Gay healers and a place in tradition

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Gay sangomas are not un-African, rather they hold an important place in cultural tradition, a new study suggests.

Lindiwe P Mkasi, a practicing sangoma who is also a graduate student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, followed 10 female traditional healers in same-sex relationships in KwaNgcolosi and Inanda. Titled “A threat to Zulu patriarchy and the continuation of community”, Mkasi’s study found that male and female sangomas practised same-sex relationships without discrimination.

Sangomas, or healers, are thought to serve as human links to ancestors and to the divine. Many researchers call them “custodians” of Zulu culture. Yet many Zulu leaders have condemned homosexuality, decrying it as a cultural import from the West.

Dr Sarojini Nadar, Mkasi’s research supervisor and a professor of gender studies at UKZN, said Mkasi’s research was “a sort of spin-off” on a wider study on HIV prevention they had worked on together in 2008.

In this study, one woman revealed she had not slept with her husband in several months because she suspected he was HIV-positive.

“We said: ‘How could you have this kind of sexual control... in such a patriarchal context?’” Nadar said. “Well, it’s because she was a sangoma.”

She then took a lesbian partner “because it was simply safer”.

Some study participants said they were possessed by male spirits when having sex with other women. “When ancestors do not want men... You actually feel it, yourself,” said one. Another sangoma, Nkabinde, said she was possessed by a male spirit named “Nkunzi”, saying: “Nkunzi loves women, especially young women. If I am with a woman of 21 or 22, normally Nkunzi will want to have sex with her... I have more power when Nkunzi is in me, especially when we both desire the same woman.”

Becoming a sangoma has long served as an alternative for Zulu women who find traditional marriage “burdensome”, according to Gina Buijs, a social anthropologist at the University of the Witwatersrand. “As a sangoma, there is a space for a lesbian woman to be herself without the pressure to perform a relationship with another man,” she said.

But Nadar said Mkasi’s findings also pointed to the extensive homophobia in traditional Zulu culture, where “ordinary men and women don’t have that kind of freedom”.

The title of sangoma may protect lesbian women in townships, where they face serious dangers if they come out as lesbian. In particular, a woman who is perceived as homosexual may be subject to “corrective rape”.

The emphasis on hyper-masculinity in traditional Zulu culture can also lead to gang formation in urban settings, according to Buijs.

Since 1994, the constitution has forbidden discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation. Yet prejudice persists in the highest strata of society. Two years ago, many prominent Zulu leaders campaigned to have this clause removed, and Jacob Zuma’s failure to condemn Uganda’s recent anti-gay legislation has drawn international scrutiny.

Yet there are signs South Africa’s leaders are catching up to its constitution. Last April, the first traditional Zulu marriage involving a gay couple took place. Tshepo Modisane and Thoba Sithole, both 27-year-old professionals, faced a lot of negative backlash on social media platforms and from some Zulu academics.

But other citizens took heart at the news. One, a blogger named Lenox Magee, called the story “beyond epic”.

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