BETWEEN ANCESTORS AND THE STATE

A LESBIAN SANGOMA CHALLENGES COLONIAL GENDER

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DOI: 10.33043/grvmqnbxkfp
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Figure 20: Photograph of Refiloe Letuma, an African healer

In a Soweto clinic, just before the 1976 student uprisings, a baby girl was born— minutes after her twin brother was delivered stillborn. Her birth was not celebrated but shrouded in superstition. In traditional Zulu belief, twins are considered a bad omen. "Twins die in the Nkabinde family," her mother was warned. But this baby survived. She grew into a sangoma—a traditional healer—and later publicly declared herself a lesbian. Her name is Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, and her life reveals a truth too often erased from African history: queerness has always existed, even when colonial systems tried to deny it.

South Africa is often praised for its progressive constitution—the first in the world to explicitly ban discrimination based on sexual orientation. Yet LGBTQ people, especially Black lesbians, continue to face disproportionate violence and social exclusion. Nkabinde's life complicates celebratory narratives of progress. Her autobiography, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*, recounts a story of gender, sexuality, spirituality, and survival. She moves between gender roles, dances in both men's and women's clothing, and communicates with male and female ancestors alike. "As a sangoma," she writes, "it is more flexible. I can dance like a woman and wear a woman's clothes and dance like a man and wear a man's clothes. I can do the work of a man, like slaughtering a goat or a cow although in traditional Zulu culture a woman

"A TRUTH TOO OFTEN ERASED FROM AFRICAN HISTORY: QUEERNESS HAS ALWAYS BEEN HERE, EVEN WHEN COLONIAL SYSTEMS TRIED TO ERASE IT."

cannot slaughter."[62] To understand the radical potential of this fluidity—and the resistance it embodies—we must turn to the decolonial feminist theorist María Lugones. In her essay "The Coloniality of Gender," Lugones argues that colonialism imposed a Eurocentric gender system onto colonized people, replacing indigenous ways of knowing with rigid binaries: man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, domestic/public.[63] These binaries were tied to Western ideals of race, productivity, and civilization. Under colonial rule, Black women were hypersexualized and denied femininity, while gender-nonconforming individuals were rendered either invisible or pathological. But Nkabinde's life as a sangoma offers a counterpoint to that imposed system. It suggests that African cosmologies had—and still have—room for more expansive expressions of identity. Her acceptance within her spiritual community, even as she faces hostility in broader society, demonstrates how precolonial traditions can serve as sites of resistance against colonial gender norms and their post-colonial legacies. "The ancestors don't mind," she writes simply, referring to her sexuality.[64] But society does. And that tension—between what the ancestors accept and what the state punishes—is where her story unfolds.

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LUGONES'S COLONIALITY OF GENDER AND THE SANGOMA AS COUNTERPOINT

Lugones challenges us to view gender not as biological destiny, but as a tool of empire. In "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," she describes how gender, as we know it, was constructed to support racial and capitalist hierarchies. The colonial gender system fused racial, sexual, and gendered oppression, creating hierarchies like male/female and human/nonhuman.[65] This system did not simply categorize people, it dehumanized them. In precolonial African societies, Lugones asserts, gender roles often operated along different logics, if they existed in the binary form at all. Instead, many communities recognized a diversity of social and spiritual roles that did not map neatly onto Western ideas of masculinity and femininity. Colonizers erased these nuances, replacing them with the idea that a proper society required fixed male

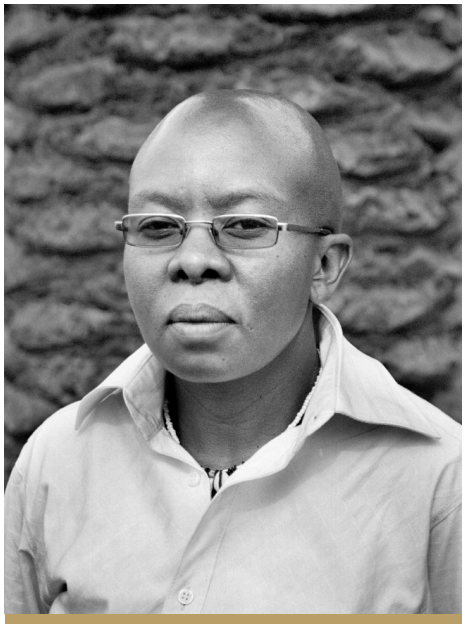

Figure 21: Photograph of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde.

Figure 22: A gay pride event held in Cape Town, South Africa

and female roles, heterosexual unions, and the subordination of women. In many ways, it meant that to be a proper woman (under Lugones' framework) meant being white, bourgeois, and heterosexual. Black and indigenous women were never women according to this model."[66] This is where Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's life provides both a personal testimony and a political counterpoint. As a sangoma, a spiritual healer called by ancestors, she exists within a tradition that resists the rigid gendering of colonial ideology. "I can dance like a woman and slaughter like a man," she writes, matter-of-factly. But this fluidity is not a modern invention or a Western import; it is rooted in African spiritual cosmologies.[67] Her calling, she says, came from both male and female ancestors. Her identity, in other words, is ancestral. "Nkunzi is the ancestor who called me and gave me his name," she writes in a praise poem. "Lo! I am now Black Bull… the young man of Sangweni."[68] In colonial logic, this kind of dual embodiment—woman and Black Bull, lesbian and healer—is unintelligible. The colonial gender system demands fixed categories. But in indigenous spiritual epistemologies, such duality is not only possible, it is sacred. A 2003 ethnographic study of lesbian sangomas in Soweto found that same-sex attraction is often explained through ancestor possession. "When this ancestor enters me, my entire sexual feelings (for men) die," one healer said. "I have a feeling in such a way that I want to be with another woman today."[69] The fluidity of gendered behavior, wearing both men's and women's clothes, taking lovers of any gender, moving between masculine and feminine expressions, is seen not as deviance, but as spiritual complexity. For Nkabinde, navigating this complexity means balancing the expectations of her family, her church, the South African state, and her ancestors. Each presents a different vision of what it means to be a woman, a healer, and a lesbian. But it is her relationship with the ancestors that offers her the most affirmation—and the most space to exist authentically. At the same time, Nkabinde is not romanticizing the past. Her story is not one of seamless acceptance. In fact, it is marked by deep pain. She recounts how members of her own community questioned her sexuality, how she feared being outed during her sangoma initiation, and how the broader society, shaped by Christian and colonial moralities, continued to treat her as a threat. "It is difficult and dangerous for black lesbians in Soweto. Lesbians are contracting HIV

because of rape. Men don't accept lesbians. They think they have to teach them a lesson by raping them."[70] Indeed, the danger is real. In one of the most wrenching sections of her autobiography, Nkabinde recalls a hate crime committed against a fellow lesbian. "Sizakele and Salome were found by a man who was jogging past a vacant plot. Both had been raped and brutally murdered. Sizakele was found with her hands tied together with her underwear and her ankles tied together with her shoelaces, with three bullet holes in her head and three in her collarbone. Sizakele was a well known out lesbian and an HIV activist working for the Positive Women's Network. Whoever murdered her and Salome, who was the mother of a one-year-old baby, knew they were lesbians."[71] These brutalities are not just acts of interpersonal violence, they are the legacies of a colonial system that marked queer Black bodies as disposable. Lugones's theory makes clear that gendered violence in post-apartheid South Africa is not new—it is historical. The colonial regime enforced gender through labor codes, domestic norms, and legal definitions that sought to discipline Black bodies and their sexuality. During apartheid, sexuality was tightly controlled through spatial governance: who could live where, who could love whom, who was allowed visibility. Many of those systems endure today. As Gunkel writes, "In 1996 South Africa became the first and only country in the world to explicitly incorporate the rights of lesbians and gay men into its constitution… However, fifteen years into democracy, the public discourse of homosexuality in South Africa still remains controversial and contested."[72] Yet Nkabinde's life is not only one of victimization—it is also one of survival, spiritual authority, and power. As a sangoma, she holds a respected position in her community, one that predates colonial systems and gestures toward alternative ways of understanding gender and sexuality. Sangomas, as Morgan and Reid observe, "negotiate a space in which same-sex sexuality becomes both a source of marginality and a site of power."[73] Nkabinde is both outsider and healer, queer and sacred.

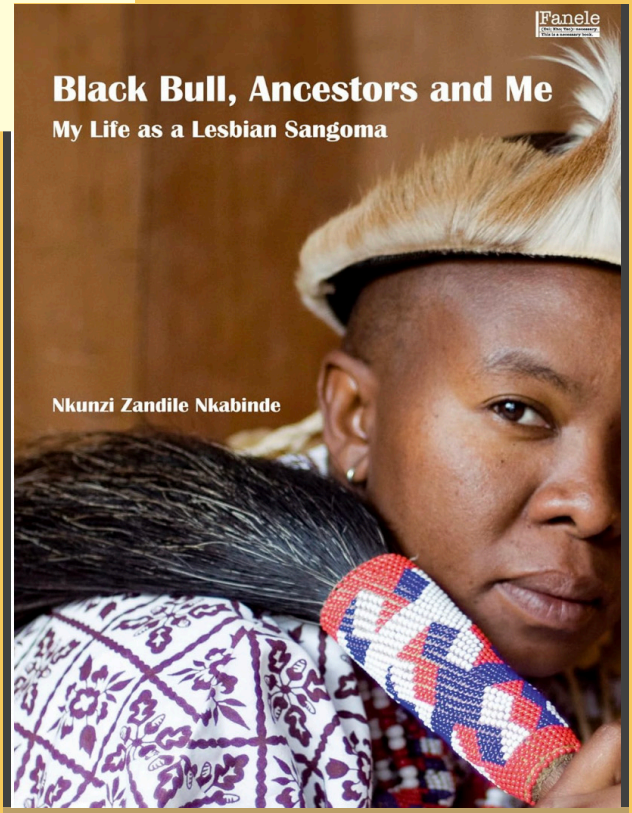

Figure 23: Image of the cover of the book, "Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma," written by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde.

POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA AND THE GHOSTS OF COLONIAL GENDER

South Africa's 1996 Constitution is often hailed as one of the most progressive in the world. For LGBTQ+ South Africans, it promised not only visibility but dignity, enshrining sexual orientation as a protected category and affirming that freedom meant the right to love, live, and exist without fear. But the law, as Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's life reveals, is not enough. In her chapter titled "Hate Crimes," Nkabinde recounts the horrors that continue to stalk queer bodies in the country's townships, such as the one referenced prior of the double rape/murder. These stories are not isolated. In fact, South Africa has become infamous for "corrective rape," a brutal and systemic form of gender-based violence aimed at lesbian women. Nkabinde's life unfolds at the intersection of these forces. As a san-

goma, she carries ancestral knowledge that affirms gender fluidity and same-sex desire. But as a lesbian in modern South Africa, she also lives under constant threat. This threat, however, is directly challenged by the active resistance of Nkabinde, who complicates and enriches the ideas of what womanhood, lesbianism, and spiritualism truly mean. Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid's research into same-sex identified sangomas supports this idea. They write, "Sangomas' construction of identity and desire shifted between that of personal agency and that of a dominant male ancestor. This required constant negotiation and encompassed elements of both the 'modern' and 'traditional'. In the case of these sangomas, same-sexuality the basis of marginality assumes a social status and becomes a source of power."[74] In other words, sangomas like Nkabinde are not simply trapped between two worlds, they are actively weaving them together. Nkabinde's autobiography illustrates this beautifully. Her narrative is not just personal, it is geopolitical. It asks: who gets to claim tradition? Who defines African culture? And who is allowed to belong? In *The Prize and the Price*, Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl expand this question to the nation itself. They write that post-apartheid South Africa must reckon with "…the invisible power of heteronormativity as the dominant ideological formation…" especially when it intersects with race, class, and tradition.[75] Nkabinde's life embodies this reckoning. She is both deeply traditional and radically queer. She performs ceremonies in rural areas and gives public talks on LGBTQ rights. Her very existence forces a conversation that many would rather avoid. This conversation is not only about rights, it is about memory. The colonial project erased entire ways of being.

ANCESTORS, EMBODIMENT, AND THE FUTURE OF GENDER

Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's story is not one of exception—it is one of exposure. Through her life, what is exposed is not just the depth of her personal strength or the complexity of her identity, but the lie of the colonial gender system itself. That system told Africans who they were and who they could not be. It dictated that men must act like men, women must behave like women, and queerness could only be an illness or a sin. It buried fluidity beneath ideology and tradition beneath dogma. But Nkabinde, dancing in both men's and women's clothes, living as a lesbian and a sangoma, breaks that spell. Maria Lugones gives us the language to name what Nkabinde lives. The modern/colonial gender system is a system of power that classifies people along axes of race, gender, and sexuality.[76] Nkabinde's life resists that logic. Her very being is impure in the best sense: hybrid, layered,

rooted in ancestral tradition but fully present in modern political struggles. She carries the weight of the colonial gender system in her body, and still, she walks. What makes Nkabinde's story so crucial is that it does not fit into the usual narrative arcs. It is not simply about pride, or trauma, or even resistance. It is about embodiment. About what it means to carry history in your bones—both the violent history of colonization and the deeper history of ancestors who speak across time. To read her autobiography is to be invited into an epistemology that does not separate spirit from flesh, past from present, identity from community. In that world, queerness is not deviance, it is vocation. And gender is not a line to follow, but a river to move through. For readers conditioned by Western binaries, this can be difficult to grasp. But that difficulty is the point. This unintelligibility is precisely what makes Nkabinde dangerous to many. She cannot be neatly categorized. She is not simply a lesbian activist, nor just a traditional healer, nor only a Zulu woman. She is all of these, and none of them fully. That is why her story matters, not because it confirms what we already know, but because it demands that we learn to read differently. To listen differently. To remember differently. And remembering is essential. For too long, African queer lives have been remembered only through violence—when they are remembered at all. Colonialism told Africans that homosexuality was foreign, that gender fluidity was abnormal, that African identity was inherently heterosexual and patriarchal. These lies were not just spoken—they were codified, preached, beaten into bodies. Undoing them requires more than legal reform or cultural tolerance. It requires a return to histories that were silenced. As *The Prize and the Price* reminds us that heteronormativity is not natural; it is manufactured. And like all systems of power, it can be unmade.[77] That is perhaps the greatest lesson of her story. Not that gender and sexuality in Africa have always been fluid, though they have. Not that colonialism distorted those realities, though it did. But that even now, in the face of violence and erasure, there are those who live otherwise. Who keep alive the memory of older ways of knowing. Who carry the ancestors not as a burden, but as a blessing. If we are to truly decolonize gender, if we are to create a world where people like Nkabinde can live without fear, then we must start by listening to stories like hers. Stories that trouble the borders of identity. Stories that remind us that the past is not behind us, but within us. Stories that, like sangoma rituals, call us to remember.

" IT IS NOT SIMPLY ABOUT PRIDE, OR TRAUMA, OR EVEN RESISTANCE. IT IS ABOUT EMBODIMENT. ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO CARRY HISTORY IN YOUR BONES—BOTH THE VIOLENT HISTORY OF COLONIZATION AND THE DEEPER HISTORY OF ANCESTORS WHO SPEAK ACROSS TIME."

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Image of the cover of the book, “Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma,” written by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde. https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/S/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/books/1328691813i/6294845.jpg

Photograph of Refiloe Letuma, an African healer. https://mg.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/5ae4c319-gogolanga_8898-1068x1140.jpg

A gay pride event held in Cape Town, South Africa https://cdn.aaihs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/shutterstock_1385514719-scaled.jpg

"Fictions of the Past" Christopher Morris

Image of Yonne Vera taken in her garden in Bulawayo, Photo taken by Eric Beauchemin, 2004. Eric Beauchemin, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Front cover of first edition of Butterfly Burning by Yvonne Vera, 1998.

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