies precarious gender", *Agenda*, 28 no. 4 (2014), 75-85: http://www.doi/10.1080/10130950.2014.963940 (2014). Hugh McLean and Linda Ngcobo, "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi (Those Who Fuck Me Say I'm Tasty): Gay Sexuality in Reef Township." In *Defiant Desire*, eds. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1994), 158 –185.

42 John Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969).

43 Mkhize and Muthuki. "Zulu names and their impact on gender identity".

Terminology and naming are symbolic in that they relate the person to the space, time, and culture surrounding the circumstances of their birth.

Drawing from the theoretical insight of identity and social theory, Hopkins and Reicher note that

> how people subjectively define themselves has a significant impact on cognition and behaviour, further pointing out that identity construction, wherever and whenever it may be observed, is not a neutral affair abstracted from the practical business of everyday life.[44]

Reclaiming these indigenous terminologies offers a way to re-appropriate self-identification. Moreover, reclaiming indigenous gender names and terminologies can be used as a more effective conceptual tool to conduct radical indigenous, cultural, and political critique in contemporary South Africa.[45] Building a strong, positive connection to an indigenous identity is an essential component for the well-being, healing, and flourishing of izitabane. This strong connection contributes to the fight against discrimination and violence perpetuated against izitabane in South Africa. The illustration of multiple indigenous gender and sexuality terminologies is in and of itself an indication of the understanding that indigenously, gender and sexuality are ambiguous and fluid in their nature.

Reclaiming indigenous gender terminologies further challenges the hetero-patriarchal, cultural aversions that African leaders and traditionalists have used as a shield to discriminate against izitabane. The reclaiming process further pushes us to have uncomfortable conversations, leading to a place where izitabane may flourish and no longer be hurt. The South African Constitution is appreciated and applauded for setting an exemplary approach to protecting the Rights of izitabane, offering a needed space for gender-diverse people to affirm their gender identities. However, the reclaiming of indigenous gender terms and terminologies further challenges the exclusion of izitabane and affirms ubutabane as an indigenous identity.

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44 Nick Hopkins, and Steve Reicher, "Identity, Culture and Contestation: Social Identity as Cross-Cultural Theory," *Psychological Studies* 56, no.1 (2011): 36.

45 Hanzline Davids, Abongile Matyila, Sizwe Sithole and Charlene van der Walt, "*Stabanisation,"*

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