Article

The “Closet” and “Out of the Closet” versus “Private Space” and “Public Space”: Indigenous Knowledge System as the Key to Understanding Same-Sex Sexualities in Rural Communities

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Abstract: This paper is produced from the author’s Ph.D. project on indigenous same-sex sexualities. It interrogates the way same-sex sexualities or homosexuality is understood in the West and how the Western interpretations of sexualities and genders are imposed on African rural communities. The paper argues that such Western impositions impede our understanding of same-sex relationships, and it threatens any attempt made to bring sexual orientation awareness programmes to rural areas. The study is framed on African indigenous knowledge systems to accommodate African indigenous perspectives on same-sex sexualities. This approach introduces indigenised same-sex discourse into contemporary discourses. The study was conducted in rural communities of Kwa Zulu Natal (KZN), where families of same-sex individuals (SSI) reside. The research employed a qualitative methodology that involved SSI, families, traditional and Church leaders. Triangulation methods involve individual interviews, focus groups, and workshops, this method is meant to validate research findings. The results reveal that, before Western debates on African same-sex sexualities, the idea of the “closet or out of the closet” did not exist, instead people lived a private life. Meaning, approaching sexual discourse by respecting this choice gives people of different sexualities the privacy they want, and this is regarded as a “safe place” for them.

Keywords: same-sex sexualities; rural community; indigenous knowledge; traditional healers; Western; homosexuality; ambiguous sexual identities

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1. Introduction

African same-sex sexualities have been the focus of gender scholars from the late 20th century up to the present day, and it is necessary to explore all aspects to understand the complexity of the subject. This paper explores the way same-sex sexualities are understood in the West and how non-African interpretations of sexualities and genders are imposed on African contexts, particularly in the rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal. Even though same-sex sexualities have existed in traditional communities, they had not been formally recognised by society since such relationships are not concerned with reproduction, they were and still are regarded as “fruitless in the natural order” (Lopang 2014, p. 81). Firstly, it is worth noting that in African traditions, issues of sex and sexualities are not open to discussion in public, but remain private and are a concern to those directly involved. Privacy allows groups of age to talk freely and there is assurance that sensitive information is not going to end up in the wrong hands (Tong 2010, pp. 161, 180). Time, space, and the age group are important when engaging in such issues, this is even more important for same-sex discourses. Secondly, when the discourse on same-sex sexualities began, it started in the West by the West and it ignored African cultural beliefs on gender and sexualities, whereby the subject is approached differently from the West. Thus, same-sex discourse or homosexuality is associated with Western culture and is seen as a Western imposition on African cultures. Thirdly, the fact that post-colonial and contemporary debates on gender and sexualities are Western-orientated leads to the exclusion of elders in indigenous

communities (Van Zyl 2011, p. 345). The Western approach to same-sex sexualities presents approaches that focus on: (a) Human rights, which emphasises individual rights; (b) the younger generation influenced by modern popular culture; and (c) the use of values inherent in Western analysis. All these approaches highlight methods that are inappropriate for African rural contexts. While the discourse on same-sex sexualities has been intensely debated by Western scholars, little is being discussed on African indigenous communities. These are the communities that are referred to as indigenous people and rural communities in this article. Although the term “Indigenous” is broad and complex to define, Yacoub defines it as a “group of people whose social, cultural, and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national communities, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations” (Yacoub 1998, p. 4). Picq and Tikuna, note this by arguing that

“Indigenous sexualities were never straight: ranging from cross-dressing to homo-affective families, they are as diverse as the peoples who practice them. But if native terminologies referring to same-sex practices and non-binary, fluid understandings of gender existed before the emergence of LGBT frameworks, why are indigenous experiences invisible in international sexual rights debates? Language shows that Indigenous queerness, in its contextual realities, predates the global LGBT framework”. (Picq and Tikuna 2019, p. 1)

Thus, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Western impositions and interpretations of same-sex sexualities impede our understanding of same-sex relationships in rural communities and how it ultimately undermines same-sex awareness programs in rural areas. This paper seeks to contribute to African scholarship on African indigenous same-sex sexualities, from the African author’s perspective.

The issue of the closet is a concern for Western discourse, since within this framework issues of sexualities are discussed based on individual rights and Western descriptions of sexualities. Whereas, African indigenous discourse would be more concerned with the cultural beliefs of that community, which is a communal system. To understand the meaning of “the closet” and “out of the closet”, the paper engages the argument by asking the question, what is the closet? and why do people live in a closet? In African communities, same-sex relationships are practiced secretly and are invisible in some traditional African societies. Therefore, the issue of “the closet” or being “out of the closet” is not applicable. Rather, “private space” and “public space” concepts are more applicable within this frame of reference, where private space could be regarded as a “safe space” for ordinary members of the community in same-sex relationships. Same-sex relationships practiced in the “public space” are privileged to specific groups within specific contexts, e.g., *izangoma* (Mkasi 2016, p. 3). The issue of “the closet” or “out of the closet” relates more to modernised communities than rural communities. If one decides to openly practice same-sex sexualities in a rural community, a person risks losing a family, relatives, friends, and community membership.

2. The Background of the Study

Homosexuality or same-sex sexualities are not a new phenomenon, even in traditional communities. There are a few relationships where it is visible, although it is still considered taboo, people have decided to keep quiet. The silence is not about the subject being taboo, but the fact that people are aware that there are same-sex rights, so they do not have a choice but to comply with the South African Bill of Rights. This paper draws from the author’s masters and Ph.D. dissertations, on indigenous same-sex sexualities. The research began in 2013 where the author was investigating same-sex relationships amongst women traditional healers. The research intended to find the reasons behind the denial of homosexuality as Un-African. The study was conducted amongst traditional healers (*izangoma*), who were identified based on the belief that traditional healers are archives of indigenous knowledge and are the leaders in local communities. As the researcher, I assumed that if *izangoma* practices same-sex relationships, that means the denial of same-

sex relationships is a wall preventing researchers from digging into the subject. Indeed, the findings of the study highlighted that traditional healers are involved in same-sex relationships, and the results confirmed the existence of same-sex practices. The study also revealed that denial of the subject is due to the fact that the discourse around the subject is often wrapped in the Western worldview. The study was conducted in 2013, after which debates on same-sex sexualities started to heat up. People were invited on various platforms to voice their views on same-sex sexualities, in newspapers, on other media platforms, and almost all SABC stations in South Africa. The challenge of these discourses is that they did not include elderly people and traditional leaders of indigenous communities, and they were also not interested in talking about it.

Firstly, the problem with same-sex discourse is that it is not openly discussed in African indigenous communities. In addition to the fact that sexualities are not a public issue, this discourse does not fit the traditional system that guides/governs people located in rural communities. Secondly, the same-sex discourses that exist are framed in the Western worldview, therefore they are more Westernised than Africanised. These Westernised discourses often take place in institutions of higher learning, in big cities and urban areas, and in places dominated by Western culture. It seems to be an academic or a modern Westernised discourse. The documented work and literature produced on the subject are easily accessible to the elite group, not the public or the grassroots people. Even the debates that are broadcasted in the media often present the subject in Western standards in terms of language, terminology, and lifestyle (Kahn-Fogel 2013, p. 316 and Picq and Tikuna 2019, p. 3). Moreover, same-sex practices are presented as homosexual identity, presented in concepts that are coined from and by the West (Wingfield 1995, p. 470). Such concepts only highlight the same-sex sexualities discourse as that which is a concern with identity (sexual identity or political identity). Discourses and presentations are completely based on Western culture, which promotes a modern lifestyle and individualistic approach, with no consideration of African traditional beliefs. As a result, ordinary people with little or no formal education simply ignore such debates as they make no sense to them, they perceive homosexuality discourse as Western attempts to introduce same-sex practices to African people. Thus, African communities keep denying homosexuality as it is seen as a Western imposition on African culture (Kahn-Fogel 2013, p. 317).

3. Research Methodology

The research employed a qualitative methodology to collect data, the benefit of qualitative research is that it supports various ways of data collection such as interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and workshops (Simon 2011, p. 1).

The sample of this study was selected through recruitment workshops and from a previous Masters study. The study intended to focus on women in same-sex relationships, but male traditional leaders were also included as they presented to be free to discuss matters of sexualities compared to women. All the participants were invited to the first workshop where the researcher explained the purpose of the study, this included parents, community leaders, and LGBTIQ + individuals. I conducted eleven individual interviews, four group interviews, and three informal interviews which were more conversational than interviews. These interviews involved two parents, two traditional leaders, two AIC leaders, two chiefs, one teacher, one policeman, one policewoman, one social worker, and one Home Affairs manager. Apart from same-sex individuals and their families, other participants were recruited to determine if there were programs in their workplace that provided adequate information on same-sex identities as that would determine how they treat such individuals. The researcher selected rural SSIs who have disclosed their sexual identity to their families. The reason for targeting rural communities was that the people who stay in these areas still live a traditional lifestyle, they are mostly traditionalists who value their traditions and still participate in Zulu cultural practices.

The consent forms were used for participants to sign for voluntary participation and other ethics protocols. The intention of the consent form was verbally explained in the

local language isiZulu, since some of the participants were not fully literate. Since the study promotes the use of indigenous language, it forms part of the indigenous knowledge systems, and is imperative for this research (Ilutsik 2001). The study further adopted an unstructured open-ended questionnaire for both individual interviews and group interviews. Open-ended questionnaires promoted a free flow of conversation and encouraged the participants to express their views openly (Denscombe 2007, p. 166).

Validity and Credibility of the Study

The study adopted purposive sampling, which is used to study a difficult population such as same-sex individuals. Participants identifying with same-sex sexualities are not easy to target as they are always cautious of whom they invite in their spaces. This is due to the discrimination, and the violence they always face in their daily lives, hence they do not trust easily. Adopting purposive sampling worked as an advantage for this study since the researcher selected individuals who confirmed that they are involved in same-sex relationships and are open about their relationships. This means participants that were selected benefitted the study as the best knowledge-producing participants.

Since the study adopts qualitative research, measuring the validity of the study can be a challenge, particularly because measuring human experiences is problematic as people's behaviour and experiences change over time (Stenbacka 2001, p. 551). To overcome such challenges, the researcher adopted triangulation methods, which enable various ways of data collection. This is the most used method in qualitative research, it allows the researcher to compare data collected from the individual interviews, focus groups, and workshops. This method further allows the researcher to compare findings, which in the end confirms the reliability of the study. The researcher also created more room for validation by selecting participants who were part of the previous study, thus were aware of the nature of the study. Selecting participants who understand the subject informed the researcher even further and working with participants in open relationships allows them to participate in individual interviews, group interviews, and workshops (Creswell 2014, p. 118). This meant that the study could compare findings gained from all three forms of data collection. As Olsen mentions, "triangulation means mixing approaches to get two or more three viewpoints upon things being studied" (Olsen 2004, p. 4). Furthermore, the researcher plays a critical role in the validity process, since they authenticate the information from the public as the researcher also has a personal experience in indigenous same-sex sexuality. The data collecting also involved using a voice recorder. To further enhance the researched field, the researcher used the notebook to capture the participant's body reactions, and body expressions as they participated (Sinomlando 2006, p. 7). Finally, the tools of thematic analysis to analyse data collected from the field were also adopted.

4. Theoretical Framework

Several African scholars have begun to research same-sex sexualities within indigenous knowledge systems, and this issue is slowly finding its place in academia. The research focused on scholars such as Tamale (2011); Chilisa (2012); and Smith (1999). This approach to the study helped the author understand sexualities and same-sex practices within an African context. It has also provided a space where the issue is addressed within the level of the participants, which is the people at grass root level in African communities. The above-mentioned scholars use African indigenous knowledge systems to tackle the African phenomenon. However, Chilisa emphasises that the indigenous phenomenon requires proper research tools that would not contradict indigenous belief systems. She suggests that to give voice to historically silenced indigenous perspectives, researchers should use indigenous knowledge systems and a post-colonial indigenous research paradigm. This framework decolonises Western knowledge systems which dominate the research space (Chilisa 2012, p. 2). For this work, knowledge produced on African indigenous same-sex sexualities must speak to the experiences of indigenous people in rural communities. Thus, this framework is suitable for this research, in which by adopting this framework, same-sex

individuals have been able to tell their own stories rather than assuming Western and urban same-sex individual's experiences. This work closes the gap that has been identified by van Zyl which proposed that

“a theoretical framework should be developed to “(re)indigenize” Africa which should include principles of interdependence, participation and sharing, and in particular, to locate same-sex families within contemporary kinships systems”. (Van Zyl 2011, p. 355)

Van Zyl made this call at a time when literature on African same-sex sexualities was lacking, specifically the work that focused on the experiences of rural women. Most African scholars during this period were still very reluctant to explore same-sex-related topics. Even the research methods to conduct indigenous same-sexualities were a problem but through Chilisa's work, researchers are provided with an opportunity to rewrite same-sex narratives from an African indigenous perspective. Deconstruction and reconstruction strategies call for correcting the incorrect documentation of African stories of same-sex sexualities. As Chilisa highlights, distortion of people's life experiences, negative labels, and deficit theorizing is reflected in the contemporary discourse which is exclusive of indigenised same-sex sexualities (Chilisa 2012, p. 17). Chilisa cautions researchers with regards to sensitivity when examining African problems. The same-sex individual's stories have been analysed by outsiders in such a way that the owners of the stories have eventually adopted the outsider's interpretation of who they are, thus some have identified with terms such as *LGBTIQ*. The generalised truth has become a universal truth, nonetheless, in consideration that culture is not stagnant and there is a need for cultural transformation. Thus, Chilisa calls this transformation the third space. The space that Chilisa argues for is found in the intersection of urban same-sex individuals and rural same-sex individuals, which is where traditional meets the modernised and the West meets the African, and as a result of the third space allows the past to meet the present and the future (Chilisa 2012, pp. 20–21).

Another relevant scholar that greatly contributed to this work is Linda Smith whose work focuses on knowledge production. She points out that the Western ways of acquiring knowledge are not free from Western colonisation. Smith further points out that the Western way of producing and acquiring knowledge depends on the term “research”, which in the African indigenous context is the term that steers up silence (Smith 1999, p. 1). This has been the case with same-sex practices in African communities, most people do not want to talk about same-sex relationships and such related topics. Unfortunately, silence and secrecy in African sexualities have always been questioned by Human Rights advocates and Western researchers who often suspect that secrecy is intended to hide harmful sexual practices (Msuny 2020, p. 57). We cannot deny that some African sexual practices pose a threat to human life but there is a tendency for the West to want to know the deepest secrets of African traditions. Smith gives illustrations of how this began, she speaks of imperialism as a process that was intended to destroy African culture, religion, and Being. The imperialism was portrayed to Africans as civilization, whereas the real agenda was “discovery, conquest, exploitation, distribution, and appropriation” (Smith 1999, p. 58). Smith argues that colonisation was a specific form through which the West came to “see”, “name”, and “know” indigenous communities (Smith 1999, p. 60). This resulted in African individuals' names being changed to English names to suit the Western culture. This applies to African indigenous concepts that are used to refer to same-sex individuals, concepts such as *uNgqingili*, *iNkonkoni*, *uNcukumbili*, and *isitabane*. These terms are no longer used but frowned upon as such names are assumed to be derogative or discriminative. The vanishing of these terms demonstrates how the degradation of African knowledge occurred and still impacts the use of African indigenous terms (Sithole 2019, p. 75).

The contemporary same-sex individual, particularly in urban settings, prefers to use English terms such as *LGBTIQ* since these were the terms they were introduced to and encouraged to adopt. While researchers working in this field are compelled to use Western languages such as English, they must translate certain concepts, even though the translation

is not good enough to capture the meaning or exhaustively describe the context (Smith 1999, p. 36).

5. Literature Review

While same-sex practices have existed in African communities, they have not been a center of attention but over the past few years, it has become a popular topic. It is the most debated issue in the field of gender and sexualities. The following scholars are the few whose work contributed greatly to the subject. Nkabinde (2008); Matebeni (2011); Van Zyl (2011); Nell and Shapiro (2011); Rudwick (2011); Msibi (2014); Lopang (2014).

5.1. Lack of Indigenous Perspective on African Same-Sex Sexualities

Regardless of the number of theories and knowledge produced around the subject, it has not yet benefitted African indigenous communities. Instead, the research centers, the states, and the institutions of higher learning receive recognition more than the researched communities. Indigenous scholars around the world detest this tendency. Scholars such as Smith emphasised that “first beneficiaries of indigenous knowledge must be direct indigenous descendants of that knowledge” (Smith 1999, p. 118). However, indigenous people, as owners of knowledge, have lost this privilege due to the oral tradition. Documenting and writing their history was not part of the culture, and this was a gap in indigenous knowledge systems. A gap that created an opportunity for non-indigenous people to record sensitive information and have access to sacred knowledge, much of which has been inaccurately interpreted (Tamale 2011, p. 14). Since ancient times, indigenous communities have depended on oral tradition, which includes storytelling. This method was used to pass knowledge to future generations. Proverbs and sayings were included in stories to conceal sensitive information from the children, the same methods were used in the events when there were outsiders present, to protect the information. Furthermore, the age and the historical background of the storyteller also contributed to the density of the story. Considering these facts, stories of same-sex sexualities should have been documented and interpreted by the storytellers (Smith 1999, p. 36). However, it did not happen, instead, non-Africans took the initiative which resulted in various problems, as mentioned above. Activists, researchers or writers on same-sex sexualities should put their ears on the ground and listen to people. Currently, they are not reaching a wider community nor do they use indigenous concepts when they talk about this issue. The worldview of indigenous people is not adequately represented, and this brings complexity and confusion to African same-sex sexualities.

5.2. The Impact of Western Discourses on Same-Sexualities

We cannot ignore the fact that Western discourse has produced enough literature for researchers who work in this area, but existing knowledge is un-African. It is more appropriate for researchers, researching in Western contexts, not in indigenous contexts (Chilisa 2012, p. 7). Therefore, there is a shortage of literature on African indigenous perspectives. Even African scholars working in the field of gender and sexualities adopt Western frameworks and paradigms in analysing African same-sex sexualities, as they also were taught in Western institutions. The general view on the absence of African literature in this subject is that it has been taken for granted (Tamale 2011, p. 2). Another reason could be that it has been purposely avoided since African scholars themselves are not exempted from the culture of silence. Same-sex sexualities are a complex issue to investigate even for insider researchers due to its nature of secrecy (Tamale 2011, p. 12). It is further noted that African scholars who have been part of the discourse do not focus only on African indigenous same-sex sexualities or gender ambiguity, but rather, their arguments are often wrapped around issues of human rights and HIV and AIDS. To emphasise this problem, Picq and Tikuna point out that “today, Indigenous peoples often utilise the global sexual rights framework for self-representation and rights claims” (Picq and Tikuna 2019, p. 4). Whereas, a human rights approach diverts the focus from same-sex sexualities, it takes

away the opportunity for this subject to be discussed independently, any homosexual issue eventually becomes a human rights issue. Even same-sex individuals are concerned that the issue is always associated with rights, and underage SSIs demand acceptance since they have rights. T12G4P2 expresses his concern about this as he argues that

“this situation could be looked at in two ways, we think we have rights, and we forget that our parents have rights too, in fact, we are infringing on their rights, and they did not want to come out. You take away their rights and put yours first. What is more painful is that there is nothing our parents can do because we are already here, they cannot throw us away. They do not freely accept us, but they are pressurised because we have rights (T12GP2, 2018)”.

Since rights are always entangled with issues of sexualities, this issue also deserves a discourse that solely focuses on it. Nonetheless, there are a few scholars who have indigenised same-sex sexualities, these include [Msibi \(2014\)](#); [Matebeni \(2011, 2012\)](#); and [Mkasi \(2013\)](#). Matebeni is one of the few African writers who aims to address the issue of African same-sex sexuality. In 2012, she wrote an article entitled ‘Queer (ing) porn-Conversation’, the article introduces a controversial topic, porn conversation and this is one of the topics that is considered to be a private conversations in African communities. However, this indicates that independent discourses on same-sex sexualities is developing.

More confusion comes from African feminists who emphasise that African women should challenge the culture of silence when discussing sexualities, something they have not been able to do themselves ([Mkhize 2019](#), p. 10). If African feminists were to challenge the culture of silence in African communities, they would need to understand the logic of silence in same-sexualities, which will provide them with an insider perspective. The challenge facing most African feminist scholars in the field of gender and sexualities is the lack of indigenous framed methods of analysing data, which has given Western scholars a chance to theorise and analyse African same-sex sexualities without being challenged. Nevertheless, something good has come out of this. Western researchers have opened doors for African scholars to face the reality and identify the gap left by Western scholars in this field. Thus, Chilisa suggests the integration of knowledge, which she sees as useful in strengthening other systems of knowledge such as indigenous ways of knowing in academia ([Chilisa 2012](#), p. 25). Having highlighted problems with Western-oriented scholarship on African same-sex discourses, the question remains, how do we produce accurate knowledge on the subject?

6. Study Results

6.1. Appropriating Research Tools for Indigenous Communities

The study pointed out that, there is a need to use appropriate research tools when investigating indigenous same-sex sexualities and this can be achieved by tackling the issue from the rural people’s perspective. More importantly, to scrutinise methodologies used to collect and analyse data on this subject. Students and researchers such as myself who are researching African same-sex sexualities in indigenous communities experience problems due to a lack of proper research tools ([Smith 1999](#), p. 135). During the research process, such researchers are forced to adopt foreign tools, which lead them in adopting foreign concepts to describe the local phenomenon. In the Zulu society, terms such as *Uncukumbili*, *Inkonkoni*, *UNgingili*, and *Isitabane* are used to refer to same-sex individuals. However, they are not often used since they are seen as discriminating terms. Whereas, when young same-sex individuals do not take their history seriously, they will lose a lot. The historical background of indigenous same-sex sexualities demonstrates a deep analysis of these terms. They are giving away an opportunity of self-identification and self-naming, which [Hudson-Weems \(2004\)](#) speaks of, that Africans are self-namers. Terms such as *Inkonkoni* have a deeper meaning although the terms refer to an animal known as a Wildebeest. The African indigenous perspective gives a much deeper analysis of the character of this animal. The *Inkonkoni* tails are associated with the divination power possessed by traditional healers. However, this discussion is explained in detail in the

author's forthcoming Ph.D. study (Khuzwayo Magwaza 2021, p. 122). This analysis could indicate to the Zulu same-sex individuals that there is rich knowledge rooted in the term *Inkonkoni* than what it is portrayed to be. Often African naming has secreted wisdom knowledge that could only be revealed when one is keen to seek such knowledge. Thus, African same-sex individuals need to go back to their history to find out who they are so that they can define themselves (Hudson-Weems 2001, p. 68). T5 is lucky since she understands why she identifies with *Inkonkoni* as she states below

"I prefer being called *Inkonkoni*, if you call me *Inkonkoni* I will respond better because that is how I understand myself. That makes me happy because the sexualities of wildebeests are ambiguous".

If same-sex individuals such as T5 want to be called *Inkonkoni* and do not see the term as being derogative, this means that analysing African indigenous same-sex sexualities differ from Western analysis. Moreover, this indicates that a broader understanding of these terms, will yield good results (Msibi 2014, p. 157).

It is clear from the above discussion that there is some secret knowledge in some of the African indigenous terms. As mentioned above, the problem of Western research frameworks is that they do not incorporate the cultural values and beliefs of indigenous communities in their designs, methods, and analyses (Lavallée 2009, p. 23). Ancestral knowledge is one of the important aspects of African culture that has kept indigenous communities intact with their culture from generation to generation, and is considered to carry sacred knowledge (Bernard 2003, p. 149). The researcher needs to respect the beliefs of the researched since indigenous knowledge is often interwoven with ancestral knowledge. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand the role played by the non-living to the lives of the living (Bredlid 2009, p. 141). Understanding this aspect of acquiring knowledge is imperative as it enables one to fully connect with the researched community. Current knowledge on African same-sex sexualities needs to be scrutinised within indigenous paradigms. Precisely, since this practice negatively impacts the social organisation of indigenous communities (Moseley 2004, p. 195).

6.2. Secrecy as a Tool to Avoid Family Division

The study further proved that the use of the indigenous knowledge systems, on African same-sex sexualities, allows reinvestigation, reinterpretation, and representation of same-sex practices in ways that allow the inclusion of indigenous views. This allowed participation at the grassroots level to witness same-sex practices in their communities, including families and parents (Gouws 2013, p. 45). They have been provided with a platform that allows them to tell their side of the story rather than outsiders trying to impose their descriptions of what same-sex sexualities are in African societies. One of the participants, expressed their feelings as follows

"all these names (LGBTIQ), make no sense to me, I do not fall under that umbrella. The problem is, we allow people to tell us who we are".

The statement above demonstrates that few same-sex individuals are not willing to identify with Western terms, as they are aware that African indigenous terms exist. Although African terms are not used with confidence due to the secrecy of the practice, they know that they exist. This calls for elders' intervention as most elders in each family possess knowledge that could benefit researchers working in this field. However, this is not enough, it further requires an indigenous knowledge framework that emphasises respect, which is in line with ethical standards of indigenous communities (Chilisa 2012, p. 19). As research produces more knowledge on same-sex sexualities, that knowledge should not contain disrespectful features that impact African sexualities. Traditionalists have always kept the issue of same-sex sexualities under the carpet, it is a private matter for maintenance of the social order, and such practices were an individual matter, not a public matter. Contrary to this view, the secrecy of same-sex sexualities has been harshly questioned by Western

scholars, but not many have examined the logic behind it. Tong explains why African communities believe in secrecy. She says

“secrecy provides a form of protection that may either already be part of an existing custom, for example where certain sacred rites or practices are known only to certain members of the community; or it may be an external protective mechanism in response to the threat of misappropriation by non-members”. (Tong 2010, p. 161)

To concur with this statement, one participant provides evidence that traditional leaders still believe that secrecy is a protective strategy for same-sex individuals. T4, who is a traditional leader, confirms this by saying

“traditional life protected them, this would be a family matter, there was nothing that could happen to a person because the family was there. The problem started when they wanted to come out, then things got bad. This “THING” has been around for a while, it is just that it was kept a secret; you find it even in the Church, infamous denominations, what’s important is that they need to control “THIS THING.” This “THING” was hidden, to an extent that nobody knows about it, it was hidden from the society” (2018).

Even the fact that the participant is referring to the practices as this THING was another way of concealing the discussion. It is not only this particular participant who talks about this THING, even in the community, as well as some members of SSI families. Silence or secrecy plays an important role in family matters, concealing issues that are perceived to be a disgrace or that would divide the family, and same-sex sexualities were and still are one such practice. It seems that secrecy on same-sex practice is contemporary, Epprecht and Nyeck argues that same-sex practices were noted in South African communities before colonization. In the 1920s, South African prisoners were first recorded as being involved in same-sex relationships (Epprecht and Nyeck 2013, p. 53).

Even in heterosexual societies, secrecy has kept the family together, as in a case where a man cannot have children, to protect his image, elders would talk to his brother to secretly plant the seed (impregnate her) to the wife without the knowledge of the husband, and this was treated as a grave family secret. This is well demonstrated in the current TV drama known as *Imbewu, TV Drama* (n.d.) on e-TV. As much as the husband would be greatly disturbed by the decision, keeping the family together is more important than the individual’s emotions. The belief in family continuation is the priority, therefore such secrets have much value as they are perceived to yield positive results.

The study further revealed that practices that are not productive, such as same-sex sexualities, were ignored but still left to exist if they did not interfere with the traditional social order. This means that African people have been aware of same-sex sexualities but have not considered it a social concern that required social recognition (Dlamini 2006, p. 13). The study shows that one of the reasons why same-sex sexualities were ignored and not taken seriously is that the practices were assumed to be temporary, perceived as something only occurring in the absence of the opposite gender. Often people in same-sex practices may either be in heterosexual marriages or later in life will eventually get married. Participant (NTP17) has been involved in same-sex relationships for quite some time, she decided to go back to her male partner and became pregnant. However, even after the pregnancy, she indicated that she was happy in her same-sex relationships, and she would go back to a same-sex relationship anytime if she had to since she has experienced compassionate love. However, this tendency of moving in between heterosexuality and same-sex sexualities is not supported by many participants, both those in same-sex relationships and those who are not. The reason behind not supporting this movement is that this tendency gives hope to parents who think this is just a phase. As a result, people do not look at same-sex sexualities as an identity but a behaviour that could change at any time. This fluidity in same-sex sexualities brings confusion, such that silence

or a closeted life in indigenous communities is a viable option, to minimise the disgrace in the family (Bertone and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2014, p. 8).

It is further noted that in African indigenous communities, gender identity determines one's sexuality and there is nothing in between. If there are sexual-related issues to be tabled, they are either about male or female. There is no space for same-sex discourse as this is treated as a private issue. These are practices that are treated as taboo, so questioning these communities about same-sex identities would be seen as being disrespectful since these are private issues. If such people exist in the community, that is an internal matter (Tamale 2011, p. 12). Contrary to the African view on this matter is the Western view, which believes that concealment of same-sex sexualities is not going to help the families and the community deal with the challenges of same-sex sexualities. Thus, indigenous communities are selective of who comes to their communities, especially Western researchers. African communities perceive Western research as something that interferes with people's private space and taboo cultural practices. In the African indigenous worldview, some things are better left unknown and unsaid. Smith argued that "the word research itself is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world vocabulary" (Smith 1999, p. 1). However, in the West, research is about acquiring new knowledge and exploring the unknown. Western ways of acquiring knowledge have disrespected African indigenous cultures. Researchers and explorers have entered spaces that are regarded as sacred by the locals and most researchers have been supported by the government. As a result, communities prefer to continue with the practice of secrecy to protect the community from possible harm that may come due to sacred information falling into the wrong hands. Fortunately, indigenous researchers such as Chilisa Bagele are challenging the space and they are coming up with research tools that are appropriate for indigenous communities. This will allow the participants to use their indigenous language which will enable them to accurately tell and interpret their stories on their terms. Chilisa emphasises the importance of indigenous research when she says

"it is context-sensitive and creates locally relevant constructs, methods, and theories derived from local experiences and indigenous knowledge". (Chilisa 2012, p. 13)

6.3. Ambiguous Sexual Identities and Religious System of the Zulu Communities

The findings of the study indicated other non-normative behaviour and ambiguous sexualities which are found in traditional communities, but also concealed as they are categorised as abnormal identities. Amongst the ambiguous sexual identities, people known as Intersex are known to exist in traditional communities, as well as "two spirits people", also known as transgender people amongst whom are *izangoma* (traditional healers). *Izangoma*, play three crucial roles in traditional communities, they are traditional healers, traditional leaders, and religious leaders in African Traditional Religion, which form part of the Zulu traditional belief systems. In African Traditional Religion, communication with ancestors is important as they are seen as mediators and messengers between people in the physical world and the Supreme Being known as God in the spirit world. The Supreme Being is believed to be in control of both the physical and the spirit world, therefore he is powerful. As a result, *Izangoma* are respected in this religion for their ability to communicate with the ancestors (Chidester 2008, p. 149).

This study indicates that although most religions deny the existence of homosexuality, particularly the Christian religion, one cannot shy away from the knowledge that African Traditional Religion and African culture acknowledge the existence of ambiguous sexual identities, even though the actual practice is not promoted. Sometimes cultural practices such as virginity testing become a hideout for those who do not want to engage in heterosexual relationships. At times, virginity testing spaces could be considered as safe spaces since girls who decide to keep their virginity for a lifetime could participate in this practice for life. While, on the other hand, she would want to engage in a same-sex relationship but

due to heteronormativity beliefs would choose not to practice. This became clear as one of the participants shared her narrative as follows

“I remember back at home, when I was growing up and not knowing who I was (Sexual identity), there was a girl I knew. This girl was a known virgin in the whole village, she was respected for that. Even when we have cultural rituals, you would see her dancing with a stick and the way she would dance, even men were afraid of her. She would wear her regalia which shows that she is a virgin, people of the village would always ask as to why this girl wasn’t choosing a marriage partner. There were rumors that she was dating other girls. At that time people did not know about same-sex relationships, so she was famous for being a virgin who was abstaining from sex” (T15, 2018).

Since the girl was participating in virginity testing, she was not interested in men, and she probably did not understand her sexuality at that time. She was suspected that she was dating other girls but she was not discriminated against it since she lived in her community. Picq and Tikuna argue that “sexual discrimination was brought in by a vogue of evangelical religions. Our ancestors experienced people living homo-affective lives but never interpreted it as something malicious, it is religion that came to interfere with our culture trying to evangelise us”. Churches introduced lesbianism as a forbidden love (Picq and Tikuna 2019, p. 5). Firstly, the explanation of ambiguous sexual identities amongst *izangoma* or in traditional healing spaces is interpreted as the result of spirit possession that crosses gender boundaries. This is normal and known in the traditional healing community but is not a matter open for discussion to outsiders. It can only be discussed by *izangoma* in a specific healing context, most likely such a discussion would take place in initiation schools (Nkabinde 2008, p. 110). Second, for individuals born with ambiguous genital organs, their existence or identity is not a public debate but a family matter. These individuals are not visible, they are intentionally hidden from society since such people do not fit a traditional gender category. Hence, they are perceived as abnormal (Mkasi 2013, p. 28).

Moreover, abnormality associated with sexualities conflicts with traditional beliefs of reproduction, which is valued in African societies. As much as these individuals are part of society, belonging in the community is hindered by their ambiguous sexualities. Therefore, parents who give birth to such children hide them from the community. This results in low self-esteem, which perpetuates the culture of silence as they feel ashamed of themselves. Therefore, people of different sexualities exist in these communities, but their relationships are private for their peace of mind, if it is not known, then they live a normal life. This section demonstrates that indigenous communities have different sexualities, but these have not been labelled as in Western discourse, since labelling and giving them a specific identity was not important (Rudwick 2011, p. 94).

6.4. In and Out of the Closet vs. Private and Public

Suspensions of homosexual behaviour, as those with ambiguous sexual identities, have always existed but no one could openly discriminate against such individuals. African communities have lived with same-sex individuals for a long time, people who have never been in heterosexual relationships, but they were not questioned about their sexual life (Mkasi 2013). T4, a Chief in one of the villages where the research was conducted, refutes the assumption that same-sex individuals are discriminated against in rural communities, he argues against this by saying “I do not remember any girl from this village dating another girl and then being abused” (T4 2018).

In traditional communities, a fully mature young woman was given a hut called *ilawu* where she could bring *isoka* (boyfriend) Such an arrangement would give the girl some privacy if that space is used responsibly and with respect. Parents are not directly involved in the children’s sexual life, since there are female leaders known as *amaqhikiza* in the community who are assigned for such a transition (Buthelezi 2006, p. 5). Therefore, love affairs and sexual lives are a private business and kept secret from the parents. Buthelezi confirms the issue of respect in matters of sexualities when he says.

Two young people who had a love relationship could visit each other and spend a night together in a practice called *ukuqhettha* (romantic evening). Ensuring that the woman's parents and brothers do not see him, in the evening the young man would arrive in the woman's homestead (p. 5) This privacy and sexual freedom were available for young girls to learn from their experiences, and they were trusted to be responsible for their actions.

On the note of respect, people could not openly talk about another person's sexuality. Even though some individuals were suspected to be involved in a same-sex relationship, it was not easy to point at someone and accuse them of such behaviour unless they were caught in the act. According to traditional laws, if one is accused of practicing same-sex and that accusation is verbally expressed, the accused can report that person to *induna* (Chief), which may cost the family of the accuser a cow or a goat. Therefore, the traditional lifestyle kept them safe from social discrimination and sexual violence (Nell and Shapiro 2011, p. 24). When one thinks of the above-mentioned practices of living a private life from the Western perspective living such a private life, it is often referred to as "living in a closet". In this instance, I refer to it as "private space", which is also a safe space for traditional ordinary (not *izangoma*) people in same-sex sexualities. The fact that traditional societies have kept the issue of same-sex sexuality a secret and did not give it social recognition, has allowed same-sex individuals to have their own "private space".

Contradictory to the African view of private space as a safe space, Berlant and Warner (2002, p. 551) (may her soul rest in peace) argue against privatisation of same-sex sexualities, whereby Gay communities are removed from the public. When the government passed the new zoning law in October 1995 in New York City, the law took away the freedom of association from same-sex individuals and placed them in dangerous secluded areas. They further argue that this was also another way of promoting heteronormativity, which privileges heterosexuality while undermining other sexualities. This tendency is not unique to Western countries but also in Africa, the tendency of protecting heterosexuality is visible everywhere. Although the privatisation of same-sex sexualities posed a danger to New York SSIs in the African context, it is a way of protecting them. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the element of heteronormativity is always there in European countries and Africa. The tendency of privileging heterosexuality over homosexuality is problematic since in protecting one group the other group is oppressed (Berlant and Warner 2002, p. 554). There are two issues highlighted in this discussion, the problem of normalising heterosexuality while oppressing none normative sexualities. Nonetheless, African communities seem to have their ways of protecting their own private space, which is considered to be a safe space for those who prefer such a life (Mkasi 2016, p. 5).

Even though privatisation of same-sex practice did not always yield good results, traditional leadership has always used it as a preventative strategy to avoid the spread of unfamiliar behaviours or abnormalities. In their worldview, privatisation of this minority group such as same-sex identities meant protecting the majority and this has always been the case in any circumstances. They kept these sexualities as secretive as possible, even though they could not keep them a secret forever as it has happened with contemporary sexualities, but issues of sexualities were approached with respect and accountability. Timing was everything, when the time comes to reveal such sensitive issues, elders new how and who would be appropriate to handle such issues. They would identify people or someone who has the experience and is known to have the wisdom to transfer such knowledge (Hill and Wilkinson 2014, p. 179). The elders also cautiously look at the aspect of time, age, and gender. Traditional pedagogies emphasise that knowledge should be shared following age, as some information is not relevant to certain age groups, in some cases, it could do more harm than good. Timing is also considered as an important aspect in child upbringing in African traditional societies, particularly the teenage stage where critical self-searching occurs. Due to curiosity and experimental behaviour at the teenage stage, elders do not promote public debates on same-sex sexualities as this would perpetuate same-sex behaviour (Butler and Astbury 2005, p. 7).

It is further noted that a human rights approach interferes with traditional approaches to child upbringing. If the Bill of Rights protects children's sexual rights, which includes the right to sexual preference, that would mean children can choose a homosexual life. From the African indigenous point of view, children's rights and woman's rights are not standalone aspects, but both women and children are cherished and given their place in the community. Domestic issues in African families are left in the hands of elders of the family and go through recognised traditional channels, depending on the complexity of the issue. Reporting domestic issues to outsiders is frowned upon and complicates things to such an extent that it could split the family. Therefore, same-sex rights could be enforcing a Western lifestyle on Africans and seen as denouncing African traditions and religious beliefs on sex and sexualities. However, a transformation that is claimed to be brought by the Constitution should value people's traditions and should implement inclusive change which gives people a sense of belonging (Gouws 2013, pp. 45–48). Changes such as legalisation of same-sex sexualities are a major change for traditional communities, and they deserve more time to transition to that stage. Therefore, this is the context where the reader should understand the secrecy of same-sex sexualities in African communities. According to indigenous communities, private space is known as living in the closet, is considered to be a safe space. While public space is which known as living out of the closet, poses a danger to the lives of SSI and therefore, public spaces could not be a safe space.

7. Conclusions

The article demonstrates that secrecy has been used as a protective strategy for same-sex sexualities, even though it does lead to the invisibility of ambiguous sexualities. Since it is hidden, therefore, it does not exist. In this situation, the relevancy of "the closet" or "out of the closet" is not clear since the issue is not discussed at all. First, this discussion would require full recognition of the practice. Thereafter, the discussion on same-sexualities could begin, a discussion that would be framed in indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being. This would be a discourse that ensures the space of same-sex sexualities in traditional structures. Currently, whether one is in or out is not important, this would be a second phase of the debate. Therefore, it is difficult to take the debate to the next level while it has not yet begun. Furthermore, to understand the meaning of "the closet" and "out of the closet", one must understand the Western configuring of these terms: Why do people live in a closet, and what is the closet? It would not make any sense in this context, living out or in is not a public concern but an individual decision that has nothing to do with a group. More importantly, it is one's decision that cannot be taken on behalf of a person, but is a self-made decision since it comes with a lot of responsibilities.

More importantly, a person must consider what one stands to lose or gain by living out or in the closet since there are consequences. There are individuals in traditional families who have decided to take advantage of the Bill of Rights and have openly exercised their sexual rights. In this process, they were evicted from their homes and disowned by their families, which led them to move to urban settings in search of work (Nell and Shapiro 2011, p. 13). Amongst them, some were not ready to be independent and could not provide for themselves. Most of them today are homeless and have dropped out of school. Those who get the opportunity to build their future are faced with several problems, they are financially unstable, discriminated against by students and teachers at school, and they go through all these challenges alone, without family support (Nell and Shapiro 2011, p. 26). Such incidents show that often people appeal to human rights without being responsible and they do not think of the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, the Constitution is not a person but a document that requires one to act responsibly. This means individuals who have a different sexual identity need to weigh options as to whether being "in the closet" or "out of the closet" is a matter of urgency or not. They need to choose what is important at that time, between their families and their sexualities. This leads to the issue of timing which is highlighted above. The question is, have the campaigns made by human rights activists and LGBTIQ organisations to encourage young people to live

“out of the closet” made provisions for sheltering, feeding or giving these individuals a better education? Or are they just another statistic to validate research on *LGBTIQ*? (Holland-Muter 2012, pp. 2–7).

Towards the end of the study, it was clear that traditional societies provide “private space” for same-sex individuals, but there is also a possibility to provide “public space” if given an opportunity. However, the following should take place, the Government departments and NPOs which should provide training and awareness workshops and awareness programmes on changes taking place in the new South Africa, should take these initiatives to indigenous communities. They should take people through transformation and not exclude them and expect them to be transformed overnight. Knowledge on gender and sexualities took years of academic research, which provided enough information for the government to realise that sexual orientation and same-sex identity are not a choice. The exploration of the complicated phenomenon of human nature needs equal sharing of knowledge from both the West and Africa. We have proof that same-sex sexualities or homosexuality exists in Africa, however, Western descriptions and their paradigms bring out characteristics that are new to African indigenous communities. In this article, I have argued that African traditional approaches to same-sex relationships have been established for a long time. Therefore, it is only appropriate that consent be sought from communities, so that a just Constitutional practice is established.

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