

Article

‘Gay and Zulu, we speak isiNggqumo’: Ethnolinguistic identity constructions

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Abstract

South Africa was one of the first countries in the world to include a sexual orientation clause in its Bill of Rights and in 2006 became the first African country to legalise same-sex marriage. Research studies on gay and lesbian speech varieties, however, have thus far been limited to Cage’s (2003) pioneering publication of Gayle which is South Africa’s English/Afrikaans gay variety and a recent paper on isiNggqumo, its African language equivalent (Rudwick and Ntuli 2008). South Africa’s history of segregation and its prevailing multilingualism and multiculturalism, offers particularly intricate social, cultural and linguistic dynamics among sub-cultures in the society, such as the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender) community. Against the background of South Africa’s apartheid policy and the history of black homosexuality, this paper explores ethnolinguistic identity constructions involved in the usage of isiNggqumo, a gay linguistic variety spoken by black, predominantly Zulu men. It draws from qualitative interview data with Zulu gay men in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and portrays individual and collective subjectivities. While it is true that the popular view of Zulu ethnicity as a fixed and static group identity is still widely prevalent (Wright 2008: 35), this paper demonstrates some of the multifaceted, flexible, and dynamic nature of current Zuluness in relation to a particular linguistic variety of isiZulu.

Introduction

In 1996, South Africa was one of the first countries in the world to include a sexual orientation clause in its Bill of Rights (Constitution of South Africa 1996) and only ten years later became the first African country to legalise same-sex marriage. The South African Constitution vigorously seeks to compensate for past atrocities and has at its aim a modern society that

embraces different cultural, linguistic and religious groups and provides respect for all citizens, including those whose sexual orientation is different than that of the 'norm' (Constitution of South Africa 1996).¹ While it is a valid argument that the gay liberation movement in South Africa contributed to the deepening of the country's democratisation (Croucher 2002), one also has to admit that there have been numerous instances when South Africa's constitutional commitment to the non-discrimination of gay people was severely at odds with the hostile violence of homophobic attacks.² The label 'gay' is often used and referred to in terms of its application as a form of anachronistic identification and is problematic in its usage when it comes to colonial and apartheid politics (Tucker 2009: 33). In this paper, the term 'gay' is simply employed as a sexual identity label and in reference to individuals who identify themselves as such.

Although social and linguistic studies on gay and lesbian speech forms, known as 'Lavender Linguistics',³ is still a field which is very much in its infancy in South Africa, the prominence of this kind of research was recently acknowledged. Cage's (2003) pioneering publication of *Gayle* portrays South Africa's English and Afrikaans gay variety and provides a short dictionary. This short monograph and the recent introduction of *isiNgqumo*, its African language equivalent (Rudwick and Ntuli 2008), laid the foundation for further research in the field. It is not unlikely that linguistic varieties that emerged from a repressive, political system, as was the case in South Africa due to apartheid, are more inextricably linked to identity politics than those emerging under more healthy sociological conditions. After all, it also has been argued that the construction of a lesbian or gay identity in South Africa is more than just self-expression, it is 'a defiance of the fixed identities – of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality – that the apartheid system attempted to impose' (Gevisser and Cameron 1995: 5).

This paper explores some of the social characteristics and categories which join on the one hand, and distinguish on the other hand, members of the *isiNgqumo* speech community and what kind of identities are linked to the usage of the variety. I examine subjective formations of identities and ethnicities that are linked to the usage of *isiNgqumo* among young *isiZulu* mother-tongue speaking gay men in the province of *KwaZulu-Natal* (KZN). *IsiNgqumo* is *isiZulu*-based (McLean and Ngcobo 1995, Rudwick and Ntuli 2008) but while it may also be spoken by other Nguni language speakers, the scope of this study is limited to Zulu gay men.⁴ Importantly, not all *isiZulu*-speaking gay men in South Africa speak *isiNgqumo*.⁵ The majority would be

familiar with some of the words or have at least heard of the argot before, but there are also a number of Zulu gay men who make little or no usage of the variety. Affluent Zulu gays often employ English as main medium of communication, as is also the case with many heterosexual 'upper-middle' class Zulu people. This is not to say, however, that affluent men never make usage of isiNggqumo. As is the case with many other speech varieties which carry 'covert prestige', isiNggqumo is highly context-dependent. Covert prestige means that the prestige attached to a linguistic variety only has internal meaning in signalling one's identity as a member of the group in a particular context. While two gay friends may perceive it as inappropriate to speak isiNggqumo in a fancy, mixed-race establishment in a Durban suburb, for instance, the same individuals may speak it extensively in a more working class type environment in the city center. Having said this, isiNggqumo could be in use virtually anywhere, from a private party to public places, in an email/sms or on the phone. It needs further to be mentioned, that isiNggqumo-speakers, unlike the speakers of many other gay varieties in the world,⁶ make little to no use of English lexical borrowings, but instead employ many re-contextualised isiZulu words, derived often from an ancient or even archaic isiZulu lexicon which has strong associations with traditional Zulu culture. Although there are also many neologisms in isiNggqumo, the bulk of the vocabulary is based on so-called 'deep' isiZulu terms, 'deep' representing purity and old-style language usage.

This paper argues that the maintenance of a culturally embedded isiZulu lexicon for the gay speech variety and the re-interpretations of a particular Zulu lifestyle is representative for the expression of not only gayness but also ethnicity. It has previously been argued (Minning 2004) that identity marking is the first pragmatic function of any Lavender Linguistics device. It is an objective in this study to find out whether this holds true for isiNggqumo. The study draws from qualitative interviews and observation data gathered in the eThekweni region of KZN between February 2007 and January 2009, and then again in November and December 2009. The participants⁷ are 34 gay Zulu men, between 18 and 38 years of age and one single female interviewee who is 76 years of age.⁸ The paper benefited from the fact that my research assistants and I spent substantial time in places which are frequented by the black LGBT community around Durban. Therefore, a certain level of participant and non-participant observation informed the findings of this study. For the purpose of this paper, the collected interview and observation data were analysed specifically with

respect to identity expressions linked to isiNggumo. The first part of the paper looks very briefly at the general historical development of black gay activities in South Africa and a little more specifically at the KZN province and Zulu people. Following that, the sociolinguistic concept of speech community is shortly discussed in terms of its relevance to isiNggumo-speakers who are subsequently given a voice in the analytical part of the paper. The summary of the findings and suggestions for further research conclude the article.

A brief historical sketch

Black homosexual men in South Africa have always been in what Kleinbooi (1995) terms 'identity crossfire'. He describes his own coming-out as 'an endless fight to be just what I am, without painful self-loathing, and without racist gay white men or homophobic black comrades telling me that there is something wrong with me' (1995: 264). To be black and to give expression to a gay or lesbian identity in South Africa was, and still is in many ways today, a double-edged sword. Numerous African political leaders⁹ in the country have made statements of severely homophobic nature and along the lines of the argument that homosexuality is an un-African phenomenon.¹⁰ Despite the complete lack of evidence in substantiation of this view, it is a commonly shared belief among many black South Africans. In fact, not many South African people in general, seem to take proper cognisance of the fact that same-sex practices have always existed in Africa and are not necessarily incompatible with African culture, cosmology and spirituality (Dlamini 2006). It is, hence, not surprising, that many black gays and lesbians found creative ways to disguise their sexual orientation and identity from time to time and to communicate in secrecy in order to feel 'safe'. Linguistic codes only understood by the in-group are useful tools to facilitate secret communication. In the words of one of our informants: 'The objective [of isiNggumo] is to deceive what you are saying'.¹¹ While the secrecy function for the protection from sexual discrimination has been noted repeatedly in reference to gay codes, it is important to remember that they are also tools which unite and empower the identities of their speakers.

The first documented incidents of African homosexuality occurred among a criminal gang called the Ninevites or the 28s which first operated in Gauteng but later spread to the area of KwaZulu-Natal (Epprecht 2004, 2006, Louw 2001) in the start of the twentieth century. Nongoloza, the Zulu born leader of the gang has been quoted as saying 'even when we were free on the hills

south of Johannesburg some of us had women and others had young men for sexual purposes' (Achmat 1993: 99). During apartheid, homosexual activity was illegal which essentially meant that black gays and lesbians faced a twofold discrimination: first, on the basis of their skin colour; and second on the basis of their sexual orientation. Despite its criminalisation and common stereotyping of homosexuals as child-molesters or drag-queens, there was notable homosexual activity from the mid twentieth century in major cities, particularly Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban (Gevisser 1995: 18), but also in township areas of the country (Leap 2004: 139). In townships and black living spaces people who were known as desiring same-sex were known as *isitabane* or *ungqingili*, but mistakenly people frequently thought that this also meant that such individuals were hermaphrodites (McLean and Ncobo 1995, Nkoli 1993). The South African mine compounds,¹² in particular, are documented to have been thriving environments for same-sex activity with Epprecht (2004) arguing that up to 70-80 per cent of men in the mines engaging in it. A certain 'husband-wife' set-up, known as the 'Law of Sokisi' (Sibuye 1993) was common between older mineworkers and their younger 'boywives' [*hlobongo*]. It can well be argued that a certain qualified acceptance of homosexuality was in place in this context. Elder (1995: 60) argues that, among other things, the lack of access to women, may have contributed to 'homosexual tolerance'. To what extent same-sex activity took place in rural areas is difficult to ascertain, but one has to assume that it would have mainly taken place in secrecy. There is some evidence that suggests that some homosexual Zulu men who had their families in rural areas of KZN started moving to the township Mkhumbane in the mid-twentieth century in order to live a homosexual lifestyle.¹³

It has to be acknowledged, however, that most of the public activity around city cruising spots, and lesbian gatherings, was 'white-only', with the exception of the coloured places in District Six, in Cape Town. There is some, albeit very little, evidence of intercultural activity between gays before the 1960s. The 'moffietaal slang' which was primarily spoken by coloured gay men also spread in its usage among many white gays, but by and large, the gay community was as segregated as the heterosexual one. While the first gay-movement in South Africa was initiated by the white middle-class in 1966, black gay men and lesbians only became politically active in the 1980s when an enormous upsurge of black liberationist movement swept through the townships (Gevisser 1995: 29, 48). The leading figure in black gay liberationist politics was Simon Nkoli who was a gay anti-apartheid

activist and joined the white gay organisation GASA (Gay Association of South Africa) in 1983. After he realised that the struggle against apartheid was no priority within GASA and further discovered that black people were still unwelcome in GASA supported gay bars and clubs, he decided to form a black interest group within the organisation (Gevisser 1995: 52). While homosexual activity had existed in townships all over the country for many decades, Nkoli's activism triggered the development that more and more township gay people were willing to become active in some kind of gay organisation. In 1988, the first largely black organisation, GLOW (Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand) was founded. Its members organised in 1990 a Lesbian and Gay Pride March for the first time and it has taken place every year since. Regrettably, however, 'as gay township activity has become publicised, a backlash of sorts has emerged from the black nationalist tendency within the liberation movements' (Gevisser 1995: 69). This backlash manifested itself, inter alia, through Winnie Mandela's defense case, which characterised homosexual activity not only as a white import and 'colonising depredation of heterosexual black culture' but also as sexual and colonial abuse (Holmes 1995: 284, Tucker 2009: 111).

While South Africa is one of the few countries in the world where gay couples have the right to marry and adopt children, this may not represent the consent of the majority of South Africans. The 2002 Royal Reed Dance in Nongoma marks an important date on which Zulu gay and lesbian people stood up for themselves and pleaded for acceptance within Zulu culture and society. In reaction to Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini's precursory homophobic statement that homosexuals were confusing children and tarnished the image of Zulu society, the Durban Lesbian & Gay Community & Health Center, headed by Nonhlanhla Mkhize, issued the following statement:

Zulu lesbian and gay people are women and men, they were born Zulu and would die Zulu. King Zwelithini can never take that away from them even if he wanted to. Being Zulu is part of their identity. I am a proud black, lesbian Zulu woman. I am fundamentally in tune with my culture. I do not need prayer or an Inyanga to heal me. I am healthy, intelligent and beautiful. My family, partner and community are proud of me.¹⁴

While Mkhize's stalwart statement indeed marked a milestone in Zulu gay activism, backlashes of various sorts followed after 2002. One more noteworthy one was the comment of the recently elected South African President, Jacob Zuma. In 2006, on Heritage Day celebrations in KwaDukuza

he was quoted as saying: 'When I was growing up an *ungqingili* (a gay) would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out.' *The Sowetan* further quoted Zuma as saying that same-sex marriages were 'a disgrace to the nation and to God'.¹⁵ It has to be mentioned, however, that Jacob Zuma soon after apologised for the allegedly misunderstood statements, and a month later endorsed the Civil Union Bill recognising same-sex marriages.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it could be argued, that many Zulu people have not yet accepted homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. And just as is the case with many British people who have never heard of the well researched British gay speech variety Polari before, few 'straight' isiZulu-speakers have ever heard of isiNgqumo.

The precise etymology of isiNgqumo is a contentious issue. McLean and Ngcobo (1995: 184) hypothesised that isiNgqumo initially developed among Durban men who engaged in same-sex activity, firstly because secrecy was more desired in patriarchal Zulu life and, secondly, because secret gay subcultures were more developed in KZN and from there spread to other parts of the country, such as the black townships at the Reef. Several other researchers (Moodie et al 1988, Epprecht 2004, Cage 2003) claim that isiNgqumo first emerged in the South African mines among the men who engaged in same-sex relationships. Many of our informants verified that isiNgqumo was used as a medium of expression and euphemism among mine workers and their boy-wives. On the other hand, Louw describes how Mkhumbane became known for its public male-male wedding activities and in this context refers to isiNgqumo as a homosexual argot derived from the isiZulu word *ukungqumuza* meaning 'to speak quietly so that others about do not hear of important matters' (Louw 2001: 292). Similarly, many isiZulu-speaking Durban gay men claim that the area called Esinmanyeni in the Mkhumbane township was the home of homosexual activities already in the 1940s and 1950s and could possibly be the place where isiNgqumo emerged among its residents. Whether the origins of isiNgqumo can be traced back to this place or whether it first emerged in the mine compounds is difficult to ascertain. Importantly, the majority of our research participants do not consider the historical places where isiNgqumo emerged as particularly significant to their sociolinguistic identities but rather the conditions under which it emerged, such as the need for secrecy and desire of solidarity. Both functions remain currently relevant. On the one hand, isiNgqumo is still used in order to communicate in secrecy, on the other hand, members of the isiNgqumo speech community make extensive usage of the argot while

socialising with each other. Sociolinguistically, it is necessary to provide some brief considerations when speaking about a 'speech community'.

Sociolinguistic considerations

Bloomfield, in his pioneering monograph *Language* (1933), dedicated an entire chapter to the concept of speech community but defined it rather vaguely as 'a group of people who interact by means of speech' (1933: 42). While more recently scanning the literature for different definitions of 'speech community', Hudson (1999: 24) comes to the conclusion that current definitions put emphasis on the speech community as 'a group of people who feel themselves to be a community in some sense'. The emphasis here lies on the emotive and social components of the speech community, ie identity politics, rather than primary linguistic elements. As will be seen below, Hudson's quote is applicable to isiNgqumo speakers as a group of people who feel a sense of belonging to each other. One of the most significant functions of the linguistic variety is that it indexes one's identity or at least a facet of one's identity. If a Zulu gay man who speaks isiNgqumo enters a bar and hears someone else converse in the variety, his immediate thought is: 'he is one of us'. In this paper, the 'gay community' is thought of along the lines of Anderson's (1983) 'imagined community' and hence 'gay speech' is an ideological construct which is associated with the imagined 'gay community'. But as has been acknowledged in relation to gay speech forms, 'actual linguistic practices [and their social functions] cannot be ignored' (Wong et al 2002: 5).

Instead of searching for linguistic and social consistencies and homogeneities within a speech community, it is more valuable to expose conflicting evidences, diversities and contradictions (Barrett 1997). Most researchers interested in gay speech forms are white and middle-class and have been studying their own communities which are not representative for the gay community as a whole. Hence, attempts to capture gay speech with the theoretical approach of the speech community as ethnically undifferentiated group results in flawed and oversimplified portrayals of the individual members of such a speech community.¹⁷ In light of the above arguments, it becomes clear that it is necessary to differentiate cross-culturally (Livia and Hall 1997). The above warnings are particularly relevant for the South African context, as resulting sociolinguistic dichotomisations would be even more problematic for a country where the government pursued a discriminatory segregation policy which had as its main pillars ethnicity and language. One has to assume that Afro-American and white

gay men in the United States socialised with each other to a greater extent than gay black and white individuals in apartheid South Africa. Until the late 1980s, in fact, gay organisations in South Africa were divided largely along the 'colour bar'. It is further questionable in how far communication boundaries constructed by race, ethnicity and language have ceased in the post-apartheid state and to what extent gays of all 'colour' have established ties. If one considers that 'mixed' social interaction is still rare among heterosexual South Africans¹⁸ one does not have to be surprised that the gay community remains also divided along the lines of race and ethnicity. Tucker's (2009) recent monograph on 'queer visibilities' in Cape Town, for instance, examines the lives of queer men separately along the lines of race, ie white, coloureds and black Africans. The life experiences of most black gay men are very different from those of white men and consequently, it is not surprising that gay linguistic varieties are also ethnically diverse in the country. An indication of how little contact continues to exist between black and white gays in South Africa is the fact that many of our participants had never heard of the so-called white gay variety Gayle. Similarly, it has to be assumed that many white gay men have never heard about isiNggqumo.

A study on Gayle by Cage (2003), although a fascinating analysis in its own, offers little to no valuable sociolinguistic information as regards the linguistic properties and sociolinguistic dynamics involved in isiNggqumo. This, as Cage himself explains, is due to the fact that Gayle is the 'language' of the South African 'white' (or English-speaking¹⁹) community. The inclusion of some selected isiNggqumo lexical items in the book merely offers a fractional lexical reference but gives no information as regards the social dynamics involved in the usage of these words. As mentioned, the argot is based on an indigenous 'black' language and the members of this speech community also share the same ethnic background. I define the isiNggqumo speech community in reference to Hudson (1999: 24) as a group who feel that they share some sense of belonging to each other on the basis of the linguistic variety they chose to speak. Thus, isiNggqumo-speaking people can be seen as belonging to a certain in-group as long as we understand this group in terms of specific linguistic practices and shared identity constructions. While it has been argued (Epprecht 2004) that a certain proliferation of isiNggqumo has been taking place, and several of our interviewees indeed indicate that isiNggqumo is also known in the eThekweni region by some straight people, they are very few in number. The scope and purpose of this study is to focus on gay Zulu men.

Exploring gay Zuluness among isiNgqumo-speakers

Buthelezi (2008: 31) recently argued that 'the belief in being Zulu' is not likely to be discarded and that while it constitutes part and parcel of post-apartheid society, it is important to explore further what it means to be Zulu to isiZulu-speakers who are members of different social sub-groups. Although it is true that the popular view of Zulu ethnicity as a fixed and static group identity dating back to the reign of Shaka kaSenzangakhona in the 1820s is still widely prevalent (Wright 2008: 35), it is also important to note that more and more individuals and sub-groups in contemporary Zulu society are starting to challenge this perspective. The province of KwaZulu-Natal exhibits currently a stark dichotomy between urban and rural life, economically, socially, culturally, politically and linguistically. The latter, rural life, is characterised by more static and traditionalist understandings of what it means to be Zulu and the former by people 'who regard their identities as more fluid and open to various ethnic, racial and linguistic influences associated with modernity' (Buthelezi 2008: 30). The understanding of how ethnic identity is related to language has been enriched during the past few decades by a prodigious amount of research from several disciplines. There is no doubt that isiZulu, both in its rural or urban dialects, has always played a significant role in the cultural identity of Zulu people. Although a post-modern approach to language, culture, identity and ethnicity implies that the relationship between these concepts is fluid, historically constructed, multidimensional and context-dependent, it has been shown (Rudwick 2004, 2008), that individuals at the grassroots level often do not subscribe to such a view. Frequently, in fact, isiZulu-speakers have a fairly one-dimensional and often romanticised notion of their language and culture that reminds one of German Romanticist thought in the tradition of Herder and Humboldt.

It is argued here that employing the isiZulu-based and culturally-rooted code isiNgqumo, which is derived from an archaic isiZulu variety, is a way for gay Zulu men to express and demonstrate their cultural rootedness, and an attempt to convince other Zulu people about the legitimisation of their lifestyle within Zulu tradition. Leap (2004: 152) illustrates a case in which a Zulu writer merges the tradition of *ukuhlonipha* [to respect]²⁰ with a gay lifestyle. The homosexual man adopts a female politeness register in order to show proper respect to the husband. 'By proposing to practice *hlonipha* on the *indooda*'s [sic, *indoda* = man] behalf the writer suggests a powerful strategy for asserting the legitimacy of their relationship within Zulu tradition' (Leap 2004: 152). Homosexuality, tradition and Zulu culture merge

and give expression to gay Zulu ethnicity. The retrieval of an archaic, so-called 'deep' isiZulu lexicon and the re-contextualisation of ancient isiZulu lexical items, which are part and parcel of isiNgqumo, indicate knowledge and appreciation of Zulu language and culture.

Baker (2002:48) notes in his ground-breaking doctoral thesis on the British gay argot Polari, that gay language varieties are first and foremost identified by their lexicon. This is not to say that some other distinctive linguistic features may characterise lavender languages, but for the case of isiNgqumo it is safe to say that lexically and grammatically it is largely based on isiZulu. Furthermore, the isiNgqumo variety examined here is KwaZulu-Natal based and is spoken with various degrees in the usage of isiNgqumo lexical items. Only some isiNgqumo-speakers claim that the dialect is a refined form of communication, but almost all agree that English lexical borrowings are unwelcome. As one of our interviewees said 'There is no English words [sic.], because it is very difficult to mix isiNgqumo with English, it's a "deep" Zulu'.²¹ It can be argued that Zulu gay men who choose to speak isiNgqumo construct a boundary between themselves and predominately English speaking gay Zulu men who attach little value to their Zulu ethnicity. Ethnicity research (Banks 1969) has long emphasised the significance of boundary construction when it comes to ethnic identity. The choice of language, for instance isiZulu vis-à-vis English, is one of the most immediate and most consequential means by which ethnic boundaries are established, especially within a Zulu township community (Rudwick 2004). In isiNgqumo the choice of the base language is isiZulu, not English, which I argue is a linguistic as well as an ethnic statement.

What the link between isiNgqumo and a Zulu background suggests is that the variety is not only associated with certain gender constructions and expression of sexualities but it also is an 'ethnolect' in the sense that it is associated, in most instances, with a particular ethnicity. Although isiNgqumo, as it is spoken in the eThekweni region, is not necessarily mutually intelligible with isiZulu in all instances it is spoken, it nonetheless employs isiZulu as a base language. While it is true in reference to gay argots and identity politics that 'for some, sexual identity has a very strong defining function' (Cameron and Kulick 2003:8), our research suggests that only those participants whose coming-out-phase was fairly recent, ie during the past five years, identified sexual identity as their primary reference point. The majority of interviewees who informed the argument of this paper did indeed index their gayness by speaking isiNgqumo but, in some instances equally

significant, also gave expression to their Zulu background. It is noteworthy, that most informants described what they considered their 'coming-out' as the period when most of the isiNgqumo acquisition took place. Some interviewees also claimed that this period was also the time when they started to think of their own homosexuality as a 'gift'. They claimed to have talents none of their siblings have, such as, for instance, an impeccable sense of good style, exceptional cooking skills, social competence, and, importantly in the context of isiNgqumo, great capacity of being articulate. Some of the interviewee's arguments remind one of McLean and Ngcobo's (1995: 183) claim that 'the sophistication and pervasiveness of isiNgqumo is an indication of the developed nature of black gay subculture'.

There were also a number of trans-sexual individuals among our participants. Two interviewees, Sbu and Linda, spoke about their desires to have a sex change one day, but explained that they are expected to refrain from it due to Zulu cultural reasons. One of them commented that he himself would prefer 'to be a full woman'²² but that the respect for his father who would strongly disapprove of a gender reassignment does not allow him to undertake it. Sbu speculates about possibilities of a sex change after his father's death but is not very optimistic that it would actually materialise due to the continuous power the father will hold through the ancestral spirits. Linda, in contrast, professed that he had his mother's consent but that he also discussed the issue with some Zulu elders and a respected sangoma in his community who both advised him to abandon the desire. The young man clearly validates the opinions of the Zulu elders and concludes: 'unfortunately it cannot be done in Zulu culture'. Respect for seniority and status is one of the main pillars on which Zulu tradition and culture is built, and it is, hence, not surprising that Linda would demonstrate his respect in this way. The behaviour of these individuals which is based on the Zulu laws of *inhlonipho* [respect] indicates that in this particular instance their cultural and ethnic identity rates higher than their sexual identity as transgendered and gay men. Of course, many perspectives of Zulu culture are not easily reconciled with a homosexual lifestyle and some isiNgqumo-speakers find themselves in a struggle to be true to themselves as gay men on the one hand and to please the Zulu family and ancestors on the other. Jabulani expressed it the following: 'This Zulu thing and me being gay is not easy. If I ever had to choose between being gay or being Zulu, I would have to choose my [Zulu] culture'. Two other isiNgqumo-speakers who were interviewed at the same time, strongly disagreed with this view, however.

The majority of our participants maintain conspicuously close links to their nuclear families, in particular to their mothers, but for many it meant a tough struggle to become accepted and some 'do not take their homosexuality home'.²³ A few individuals described how their parents and other family members would perform slaughtering of livestock and other Zulu rituals in the hope of turning their 'deviant' relative into a straight person. As these attempts failed, family members, particularly women, were more likely to accept the sexual orientation of their relative. All but four of our participants emphasised that it was important to them that their parents and siblings accept them the way they are. 'You see what actually happens in this life [...], the whole thing starts in the family, if your family does not accept you, believe me, you can never be happy as a gay, you will never be happy'.²⁴ A few of the young men claimed to have an intensely close relationship with their mother. In contrast to that, most of the interviewees admitted that the relationship to their fathers, if existent, was strained in various ways. Most of the fathers who know about their son's 'deviant' sexuality seem only reluctantly to accept it. In most cases it is said to be something which is not openly discussed.

I would, however, like to mention that despite the fact that all of our interviewees self-identified as 'gay' and claimed to live a distinctly gay lifestyle, some of them were still hiding their homosexual activity to certain family members and acquaintances. It was explained to us that this was an issue of respect [*inhlonipho*]. Sadly, some isiNggqumo-speakers feel that openly demonstrating their gay lifestyle to their parents would be disrespectful. This is not surprising, however, as certain interpretations of the Zulu custom of *hlonipha* includes that children, no matter what age, refrain from actions that are disapproved by the parents. It has been noted before (Reddy and Louw 2002: 90) that African male youth who self-identify as gay are often those who take on the sexually passive role and typically perform 'feminine' roles in their relationship. Similarly, many but not all of our participants claimed to be *skesana* and some of them expressed the desire to be with a 'straight'²⁵ man. Tucker (2009) shows how Western conceptualisations of 'the closet' fail to account for the space and different social worlds in which many African men who consider themselves 'gay' are located. This explains why several of our informants who considered themselves 'out of the closet' had not explicitly discussed their sexual orientation and gay lifestyle with certain members of their direct kin. Nonetheless, all, except three of our participants, considered family

involvement as paramount in their life. As Sfiso puts it: 'My family is my first priority. I feel that is what identifies me as a Zulu person'.

A township lifestyle or background also plays a role in the usage of isiNgqumo. Linked to this is also, at least to some extent, the social variable class. Young black gay men with a Zulu background who prefer to speak English as the major medium of communication are likely to be 'middle', 'upper-middle' class, and are reasonably well educated. At the very least, they move around in the circles of a fairly affluent society. I do not suggest, however, that all isiNgqumo speakers are 'poor', or that one has to struggle financially in order to qualify as an isiNgqumo-speaker. Rather, one has to have socialised extensively and associated oneself closely with people from a grassroots level of Zulu society. Most of our interviewees live(d) in a township environment under relatively poor socio-economic conditions. South African township identities have been described as culturally 'hybrid' (Ratele 2003) in reference to Homi Bhaba's work (1990, 1994). Township residents are placed not only physically but also metaphorically 'between' those who live in modern suburban city areas and those who live in rural, traditional places. Many diverse so-called western standards as well as so-called traditional African norms serve as points of reference for township residents. Family values and the ancestral spiritual belief system in the context of Zulu ethnicity was expressed in the following way:

I believe that a Zulu man is a person who supports his family in everything that he has, with every power that he has. And, in my culture that has nothing to do with me being gay, because my ancestors they know me. As much as some living members of the family may not understand....., but my ancestors still know me, I am still their child, I still have their blood moving in me.²⁶

Family belonging and ancestors are paramount to most Zulu men, whether they are straight or gay. Even those that allege to belong to particular Christian congregations display a certain level of syncretism and are quick to speak about the power of the *amadlosi* [ancestors]. Many of them even claim to have spiritual reasons for their coming out as a gay man. Sandile, being one of our youngest interviewees, claims that 'the real reasons you know that you are gay, is because one of your ancestors is a woman who died and has gotten into you, and she wants you to work through her'. Another young informant, Bheki, who had received a calling to become a sangoma and was currently under training, explained it in a similar way:

Why would the ancestors act in me and make me see visions and make

me have dreams [...]? In the Zulu culture, whether living people like it or not, there is this belief, that more especially if you are gay, it is your great, great grandmother, or some woman who died who is a member of your who is trying to represent herself through you...and that's why you are gay, that's the belief. But it's hard for others to accept that.

The above kind of reasoning was put forward on numerous occasions in interviews. It confirms Ngubane's (1977) long standing argument that among Zulu traditional healers there is a strong connection between sexual inversion and spiritual authority. Recently, a young lesbian sangoma has published her story in form of an autobiography (Nkabinde 2008). Extraordinary spiritual and physical power is claimed to be linked more often than not to a certain kind of gender-crossing. Even Skaka is said to have exhibited exaggerated effeminacy, purportedly even feigning menstrual cramps (Epprecht 2004: 46). Several of our participants claimed to have a 'special spiritual gift' and two of them are in the process of undergoing training as sangomas.

Some of our interview data suggests that in particular Zulu gay men who identify themselves as *skesana* are the ones who are most likely to have 'deep' knowledge of isiNggqumo and are the ones who take the most joy and pride in speaking the vernacular. *Skesananas* have been argued to 'assert their female role with great determination and they themselves enforce their receptive role in sex' (McLean and Ngcobo 1995: 164). It must be emphasised that the receptive role in sex which *skesananas* enforce should not mistakenly be understood as subordination or misinterpreted as self-oppression, as they can dominate in order to get what they want (McLean and Ngcobo 1995: 164). Importantly, *skesananas* do not identify themselves as women but as homosexual men who sexually desire masculine men and only 'feel like women'.²⁷ While many of our participants considered themselves to be *skesana*, the adoption of this identity or persona is by no means characteristic for all members of the isiNggqumo speech community.

While there are evidently certain values and collective linguistic, sexual and ethnic identity concepts isiNggqumo-speakers share, one needs to acknowledge that gay Zulu men in South Africa who make usage of the linguistic variety, are not a homogenous group of people. While the argot is certainly a linguistic and cultural medium of communication which creates secrecy, solidarity and community among its speakers, the isiNggqumo speech community and its members is a highly diverse and heterogeneous sub-group in society. Importantly, however, all participants of this study are

self-consciously Zulu and proud of it, but at the same time also self-consciously re-arrange and re-adapt Zulu heritage and tradition.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that current South Africa still exhibits many of the old, fossilised ethnic classifications (Carton 2008: 3), particularly so as regards to Zulu ethnicity. However, it also needs to be acknowledged that within Zulu society there are various, multifaceted and also contradictory currents of what it means to be Zulu today. As Sithole (2008: 328) aptly notes, our ideas and perceptions of what characterised Zuluness in the past, and what marks it today 'are constructed, redistilled, and changed over time by various ideologues and activists competing in a political arena'. Zulu gay men who live an openly 'out' lifestyle and engage in speaking isiNgqumo are certainly not members of mainstream Zulu society who fit in well. Some traditionalist Zulu people may even label their lifestyle as un-Zulu. Notwithstanding this, the vast majority of our participants claimed to live a solid 'Zulu lifestyle' with the exception of procreation.²⁸

The code, as described here, is bi-cultural; it merges 'gay culture' with 'Zulu culture'. While pride in one's ethnic and cultural background and belonging is characteristic for most Zulu people, this has not been noted much for Zulu members of the South African LGBT community. Of course, the elements inherent in Zuluness are interpreted in various different ways by isiNgqumo-speakers, but there are constituents of so-called traditional Zulu culture, such as the belief in *amadlosi* [ancestors] and the laws to show respect, *ukuhlonipha* [to respect], which play a profoundly significant role in the life of our informants. The traditional patriarchal nature of Zulu culture, however, is re-interpreted in a way where isiNgqumo speakers position themselves beyond traditional gender roles and relations, against the significance of reproduction, and in line with a gay lifestyle which incorporates many Zulu values. Although the gay and lesbian liberation movement is essentially based on sexual liberation, gayness and lesbianism are not simply constructions and negotiations of sexual preferences, 'they are, fundamentally, identities', in some cases also 'resistance identities' (Castells 1997: 206,8). In South Africa, Zulu gay identities are resisting essentialised and rigid perspectives of what it means to be Zulu.

The recognition of gay linguistic and ethnic identities as the one described above also explains why Halliday's (1978) conceptualisation of the 'anti-language' has been utilized by numerous researchers in reference to gay

codes. The identities expressed by this particular linguistic code are based on resistance to what is generally considered the accepted ‘norm’ in society. Most isiNggqumo speakers interviewed perceive the code as ‘their language’, in a sense that they feel that it is the one linguistic medium which captures most adequately who they are and how they see themselves in the world. However, the perspective presented must not erroneously be understood as essentialist. The ‘gay culture’, ‘Zulu ethnicity’, as well as ‘gay-Zuluness’ associated with isiNggqumo, has many different facets and reference points for different individuals and involves many idiosyncrasies.

Olivier (1995: 219) mentions that it is a universal phenomenon that ‘many gay people never use the so-called gay vernacular, and some have an active revulsion to it’. It would be worthwhile to investigate further what the reasons and motives are for some Zulu gay men not to make usage of the variety at all. It appears that an ‘active revulsion’ to isiNggqumo is at least partly based on the socio-economical variable class, or at least what is considered to be ‘lower-working-class’. One interviewee, for instance, said that he used to speak isiNggqumo quite extensively but that it has become ‘too ghetto’ for him and that he socialises in ‘better’ circles now. While it can be argued that it is considered more prestigious to speak English in certain ‘middle-upper-class’ Zulu gay circles, it also has to be acknowledged that isiNggqumo carries a distinct covert prestige. Those that do make usage of it truly treasure it as an in-group marker and for group solidarity. Although isiNggqumo-speakers in South Africa have ethnolinguistic identities too complex to fit their description in one research article, this paper addresses some facets and lays the foundation for further in-depth studies.

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Notes

1. See Marks (2004) for a more detailed analysis on general institutional matters.
2. For recent general discussions of homophobic hate-crimes and -speech, see Wells and Polder (2006).
3. Lavender Linguistics is a subfield of linguistics, associated most notable with the US American linguist William Leap, and is the study of the language used by the LGBT community. The term is derived from the longterm association of

the color lavender (light violet) with gay and lesbian communities.

4. Sotho speakers, as well as Tshivenda and Xitsonga speakers may have other linguistic varieties which index gay status, which raises the questions whether there may be another African gay-variety spoken by gays who are L1 speakers of these languages or whether there are at least different varieties of *isiNgqumo* spoken by Sotho, Venda and the speakers of other indigenous African varieties. Unlike the largely bilingual 'white' community in South Africa, members of the Black community are often polyglot and multilingual. From this perspective, one can assume that *isiNgqumo* is much more diverse and hybrid and that it exhibits much greater linguistic variation than Gayle.
5. Noteworthy is also, that numerous of our informants claimed that *isiNgqumo* was spreading in the Durban area and that some heterosexual Zulu people who socialised extensively with gay people started to make usage of the linguistic variety as well.
6. See, for instance, Minnings (2004), Jackson (2004) and Murray (2004).
7. When quoted in the text the interviewees are all given pseudonyms in order to assure their anonymity.
8. The female interviewee did not speak any *isiNgqumo* herself but she was conducive for the study because she had special knowledge about the etymology of *isiNgqumo*, due to the fact that she lived most of her life in the Durban township Mkhumbane and was familiar with the homosexual sub-culture which was thriving there, particularly in the middle of the twentieth century.
9. To mention but a few of the public figures and leaders who have become known for their homophobic outbursts: Winnie Mandela, Ruth Mompati, Bennie Alexander and Jacob Zuma.
10. This is not surprising, as many Afro-American leaders in the USA have also been outspoken opponents of a homosexual lifestyle (Johnson 2004: 261). One of the reasons for that may be that the emphasis on family and reproduction is stronger among many African people than it is in white western society where many other values are attached to a 'successful' life.
11. Interview with Bhonkosi (aged 26), July 5, 2008.
12. For a seminal work on same-sex practices in the mines, see Moodie, Ndatshe and Sibuyi (1988).
13. Interview with Sibongile (aged 76), November 7, 2009
14. For further detail, see <http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/takeaction/partners/363.html> [accessed April 24, 2009]
15. For detail, see http://www.news24.com/News24/South_Africa/News/0,,2-7-1442_2004158,00.html [accessed April 24, 2009]

16. For more detail, see http://rodonline.typepad.com/rodonline/2006/10/zuma_endorses_s.html [accessed April 24, 2009]
17. Gaudio (1997: 417) also questions the usefulness of the notion of speech community in queer studies as his research in Nigeria suggests that the innovativeness and idiosyncrasies in the usage of 'feminine' linguistic expression of Hausa men disproves the idea that 'members of a particular gender, ethnic or social category speak in objectively similar ways'.
18. According to a recent survey, only 12 per cent of white people in South Africa have contact with other racial groups outside of work, and more than 80 per cent of black people, apparently, have never shared a meal with a white person (www.frommers.com/destinations/southafrica/0239020632.html, accessed May 14, 2008). Even if these numbers are conflated and one is critical towards quantitative census type methods, the statistic nonetheless provides an insight into how segregated South African communities still are.
19. We add English-speaking here, as we encountered numerous Indian South African gay men who self-identified as gay and knew of Gayle.
20. For more detail to the social and linguistic custom of *ukuhlonipha* [to respect], see Finlayson (2002), Herbert (1990), Raum (1973) and Zungu (1985).
21. Interview with Sfiso (aged 31), June 20, 2008.
22. Interview with Ndumiso (aged 38), July 7, 2007.
23. Interviews with Linda, Sibusiso, Terence and Bubble.
24. Interview with Bonkhosi (aged 23), December 10, 2008.
25. 'Straight' in this context does not necessarily refer to sexual orientation. Rather 'straight' is a reference to stereotypically masculine looks and behaviour (Reddy and Louw 2002: 90)
26. Interview with Mandla (aged 23), December 18, 2008.
27. However, one of our informants who regards himself as a *skesana*, proudly explained that his mother, who had now accepted that he was not an 'ordinary' man, started to talk about her boys and girls [notice: plurals] while mentioning her children, although she only has one biologically female child, his sister. Furthermore, in an interview with a 23-year old *skesana* which I conducted in a Durban café, we were greeted with the words 'hello girls' which put a big smile on my interviewee's face. This demonstrates that femininity is not only a behavioural code for this individual, but that a feminine identity is successfully constructed.
28. However, there may well be isiNggqumo-speakers in South Africa who are ethnically Zulu but do not engage with Zulu culture and tradition as discussed in this paper.

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