Condemned bodies:
experiences of homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Corpos condenados: experiências de ódio homofóbico e violência em Pietermaritzburg, África Do Sul

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present the thoughts, voices, and lived experiences of people who diverge from normative socio-cultural and religious prescriptions of gender and sexuality, namely black Izitabane[2] women located in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Through sharing these experiences, I hope to inspire deeper reflection and reconsideration of the role and presence of Izitabane women in African faith spaces and society. My reflections are framed by Queer Theology, asserting the importance of prioritizing the lived experiences of marginalized Izitabane people in scholarly discourse. This form of theology is particularly relevant and valuable for theologizing on Izitabane bodies, whose rights, experiences, perspectives, and existence are rejected as meaningless and denounced as unimportant. As a result, this methodology underscores the development of a theology from the margins in which the focus is placed on empowering the lives of black Izitabane women as essential points of reference for theological consideration.
Keywords: Hate crimes. African faith communities. Isitabane/Izitabane.

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar os pensamentos, as vozes e as experiências vividas de pessoas que divergem das prescrições socioculturais e religiosas normativas de gênero e sexualidade denominadas mulheres negras Izitabane, habitants de Pietermaritzburg, África do Sul. Ao compartilhar essas experiências, minha intuição é inspirar uma reflexão mais profunda e uma reconsideração do papel e da presença das

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[2]The term 'Isitabane' (Isizulu language) is used in this study to refer to black queer bodies (more generally known as lesbians) within the South African context. I am reclaiming this term that has been used to discriminate and oppress non-gender conforming bodies and I am using it to showcase that Izitabane people exist in South Africa. The term is discussed in detail in the conceptual classification section below.

mulheres Izitabane nos espaços de fé e na sociedade africana. Minhas reflexões tem como base a proposta metodológica da Teologia Queer, afirmando a importância de priorizar as experiências vividas pelo povo Izitabane marginalizado no discurso acadêmico. Essa forma de teologia é particularmente relevante e valiosa para teologizar sobre os corpos Izitabane, cujos direitos, experiências, perspectivas e existência são rejeitados como sem sentido e denunciados como sem importância. Como resultado, essa metodologia ressalta o desenvolvimento de uma teologia a partir das margens, na qual o foco é colocado no fortalecimento das vidas das mulheres negras Izitabane como pontos de referência essenciais para a consideração teológica.

Palavras-chave: Crimes de ódio. Comunidades Africanas de fé. Isitabane/Izitabane.

> *"One thing that has kept me going in hard times or when I am experiencing challenges is to believe that Unkulunkulu uyena osidalile ubesahlali azi ukuthi vele ngizophila lempilo [God created us this way, He always knew that I am going to live this life]. So, I do not need to worry about other people's thoughts"* (Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023).

Introduction

In the contentious realm of sexual politics, South Africa's Izitabane Rights movement has achieved more legal success than any other community, making the country one of the most liberal, if not most radical, in the world (Thoreson, 2008). South Africa's "Bill of Rights offers civil protection to individuals based on vectors of identity including sexuality, gender, and religion" (Stobie, 2014), which has resulted in successful legal challenges to discriminatory laws and practices (Epprecht, 2013). In May 1996, the country's Constitution became "the first anywhere to explicitly include sexual orientation in an enumerated list of constitutional equality guarantees" (Stychin, 1996). Izitabane rights are protected via section 9(3) Chapter Two, also known as the Equality Clause of the Bill of Rights, which affirms that "[T]he State may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth" (Human Rights Watch, 2011b).

This victory was made possible in many ways by the rhetoric that the Izitabane movement utilized. This rhetoric began to take shape in 1994 when the inherited apartheid laws against black people were being reviewed and some canceled. Since

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then, activists have successfully used the Equality Clause to produce a recognizable body of case laws and to legislate other protections for the Izitabane community.

In 1998, the Constitutional Court decided in *National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and Another v. Minister of Justice and Others* to overturn the prohibitions against sodomy (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019). The Court found that common law and statutory prohibitions were in contravention of the Constitution. The following year, the Court invalidated Section 25 (5) of the Aliens Control Act of 1991 in National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and Others v. Minister of Home Affairs and Others, which held that the permanent same-sex partners of South Africans should receive the same immigration benefits as heterosexual spouses. Two years later, the High Court concurred that sections of the Child Care Act (2000), and the Guardianship Act were discriminatory and legalized same-sex adoption in *Du Toit and Another v. Minister of Welfare and Others*.

Finally, in November 2006, the Court Rules in Minister of Home Affairs and Another v. Fourie and Another and Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and Eighteen Others v. Minister of Home Affairs and Others, the Supreme Court ruled it was unconstitutional for the state to deny same-sex couples the right to marry. The Court later voted in favor of the legal recognition of same-sex couples' marriages through the amendment of the Civil Union Act (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019). Alongside this development in jurisprudence, South African legislation has continued to evolve in ways that set precedents for the constitutional obligations of broader democratic ideals of dignity, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the general democratic ideal of anti-discrimination. These include; the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act enacted in 2000 (PEPUDA or the Equality Act, Act No.4 of 2000) as amended in 2005, which provides measures to address discrimination on several prohibited grounds, including gender, sex, and sexual orientation (Iranti and the Arcus Foundation, 2019).

Yet, despite all these significant moves and many other legislative reforms in South Africa, the country, especially at the community level, is still haunted by its dark past, which was not only informed by institutionalized discrimination but also by homophobic violence against Izitabane coupled with social marginalization (Munro, 2005; Gevisser and Cameron, 1995; Naidoo & Karels, 2011). In South Africa, today,

Izitabane, and black Izitabane women in particular, who choose to be open about their sexual orientation, continue to be a vulnerable group that is susceptible to some of the most horrific forms of homophobic violence and crimes, including what has widely become known as the crime of homophobic rape also known as "corrective rape" and homophobia ((Nel; Judge, 2008). Brown, defines homophobic rape as rape often perpetrated by men (strangers, acquittances, or friends) against Izitabane individuals to communicate their disapproval of Ubutabane[3]. The intention is to "correct" or "cure" the victim of Ubutabane, and sometimes, this act is perpetrated with the support of the victim's family (2012). In South Africa, this so-called correction has often gone beyond the act of rape to the murder of the most horrific kind.

In 2021 alone, at least 24 Izitabane people were reportedly murdered in bias-motivated attacks (Reid, 2022). These reported cases, all occurring in rapid succession, emphasize a disconnect between Constitutional protection and black Izitabane women's lived experiences, which range from physical violence, shaming, discrimination, and homophobia to acceptance (Bhana, 2012); further exacerbated by the violent legacy of the apartheid state, patriarchies of oppression found in colonialism, as well as a conservative culture which exist within South Africa's communities (Gontek, 2019). In South Africa, studies found that in contrast with the progressive Constitution, many people struggle to accept Izitabane as moral human beings and that people's attitudes towards Ubutabane are yet to improve. Heteronormative discourses and practices continue to silence Izitabane sexualities and to negate Ubutabane as "un-African" (Gontek, 2019). A 2008 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study of attitudes towards Ubutabane found that "more than 80% of the South African population aged 16 years and above expressed the view that sex between two men or two women could be considered 'always wrong'" (Human Sciences Research Council, 2008).

Homophobic sentiments like those expressed by the South African former President Jacob Zuma have influenced popular opinion in portraying Ubutabane's behavior as "un-African" and "unnatural". In 2006, Jacob Zuma fiercely aligned heterosexuality with African values and publicly referred to Ubutabane's sexual

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[3] While the term Isitabane is used to refer to queer bodies or gender non-conforming bodies, Ubutabane is used to refer homosexuality within a South African context.

behavior as "a disgrace to the nation to God" (Mail and Guardian, 2006, *apud* Beresford; Schneider; Sember, p. 220). Adding weight to this side of the debate, various religious and community leaders in South Africa maintain that God is against Ubutabane and that Ubutabane is immoral and un-Christian. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 and the Creation account in Genesis 1-2 are used as proof that "normal" relationships exist only between a male and a female. Everything outside these norms is considered "un-African", "un-Christian", and "immoral" (Awondo; Geschiere; Reid, 2012). Despite all the evidence of fluidity of human gender and sexuality, Ubutabane is frequently represented as aberrant "lifestyle choices", or mental health disorders (Ewing et al., 2020).

This observation as well as my own lived experiences as a black Isitabane woman navigating issues of identity, faith, heteronormativity, homophobic hatred, and violence in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa ignited the present study and left me with the following question: "What are the other possible interventions that are necessary in addressing and responding to violence perpetrated against black Izitabane women, and by whom?". A possible medium that came to mind and that could be considered as a key mechanism to aid as an intervention is African faith communities (Venter, 2004)[4] "for religion has a unique ability to promote stability, cohesion, and solidarity" (le Roux, 2015). In South Africa, faith communities and faith leaders hold considerable authority and influence in the education and socialization of society and are uniquely positioned to shape community attitudes on a range of social issues including sexuality (Selina; Gaum, 2021). During the apartheid era, faith communities in partnership with the local community leaders (particularly traditional leaders), played a tremendous role in the dismantling of the white supremacy regime and in supporting the human rights of black people in South Africa and continue to play this role in many other countries (Dube, 2018).

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[4] The African faith communities in question are members of the African Initiated Churches. These churches are technically those churches which at the beginning of the twentieth century, either broke away from mission churches or missionary/mainline Christianity or were founded independently of European missionary activities and are headed by African leaders (Venter, 2004).

Among many other things, the church "spoke against race classification; the forced removal of population groups due to the Group Areas Act; the Immorality Act and Mixed Marriages Act, designed to preserve racial purity; the various education acts which created separate kinds of education along ethnic lines; as well as job reservation" (De Gruchy, 1986, p. 88 *apud* Masuku, 2014, p. 151). Church pulpits and assemblies provided an array of platforms for black people to engage in a prophetic vocation against the apartheid system at a time when few others were available in the black community (Allen, 2006, p. 233 *apud* Kumalo; Dziva, 2007). This non-violent approach of the church proved to be a major factor in the downfall of apartheid, despite predictions that transaction comes through violent revolutionary cataclysm (Hudson-Allison, 2000 *apud* Dube; Molise, 2018, p. 161). All in all, faith communities remain the most important part of many South Africans and are an organizing center for political and social movements, providing marginalized communities with an empowered voice to engage in social justice issues (Bent-Goodley; Vil; Hubbert, 2012, p. 53). This leads one to assume that churches can play an active and prominent role in addressing the violence of heteronormativity including harmful practices aimed at silencing and suppressing black Izitabane women's identities.

The purpose of this article is to determine the experiences of, reasons for, and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal; to explore the concept of faith in ending homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal; as well as to engage Queer Theology as a faith resource to enable the formation and development of counter communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

1.   Preliminary Literature Review

1.1 Part One: Placing Violence Faced by Black Izitabane Women in Context

Sexuality and sexual activity, regardless of the society, are intricately linked with the exercise of power (Foucault, 1980 *apud* Msibi, 2011, p. 57) and continue to be highly controlled and heavily policed (Msibi, 2011, p. 57). In many cultures, including African cultures, sexuality is organized around the heterosexual/homosexual binary, a

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symmetrical and oppositional coupling of a marginal category (homosexuality) with a privileged class (heterosexuality) (Sedgwick, 1990). A closer examination of such binary, according to Katz, reveals that heterosexuality depends on subordinate or marginalized sexualities such as Ubutabane and other sexualities to reinforce and re-affirm its superior position (1995). Fuss elaborates: "For heterosexuality to achieve the status of 'compulsory', it must present itself as a practice governed by some internal necessity. The language and law that [regulate] the establishment of heterosexuality as both an identity and an institution, both a practice and a system, is the language and law of defense and protection" (Fuss, 1991, p. 2).

Despite its dependence on Ubutabane as a category, heterosexuality has largely remained opaque, unquestioned, and unproblematized (Igraham, 1996). It is simultaneously marked as a natural and given category and unmarked as a ubiquitous and invisible force permeating all aspects of social life (Warner, 2002). When the view is that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate, authentic, prescriptive, and ruling social, cultural, and sexual arrangements, it becomes heteronormativity (Robinson, 2005, p. 19). Yep (2003, p. 18) defines heteronormativity, as the invisible center and the presumed bedrock of society, the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others. While Yep's observation may seem ancient, heteronormativity remains strongly encoded in the very fabric of our social, legal, economic, political, educational, and religious institutions yet remains largely invisible and elusive (van der Toorn; Pliskin; Morgenroth, 2020 cf. Epstein; Johnson, 1994).

Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is, organized as a sexuality- but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; marked as a natural state, or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations-often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions (Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 309). Heteronormativity makes heterosexuality hegemonic in our general culture through the process of normalization (Weeks, 1996). This process of

normalization serves to stigmatize, marginalize, subordinate, oppress, and regulate other sexualities, notably Izitabane - pushing Izitabane to the margins of society. These include formal restrictions on behaviors that challenge heteronormativity, with homophobic laws present in at least 76 countries criminalizing consensual, adult Ubutabane relationships, cross-dressing, cross-gender behavior, and/or even discussions of non-traditional sexualities.

In African countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Iran, Mauritania, and parts of Somalia, punishments for people whose sexual orientation or gender identity, or expression offends heteronormativity range from imprisonment to the death penalty (Simmons, 2014). Studies point out that at the heart of this "are perceptions of how people should 'be', based on binaries that have hardened, blurred, or been redrawn over millennia between shifting layers of cultural, religious, political, and economic norms" (Ewing et al., 2020, p. 1; cf. Morrissey, 2013; Thoreson, 2013; Epprecht, 2013; Koraan; Geduld, 2015). In South Africa, one of the structures that uphold the heteronormative ideology is violence against black Izitabane women, and homophobic rape, also known as 'corrective rape' is one form that it can take (Lake, 2014 cf. Warner, 1999; Jewkes et al., 2011). According to Msibi, in contrast to other African nations, where expressions of homophobia are institutionally, socially, and individually permitted and endorsed through the law, violence against Izitabane in South Africa operates in violation of the law that seeks to protect Izitabane from discrimination (Msibi, 2011).

Religion and cultural arguments are often used to reject the existence of Ubutabane and to support and justify the violence and discrimination against Izitabane. One aspect of this argument in South Africa is that Ubutabane is "un-African," 'unChristian,' 'immoral,' and against the African culture, religion, and laws (Awondo; Reid, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013). With repetition by the media and reinforcement by religious, political, and at times even traditional extremists, such views persist (Ewing; Brown; Mkhize; Msibi, 2020), despite the fact that many Izitabane South Africans have been raised under religion and continue to honor their religions. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.1-9 and the Creation account in Genesis 1-2 serve as the foundation for African discrimination against black Izitabane women. The argument by church leaders and people of faith is that God created Adam and Eve, and men and women for procreation purposes. In this manner,

marriage between a male and a female is viewed as correlative, exclusive, comprehensive, and permanent (Hunter, 2014, p. 23).

Black Izitabane women find themselves on the receiving end of horrific forms of violence, ranging from verbal violence to physical harm and murder, and are generally stigmatized by their families and society at large as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Nel; Judge, 2008; Mkhize et al., 2010). Between 2001 and 2002, the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project in Johannesburg, South Africa, found that 32% of black Izitabane women had been raped at some point in their lives, 5.5% had been the victims of robbery, and 91% had been assaulted (*apud* Naidoo; Karels, 2012, p. 239). LulekiSizwe, a non-profit organization that helps survivors of rape in the Western Cape has been, on more than one occasion, reported having stated that each year at least 500 Izitabane report being victims of 'corrective rape' in South Africa (Gaitho, 2022). Statistics provided by Triangle, a non-profit organization based in Cape Town, show that support groups dealt with 10 new 'corrective rape' cases every week (*apud* Van der Schyff, 2018, p. 37). These cases were reported in Cape Town alone. Another research published in 2003 by OUT LGBT Well-being, a non-profit organization, revealed that 10% of black Izitabane women had experienced some form of sexual assault.

In 2016 OUT found that 41% of Izitabane surveyed in South Africa knew someone who had been murdered because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The majority of these hate crimes take place in public spaces and sometimes at the hands of people who are known by the survivor or victim of the crime (Strudwick, 2014).

Furthermore, in South Africa, we cannot talk about violence against black Izitabane women without considering the apartheid system. The long and complicated history of discrimination and violence serves as the backdrop of the hate crimes and social prejudice experienced by many black Izitabane women and many other individuals who are merely suspected of expressing, affection or desire across socially constructed sex and gender boundaries (Munro, 2005). According to Cameron: "Apartheid valued conformity. Above everything else, it prized so-called racial purity. It treasured whiteness and European culture. Its entire edifice of separation, of exclusion, of subordination, of pass laws and body searches was built on the premise that one culture, one race, one skin color, was superior, valuable above all others" (Cameron,

2014, p. 212). This deeply ingrained system of racial and cultural superiority has profoundly affected black Izitabane women in South Africa. The intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation subjects these women to multiple layers of marginalization and violence. Under apartheid, black bodies were already considered inferior, and this systemic devaluation extended to gender and sexual minorities within black communities. Consequently, black Izitabane women face heightened vulnerability to violence and discrimination, both from broader society and within their own communities, where traditional gender roles and heteronormativity may be strictly enforced.

Due to hate crimes and other related pressures, Izitabane are at risk for negative health and mental health outcomes and are likely to attempt suicide, drop out of school, experience homelessness, and use illegal drugs (Garnets; Herek; Levy, 1990; cf. Willis, 2004). These issues may also contribute to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and feelings of isolation (Jewkes et al, 2009). More or less the same data were discovered in Muller's study that involved Izitabane and 14 representatives of Izitabane organizations in South Africa (Muller, 2017). Similarly, Jewkes and colleagues found that hate crimes have extreme physical and mental consequences for survivors, and can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (including intrusive memories, flashbacks, and nightmares), which could, if untreated, in the long-term lead to increased anxiety, suicidality, and/or major depression (tiredness, temper outburst, worthlessness, helplessness, insomnia, hopelessness) (2009). Survivors are often so traumatized that they live in constant fear, which, according to Nel and Judge, "can have a chilling effect on the ways they present themselves in public, often encouraging them to play down or "closet" their sexual orientation or gender non-conformity" (Nel; Judge, 2008 *apud* Naidoo; Karels, 2012, p. 248).

In addition, a number of fundamental rights of the survivors are violated, and they are denied the promise of a post-apartheid South Africa that is free from all forms of fear, hatred, and bigotry. As Di Silvio eloquently stated: the perpetrators of hate crimes "robs its victims of their dignity and strikes fear in their hearts for merely contemplating the exercise of their everyday rights" (Di Silvio, 2011, p. 1485). The right to life as guaranteed by section 11 of the South African Constitution is also diminished (Nwambele; Wheal, 2015). Many survivors further face secondary

discrimination and stigma from family and community members. The concept of intersectionality provides a useful framework to interrogate and highlight the violent experiences of black Izitabane women in South Africa. Meyer argues that employing this framework will assist in revealing how black Izitabane women's experiences differ along the lines of race, class, and gender (Meyer, 2008). An intersectionality approach facilitates our understanding of the ways in which black Izitabane women interpret and experience violence in South Africa. The term "intersectional" was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, who is credited with founding the field of intersectionality studies (Moreau, 2015).

1.2 Part Two: Creating Counter Communities of Care

In South Africa, faith communities are known for their prominent role in fighting for justice and also for bringing healing to black people. "Since the sixties until the change in 1994, the prophetic church in South Africa, directed by South African liberation theology, has had a huge influence on people, here and overseas, so much so that the previous government eventually had to fully acknowledge this" (Pieterse, 1999: p.82). Faith communities spoke with a powerful and fearless voice against apartheid (Pieterse, 1999, *apud* Coetzee, 2004). During this era, most African churches were part of the revolution and pleaded for action against violence. The church urged its "followers and members to take part actively in the struggle; to see this participation as a calling, based on a specific way and method of interpreting the Bible" (Pieterse, 1999, *apud* Coetzee, 2004: p.342). Religion and the Bible were a foundation that gave rise to values that are fundamental to human rights, such as human dignity, freedom, justice, and equality.

The South African context, in this way, presents an opportunity for religion and Christianity, in particular, to make a significant contribution to ending homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women and in protecting and caring for those most vulnerable. Regardless of how the church views Ubutabane, supporting vulnerable individuals is critical to biblical interpretation and appropriation (West; Van der Walt; Kaoma, 2016).

The ethos of Christian hospitality can provide insights into the contemporary church's welcoming and inclusive approach towards all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. The idea of hospitality is a theme that is often portrayed in biblical narratives. In the Kantian sense, hospitality addresses the idea, particularly in his understanding of the term as the 'natural right' "of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another." For Kant, this right is also possessed by all humans (Kant *apud* Henry, 2018). Kant saw hospitality as the defining element that brings people of different cultures together (Kant *apud* Siddiqui, 2015). Hospitality "welcomes 'the stranger' as one worthy of being considered a household member, marking a willingness to make room for another's unique presence" (Reynolds, 2008: p.191).

2. Theoretical Lens: Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology

> *[W]e must remember that the starting point of our theologies are bodies, but the rebellious bodies: ... (Althaus-Reid, 2004, p.148).*

Queer Theology is a relative system of theology, as it seeks to reflect upon faith in concrete social, political, and cultural contexts (Cheng, 2011). The literature reviewed suggests that black Izitabane women in South Africa face unique challenges, including limited access to faith spaces because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Literature also shows that discussions about sexuality, in general, remain silenced, and Ubutabane is considered to be "un-African and un-Christian". Through Christianity, heteronormativity becomes an organizing principle against black Izitabane women's sexual identities and sexual activity (Boesak, 2019). Queer Theology offers a useful way of understanding experiences of being black, Isitabane, religious, and African in a 'heterodominant' world and notes the circumstances under which gender and sexual minorities give meaning to religious violence. This theoretical framework can be understood as a way of doing theology that is rooted in Queer Theory and that critiques the binary categories of sexuality (that is, Ubutabane vs. heterosexual) and gender identity (that is, female vs. male) as socially constructed (Boesak, 2019, p. 19).

According to Cheng, Queer Theology is Izitabane people "talking about God" in a self-consciously transgressive manner, a "talk about God" that challenges and

deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity (Boesak, 2019). Queer Theology emphasizes the fluid and humanly performed nature of sexuality- or better, sexualities. It questions socially established norms and dualistic categories, focusing on challenging sexuality, gender, class, and racial classification. It further deconstructs heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology but also unveils the different and the suppressed face of God amidst it by presenting a deeply incarnational account in which God is found in human flesh and human flesh thus reflects God (Althaus-reid; Isherwood, 2004). Queer Theology in Christianity is not about apologetics for the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in Christianity (Tonstad, 2018), but the point in Queer Theology is a resistance to normativity and a subversion of the politics of representation which are essentialist and reductionist (Althaus-Reid, 2005).

According to Althaus-Reid, the theological underpinnings of Queer Theology are formed on the ground where theology has been thought, the grounds of ideological legitimacy. The gender of God becomes irrelevant, not because it gets subsumed into something 'higher' but because legitimacy and illegitimacy in theology are no longer kept within the boundaries of boys and girls or heterosexuals versus Izitabane. Althaus-Reid goes on to say that Queer Theology presents a unique challenge to theology, that is, to do theology from a different sexual epistemology (Althaus-Reid, 2005). Within the African contextual faith landscape, Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology is an explored theology. Similar to Queer Theology, Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology calls for a theology by Izitabane people and for Izitabane people in Africa. It engages with the backlash of Izitabane people by reclaiming the term "Izitabane" which has frequently been used in a discriminative manner to undermine and shame Izitabane individuals. Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology calls for theological reflections done by those, starting from the lived experiences of those, who often negatively identify in the African context with the term Isitabane, "In the process, disrupting the traditional status of authoritative voices when it comes to theological discourse as well as the dominant direction of theological reflection and engagement" (Davids et al., 2019: p.7). Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology provides an appropriate lens for understanding black Izitabane women's experiences within the African faith context.

This theology not only acknowledges but centers the lived realities of these women, promoting a more inclusive and empathetic theological framework. By doing so, it contributes to the creation of communities of care where black Izitabane women can find support, validation, and solidarity. Communities of care are essential in addressing the unique challenges faced by black Izitabane women. These communities offer a safe space for sharing experiences, fostering resilience, and providing mutual support. They also serve as a platform for advocacy and education, challenging societal norms and working towards greater acceptance and equality. In essence, communities of care, informed by Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology, play a crucial role in the empowerment and well-being of black Izitabane women in South Africa.

3.   Research Methodology

The research design refers "to the overall strategy and analytical approach that you have chosen in order to integrate, in a coherent and logical way, the different components of the study, thus ensuring that the research problem will be thoroughly investigated" (De Vaus, 2006: p.8). Qualitative inquiry focuses on researching "into an experience" (Clandinin; Connelly, 2000: p.50). Qualitative research is defined by Denzel and Lincolns as a situated activity that involves interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. It emphasizes studying things in their natural settings and interpreting phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. This involves various activities such as field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. (Denzin; Lincoln, 2000). In qualitative research, personal experiences, narratives, and opinions are valuable data that provide researchers with tools to find the answers they are looking for (Catherine; Rossman, 2022). Qualitative research is the appropriate research design because it allows me to gain an in-depth and thorough understanding of how black Izitabane women perceive and derive meaning from their experiences. It also enables me to gain insights into how these women relate to and comprehend concepts such as *Isitabane* and *faith*.

4.   Autoethnography

Autoethnography "is a unique qualitative methodology that draws upon several qualitative traditions, including narrative research, autobiography, ethnography, and arts-based research" (Cooper; Lilyea, 2022, p. 197). As a method of inquiry, autoethnography deploys data sources that capture the critical events of the researcher's life, such as photographs and medical records. As Chang stated, autoethnography "draws from autobiographic data such as memories, memorabilia, documents about themselves, official records, photos, interviews with others, and ongoing self-reflective and self-observational memos" (Cooper; Lilyea, 2022, p. 107-108). By employing autoethnography, I examine personal experiences from my life that pertain to my research topic and consider the impact of homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices on health, well-being, and identity. In autoethnography, "the process of triangulating internal thoughts and external behaviors, current memories with past notes or artifacts, descriptive facts with visceral emotions, and so forth is key to creating the ability to observe oneself and thereby, allowing for beneficial contrast and comparisons" (Cooper; Lilyea, 2022, p. 202). The chosen methodology is inspired by my own personal experience of growing up in a rural community setting that is very religious, which contributed to how I viewed myself and my sexuality.

To collect data for this study, I employed three techniques: my own personal narrative, one focus group discussion with nine black Izitabane women, and individual interviews. The first step began by writing my own personal narrative. This exercise employed the criteria of selecting six key moments or themes that define my journey of *Being Acquainted with Christianity*; my *Journey of Coming Out as Isitabane*; being *Split Between Two Worlds*; *Recreating and Reclaiming My Sexuality and Christian Identity*; being *Condemned by Religion*; and *Redefining Faith*. I presented these six snapshot stories as the first step of data collection and to reflect on my struggle with the studied phenomena, using artifacts such as photographs, a song, a narrative, and memories to re-tell these critical moments from my life. The intention of using the narrative research design for this study was to examine my experiences in relation to the studied phenomenon, develop a more comprehensive understanding of myself, improve understanding of the larger cultural group of black Izitabane women and homophobic

hatred and violence, explore the role of Christian faith in the lives of black Izitabane women, as well as to consider how in my experiences, I have dealt with the questions that religion mainly Christianity raises about Ubutabane.

This method provided me with a way to think about what it means to be as I live through experiences that are shaped and influenced by violence, culture, and religion. My personal narratives were used as a rational source and base for collecting data. I wrote a narrative about the struggles of being black Isitabane women and growing up in rural conservative South Africa that were later incorporated into the complex narratives of other black Izitabane women of varying social statuses in Pietermaritzburg, offering an analysis grounded in queer theory. According to Stone-Mediatore, narration plays a vital role in reclaiming the agencies of people who have been excluded and whose existence remains a struggle: "First, because the act of telling one's own story is empowering for the storyteller, especially for people who have been excluded from official knowledge-producing institutions. Telling their own stories enables them to reclaim epistemic authority and counter the objectified, dehumanized representations of them circulated by others" (Stone-Mediatore; Stone-Mediatore, 2003: p.126).

According to Denzin & Lincoln, focus group discussions have the potential to produce rich data as participants interact and compare their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995). To form a focus group discussion, I used the six snapshots discussed above as discussion prompts. The intention was to invite and allow other black Izitabane women to share whatever emotions that were brought up by sharing my narrative that is drawn directly from my own lived experiences with them. This method enabled me to connect with the identified participants and explore my experiences, particularly about faith, violence, culture, and sexuality. It also allowed me to test if my experiences resonate with their experiences and how the other black Izitabane women make meanings of these experiences.

The last set of data for this study was collected through individual interviews with nine black Izitabane women to explore their personal experiences with the studied phenomena. For a subject as delicate and intricate as this one, individual interviews were deemed to be more appropriate. Using individual interviews in a qualitative study provided an opportunity for clarification and flexibility to explore the participant's perspectives (McIntosh, 2015). Individual interviews with the participants were

conducted in order to demonstrate the possibility of alternative approaches to ending violence against black Izitabane women and to gather information that will assist in transforming the stance of African faith communities regarding Ubutabane. Seven exploratory questions were structured to guide the interview.

This study was conducted in Pietermaritzburg KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, with nine black Izitabane women, including me, the researcher, as the 10th participant. All the participants in this study openly self-identify as Izitabane, African, Black, South African, and navigating faith. Participants were approached and selected through a local Izitabane support group, Uthingo Network[5] in Pietermaritzburg. Participants were active members or beneficiaries of the Uthingo Network and have experienced homophobic hatred and violence. Uthingo Network is a registered non-profit organization (NPO) that was started in response to the need for Izitabane in and around KwaZulu-Natal to have a safe space. The site was chosen based on three criteria: 1) its interest in providing safe spaces to Izitabane, 2) its interest in addressing violence against Izitabane in African countries, and 3) it is known by many Izitabane. The study sample was generated using the purposive sampling method; participants were selected because they occupy a defined position in a structure or social order and so have a distinct perspective to offer in relation to the study objective (Etikan, Musa; Alkassim, 2016).

Six resonant themes that emerged from the findings were as follows: "*Religion is Still a Big Part of My Life"*: Recognizing Christian Faith as an Important Part of Black Izitabane Women's Lives; *"Uma Ufuna Ukuba Isitabane Uzoya Esihogweni[6]"*: The Journey of Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure – Stories of Becoming; *"Udinga Umfana nje o-Strong Ozolala Nawe Uzoba Right[7]"*: Being Isitabane in a Heteronormative Socioreligious Society; *"Njengoba Esekulobolile He Has Every Right to You[8]"*: Wrestling with Social Responses to Izitabane Sexuality; *"Unkulunkulu Uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu Uyazizonda Izidakwa"[9]*: Dealing with Internalized Homophobia and Challenging Harmful Christian Perspective Concerning Ubutabane;

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[5] (https://www.uthingonetwork.org.za/)
[6] If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell
[7] You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change
[8] Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now and he has every right to you
[9] God hates Izitabane, God hates drunkards

and; *"... Personify Your Experience. Personify Your God":* Fighting back from the Margins. These themes suggest that one's spiritual development could be a source of resilience, empowerment, and meaning.

4.1. *"Religion is still a big part of my life": Recognizing Christian Faith as an Important Part of Black Izitabane women's lives.*

The first theme that was extracted demonstrates that black Izitabane women have strong connections to the religion of Christianity and were raised as part of the church, despite the fact that these connections frequently come with challenges related to Ubutabane sexuality. According to Van Klinken, the pervasiveness of religion of Africans is "notoriously religious," meaning that many Africans are religious and that religion has a significant impact on sociopolitical life. In such a context, being explicitly and openly non- or antireligious is not only uncommon but socially and culturally also more or less unacceptable. Van Klinken further maintains that in Africa, religious adherence is not simply a matter of individual choice but (also of family history, community, and culture) (Van Klinken, 2015). This was evident in this study. The women in this study describe their journey with faith in a similar language. All the women were raised within the Christian church and they acknowledged that religious faith is important in their lives. The following quote demonstrates the place of the church and religion in the lives of black Izitabane women in South Africa:

> "I'm an Apostle… I grew up in the church almost like everyone else here. My grandpa was one of the church founders. He was a leader, so growing up as a little kid with no clue about my sexuality at that time, it was exciting until I grew up and discovered myself. It wasn't my choice [going to church] but I loved the idea of believing... I still believe in God. I guess because of my grandpa, I still have that thing that even though I'm an Apostle, there are a lot of other religions that I want to explore. I've tried some and felt comfortable, but there's that thing that maybe I was raised in the Apostolic. There's that thing that says Apostolic Apostolic. But yes, it wasn't my choice and I love believing, unfortunately" (Participant #8 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023).

These experiences shared by black Izitabane women are consistent with Marc Epprecht's findings in his book *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*, where he notes

that "many African Izitabane [lesbian and gay people] … are proudly happily and deeply religious" (2013, p. 66-67).

4.2. *"Uma ufuna ukuba Isitabane uzoya esihogweni[10]": Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure – Stories of Becoming*

"Coming out," the act of letting people know that you are not a heterosexual through means of dating people of the same sex freely and openly" (Masson; Nkosi, 2017: p.87) can be challenging for black Izitabane women since they belong to a community and embody an identity that has been oppressed and discriminated against based on race and gender; coming out as an Isitabane can feel isolating. This isolation can be even more challenging for individuals if there is no one in their community who shares these identities. Most women in this study have disclosed their sexual identity to at least one member of their family or assumed that family members knew, even though they did not explicitly disclose their sexual identity. In their responses, the families of those who disclosed their sexual identities were either supportive, confused, in denial, or unsupportive. Furthermore, some of these women shared that they experienced an inherent dilemma that caused internal conflict surrounding the question of how one can live life being sexually attracted to women and also be a member of the church they belong to. One woman shared:

> "… it's hard … because growing up at home, they teach you how to behave like a girl. So now you come with these feelings. How do I fit into all the teachings that I was raised with? The Christian way, you see. Everything that I was taught when I was growing up. So, I think, for one, both these things- being Isitabane and being a Christian are fighting with each other. I think there's a conflict …" (Participant #1 – Individual Interview, 14 November 2023).

Some chose to abandon their faith communities to be true to their identity as Izitabane:

> "… the last time I attended church was in primary school. I decided to stop because I noticed that people like me were seen as sinners… There was always that fear that maybe they would think that I was tainting the dignity of the church, so I decided to stop going to church

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[10] If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell.

> and live my life... I'm not going to lie; there's a lot of judgment in my church… the Zion church. People from that church are not good people. They go to church and call themselves Abazalwane [believers], but they are not good people" (Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023).

Others tried to hide their sexual orientation in order to follow their conservative Christian faith:

> "It was hard. I tried praying about it, trying to change myself… I tried to hide it. I failed. I failed until I reached the point where I realized that I should be me" (Participant #3 – Individual Interview, 16 November 2023).

The experiences documented in the literature align with the findings of this study, demonstrating that for black Izitabane women who identify as Christians, the process of coming out is an ongoing journey. These women grapple with the complexities of disclosing their sexual orientation within the context of their religious beliefs, navigating a multitude of decisions regarding whom to come out to, when, and in what setting. Moreover, the ongoing nature of the coming-out process underscores the persistent barriers and stigmas faced by black Izitabane women within both religious and societal contexts. Despite the progressive constitution in South Africa, many continue to grapple with the fear of rejection, discrimination, and isolation, which profoundly impact our sense of self and belonging.

4.3. *"Udinga umfana nje ostrong ozolala nawe uzoba right[11]": Being Isitabane in a heteronormative Socioreligious Society;*

Heteronormativity, as defined in queer theory, is the presumption and privileging of gender conformity, heterosexuality, and nuclear families over all other "deviant" forms of gender expression, sexuality, and families (Oswald et al., 2009). By self-identifying as Isitabane, black Izitabane women undermine heteronormativity and must interact with societal heteronormative messages while reconciling these messages with their sexual identities (Oswald et al., 2009). Many women involved in this study spoke of heteronormative expectations early in their lives and shared that they felt pressured to conform to heteronormative expectations from a young age.

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[11] You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change.

Heteronormativity legitimates homophobia – the irrational fear of Izitabane people- and heterosexism – the discrimination of sexual minorities with social relations and structures. Heteronormative standards and discourses that legitimate the discrimination of sexual minorities can be found in most social institutions, including religion, the family, education, the media, the law, and the state. Under dominant heteronormative standards, heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary opposites. The gender roles of masculine men and feminine women are naturalized, and sexual relations between complementary gender roles should be consummated in the private sphere. Monogamous, marital, and procreative heterosexuality is considered superior to all other sexual expressions (Robinson, 2016). Violence against Izitabane women is normalized and accepted. One woman shared her experience of when she was attacked by an unknown man who didn't like that she was Isitabane.

> "I tried to calm myself so that if he tried something, I'd be ready for him. Then I heard him saying, "Why u-so? Why wenza lento oyenzayo?" [Why are you like this? Why are you doing what you're doing]. I kept quiet and continued with what I was doing while observing his next move. He grabbed me and pointed a knife at me. You see this scar [showing me the scar on her finger]. He nearly chopped off my finger. We fought. He tried to pull me to the nearest bush. We fought. I was able to get away from him. I found a rock, and I hit him with it. He fell, and that's when I was able to escape. We don't know who he is, and he has never been found. Even his voice, I don't think I can recognize it" (Participant #4 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023).

Another woman shared her story of how she was betrayed by someone she had met on a night out:

> "Next thing, I woke up at his place. It was a whole mess. I am mentioning this story because the morning after, when I confronted him, he said the words, "Relax, we used a condom. I had to show you what you were missing out. You could be a proper girl. Look at you; you're so beautiful". So, that's why I'm mentioning this because he knew and he saw very well that I'm lesbian [Isitabane woman], and he did that" (Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 27 November 2023).

According to Van der Walt, conservative religious and cultural discourses are often employed to support Izitabane condemnation, exclusion, and violence. Van der Walt further adds that it is frequently held that the Bible is clear on Izitabane realities. This positionality holds that there is no possibility for the inclusion of Izitabane people,

that Izitabane are an abomination, and that their "lifestyle" should be avoided, repented from, and corrected. Van der Walt further elaborates that this positionality further holds that Izitabane people are immoral and only found on the fringes of society and could, therefore, in no way form part of any vibrant community, especially not faith communities. Faith and sexuality, according to this position, are not matters that can be discussed in the same context, and issues of sexuality and intimacy should best be engaged in a private setting, if at all. Izitabane people and their lives can, as a result, only be discussed and engaged in the context of violence (2022b).

4.4. *"Njengoba esekulobolile he has every right to you[12]": Wrestling with Social Responses to Izitabane Sexuality;*

While some Christians accept that Christianity and Ubutabane can co-exist, many maintain that the notion is contradictory to the essential principles of the Christian faith (Masson; Nkosi, 2017; Yip, 2002; Keena, 2015). These contrasting viewpoints are often based on different interpretations of Bible Scriptures and cultural beliefs about sexuality. The third theme that was extracted from the data addresses intimate and important questions that speak to the complexities faced by black Izitabane women in the Southern African context, who, despite constitutional protection, navigate violence and the threat of violence (Robertson, 2020). The theme speaks to challenges and the tension of embodying two "contradicting" identities in a black heteronormative society. Participant #8 shared her experience of when she was kicked out of her home for bringing her girlfriend: "My family and my aunt kicked me out and told me that nothing like that had ever happened before" (Participant 8—Individual Interview—WhatsApp, 27 November 2023).

The topic of heterosexual marriage is another source of contention that frequently arose, particularly among black Izitabane women who attended the 12th Apostle Church and Nazareth Baptist Church. The women who belonged to these denominations shared that they had been asked for marriage by men countless times. One participant even shared that she decided to stop going to church due to this: "… the

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[12] Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now and he has every right to you

last time I went to church, someone wanted Ukungikhetha, and this was the third time. I left because I realized that things were getting out of hand" (Participant #4: Individual Interview, 20 November 2023).

These women are expected by the church to dress and conduct themselves in a certain way which is in contradiction of who they are. For those individuals who choose to defy these social expectations, the imagined punishment is severe, such as eternal damnation or burning in hell.

Another aspect of the internal conflict expressed by the women in this study is best categorized as pressure, particularly from other people of faith, whether of their faith or another faith. Many Christians who stand firm in opposition are not hesitant to proclaim their conviction that the people who identify as Izitabane are sinners. These are the beliefs and practices that allow homophobic hatred and violence to flourish and deny rights to Izitabane. Loughlin made a valid point, when he stated,

> "In the secular world, it would be wrong to dismiss someone for being queer, but it would be right to do so in the world of the Church. To many this seems like a hypocritical double-standard, affirming what is at the same time denied. But the Church has always advocated multiple standards, which are presented as a ladder of perfection, which we climb by embracing even more rigorous forms of life" (Loughlin, 2004, p.75).

The current study found that the benefits of spirituality and religion are limited, and this was evident throughout the literature (Van Klinken, 2023). Many people, both within and outside faith communities, struggle to accept queer [Izitabane] women as moral and equal human beings (Griffin, 2000). Religious texts, such as the Bible, are directly used to forbid Ubutabane activity, creating the basis for tension between traditional religion and Ubutabane. Most spiritual teachings focus on how people, and women in particular, should conduct themselves, including what they should or shouldn't wear. For the women in this study, bodily expression of their Ubutabane seems to be the number one factor that contributed to their exclusion.

Furthermore, within the Christian tradition, it is understood that all persons are created in the image and likeness of their Creator, and, therefore, have innate sacred worth. The church community is seen as a reflection of God's love and ideal for humanity, aspiring to be a space characterized by acceptance, compassion, and solace.

However, this has not been the experience for most black Izitabane women in conservative churches, who have had to look outside the church to find fellowship and support in their journeys of faith. With strength and tenacity, these women, who have been raised in a conservative church, remain true to themselves while continuing to pursue their faith and live authentic and open lives. Many Izitabane women who have not had positive experiences with the conservative church, may believe that the only answer is to leave religion altogether. They may then feel free to form their versions of Christianity, by either worshipping privately or by creating small networks of support groups to incorporate a supportive and like-minded para-church community into their spiritual practice. Participant #9 shared:

> "… I just pray at home. I praise at home, I praise in spiritual spaces. I know for some, it's the mountain; for others like me, it's being in nature, being in water; it's being in so many different spiritual spaces that exist that don't need me to be confined to anything for me to be accepted. That's what faith has become for me. It's become so personal that no matter where I go I will never lose anything because I still can carry that faith with me. When I feel like I need to be in the water I can do that anywhere…" (Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 28 November 2023).

Barton's study with 47 lesbian women in the United States of America found that many Izitabane have to endure sitting in church services listening to faith leaders advocating for the end of homosexuality by any means, being told that they must "pray away the gay]" to enter heaven. Numerous lesbian women in Burton's study reported having been alienated and scrutinized (Woodruffe-Burton & Bairstow, 2013). This was true for the women in the present study. One woman shared:

> "When I realized that I was living this life, I saw how people looked at me, even though they had never said anything to me directly. I decided right there and there that being crucified by these people [the church] was not working out for me. So, I decided to stay at home and worship God by praying all the time and yes, I still believe in God" (Participant #2 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023).

As they struggle to accept their sexuality, one participant shared that they experienced a "deep, deep dark hole," but she noted: "Ubutabane is what kept me going." Some spoke very movingly about how God loved and accepted them as they were, and how realizing this had helped them to accept themselves. In contrast to the belief that God accepts everyone, the women in this study had either experienced

rejection from people within the church or were concerned about the painful possibility if they disclosed their sexuality to the wrong person.

4.5. *"Unkulunkulu uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu uyazizonda izidakwa": Dealing with Internalized Homophobia and Challenging Harmful Christian Perspective Concerning Ubutabane;*

Another important finding in this study is the development of internalized homophobia, which alludes to the negative self-discernment embraced by Izitabane women and men who have internalized the culture's negative messages about themselves, resulting in a shame-based self-image of being "flawed," "damaged," or otherwise "less-than" their heterosexual counterparts. Internalized homophobia has been named one of the biggest barriers to the Izitabane faith and well-being of Izitabane women and men because of its association with guilt, depression, and feelings of worthlessness.

The women in the study conveyed a sense that being an Isitabane woman and being a Christian were both important self-identity concepts for them. For some, feeling that two key aspects of their identity were incompatible had caused them considerable distress and led them to search for ways to reconcile their faith and sexuality. For example, participant #1 shared:

> "For the past year or two, I have been trying to understand how to fit my life into Christianity and I have researched different religions… Just recently I have come to understand that it is not the religion itself but people who are preaching it. I decided that let me take Christianity, let me take the bible, and let me live it according to my life. For the past couple of months, that is what I have been doing. I read the Bible and base those verses on my life" (Individual Interview - 14 November 2023).

According to Kirkman, a reexamination of sexuality and sexual relationships, incorporating faithful reading of scripture, particularly from a liberal, progressive perspective, and soul-searching, may result in the successful integration of these two seemingly paradoxical parts of oneself as both Christian and queer (Kirkman, 2001 *apud* in Speakmna, 2009). Yip argues that if one believes in a radically inclusive God, who created all sexualities to be celebrated and accepted, then one must conclude that queer women are totally and completely accepted by God and valued as part of God's

family (Yip, 2002). It was also found that not all women experienced inner conflict regarding their religious and sexual identities, but all participants had, over time, come to integrate these two identities. In addition, all the women were clear that experiencing Ubutabane attraction was not a choice or something they could control and, therefore, could not be a sin. Participant #8 for example, expressed that, while she found other religions more accepting, she just couldn't bring herself to leave her old church:

> "There are a lot of other religions that I want to explore. I've tried some and felt comfortable, but there's that thing that says Apostolic Apostolic, maybe I was raised in the Apostolic." (Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2022).

4.6. "… Personify your experience. Personify your God": Fighting back from the Margins.

The study found that most of these women who were involved have come to the realization that God loves and accepts everyone as they are, and they carry this knowledge with them to find comfort, guidance, and a sense of peace and well-being. These women have also reappropriated the word Isitabane, previously used to discriminate against black queer bodies, and now use it positively. West reminded her readers that there is a long tradition of those who have been oppressed to, "choose their own words to name themselves rather than allowing the dominant culture to assign negative meaning to certain words that are used to demonize a group of people" (West, 2008, p. 1). By reclaiming the word "Isitabane" for ourselves, we internalize the idea that our identity is defined by us and not by the majority culture. When connecting the words "Isitabane" and "Christianity", Izitabane people of faith can define the tenants "Isitabane" and "Christianity", Izitabane people of faith can define the tenets of Christianity by their terms and experiences, free from blindly swallowing what they've been taught by the dominant culture. Just as members of different ethnic groups and nationalities have their worship and preaching styles, music, and even different interpretations of scripture, Izitabane Christians also reflect a unique and valid experience of their relationship to the divine (West, 2008, p. 1). Just as each human being has his or her own deeply personal connection to God, so do Izitabane persons, as

they cannot and should not separate their sexuality from their spiritual practice (Horn et al., 2005).

One of the most beautiful aspects of reclaiming, deconstructing, and reconstructing our faith is the ability to see it from the perspective of our unique experiences. The way we understand and practice spirituality is shaped by our personal stories, struggles, and successes. It is within our power to redefine our faith and find new meanings that resonate with our identities. By embracing our authentic selves, we empower ourselves to explore and live our spirituality with genuine conviction. The women in this study speak about questioning and rejecting the conservative church's teachings and finding out for ourselves what is true and what is not. For example, participant #9 shared:

> "I think a lot of people accept information without necessarily questioning what is being given to them which is what happens in many churches. If a person goes to church and the pastor is convincing and so charismatic, wearing a shiny suit and preaching with a nice base you end up accepting whatever they say without actually questioning what they mean…" (Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023).

Similarly, the women recognized the popular interpretations of Bible scriptures, particularly scriptures that are frequently used to condemn Ubutabane. Participant #8 shared:

> "The Bible has been refined. Some things were taken out. Some were added to support whoever was in power at that time you know. We can't say in this day and age that the Bible as it is, that's how it was, or that's how God left His messages.". Participant #8 explained (Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023).

This illustrates that black Izitabane women have direct access to the Bible, and they can challenge the interpretations presented by religious leaders as well as the teaching of their pastors in the church. It was clear from the interviews that experiences of faith are crucial – the belief in God as creator and in God as love. The women expressed that their sexual identity as Izitabane women doesn't stop them from believing in God. One woman shared:

> "Just because I'm living this life, it doesn't mean that I have to stop believing in God; no, I haven't stopped. One thing that has kept me going in hard times or when I am experiencing challenges is to believe that Unkulunkulu uyena osidalile. Ubesahlali azi ukuthi vele

ngizophila lempilo [God created us this way, He always knew that I would live this life]. So, there is no need for me to worry about other people… I always put my trust in God all the time. No matter what people say or how they test me, my faith is strong and not going anywhere" (Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023).

The women acknowledge that God is love and that God created us in this beautiful way. Our sexuality is not something that we choose but just like our religious identity, it is an identity that develops as we grow, and this identity shapes how we understand ourselves and provides us with a basis on which we can navigate our religious identity and grow our faith. Referring to the words of *John 3 chapter 16,* one woman shared:

"When I read that verse alone and I break it down, it helps me understand what God meant when God said "Ekuqaleni Unkulunkulu walithanda kangaka izwe" [For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son]. That line on its own "He gave his only son" … God loves me more than a saint" (Individual Interview, 14 November 2023).

Another woman shared:

"I've told myself that I am God's child because everything is still going well for me. When I call God, God answers, meaning I am still God's child and God still loves me" (Participant #6 – Individual Interview, 21 November 2023).

The women viewed God as love and as the Creator who loves all human beings, especially those at the margins of society. This understanding of God helps to deal with the Bible scriptures that are used to condemn Ubutabane in many African faith communities. This understanding can also help African faith communities respond to violence that is targeting black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg and learn how to shape faith spaces in ways that might be more welcoming to Izitabane individuals. Faith leaders must be informed and advocate for black Izitabane women who are at the margins of society and promote social justice and social change as instructed by the Holy Bible. In addition, the teaching of the mainstream church is that Christ came to earth to save everyone, without exception, then that must also include those in the church who are Izitabane women. Loughlin argues that mainstream churches must acknowledge Izitabane as fully humans and fight and advocate for full inclusion and equality of all Izitabane in all aspects of life. Churches must fight, advocate, and

educate themselves about the struggles of all members of the church, especially marginalized individuals.

"Queer Christianity" reinterprets the Bible in light of the experiences of Izitabane people. Six clobber passages that are often used to condemn Ubutabane are reclaimed and reinterpreted to include Izitabane, with the objective being that, as Izitabane, we see ourselves as active members of theology. Koch, in his research, criticized the three primary arguments that scholars have used to support homosexuality in scripture. Koch challenges his readers by offering an alternative; "cruising" scripture to find Izitabane references (2001). His theory is that queer women of faith should not reject scripture; rather, they should look for stories and characters that honor the faithful Biblical heroes who might have had a different sexual orientation. Koch encourages queer individuals to "cruise the scripture" by "being open to possibility, paying attention to what catches your eye, pursuing your curiosity, following up on any promising signals, and simply "taking it from there."

It is with this understanding and frame of reference that those in the Christian community who identify as Izitabane may approach scripture and claim it as their own. When one can open oneself to the infinite possibilities of God's love, then one can stake a rightful claim that the Holy Bible was written for everybody as a love letter from God to God's people, with the two central tenets being love God and love one's neighbor. This offers Izitabane Christians the opportunity to develop a strong sense of who they are, that they are loved and supported, and provides them with a sense of meaning and purpose, which can be extremely beneficial to one's overall well-being.

The experiences recounted by black Izitabane women in this study offer faith communities a profound opportunity to challenge the prevailing assumptions that often shape discussions about the realities faced by those who live outside the norm in South Africa and across Africa. Queer Theology presents valuable tools for African faith communities to center the lives of Izitabane women within religious settings, facilitating nuanced and embodied conversations that honor diversity. By incorporating queer theological frameworks, African faith communities can actively engage with the complexities of Izitabane women's lives, acknowledging the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and faith. This framework encourages a critical examination of

traditional religious narratives and practices, inviting communities to confront and dismantle systems of oppression that marginalize and silence Izitabane women.

Final Consideration

Overall, the women in this study have met with complex challenges and painful situations while attempting to live their lives authentically and without compromise. Some of these challenges include being discriminated against by their religion and being frequently told about their alleged sins and the inevitable destination of hell. These negative experiences that the women in this study encountered have forced many to walk away from their churches. Unfortunately, most of these women in this study, who do not meet the expectations of heterosexuality, have not been able to find a supportive church environment where they can be free to express themselves fully, grow in their Christian faith, and be of service to others. The majority of the women shared that instead of going to church or seeking a welcoming and affirming church, they preferred to worship in the comfort of their own homes. Some shared that they left the churches where they grew up and were still looking for a new church where they could feel welcomed and comfortable with all their identities without having to choose one over the other. A number of the experiences and perceptions that these women shared reflect that they were out to their church communities and that they felt unwelcome in churches. Thus, the women pointed to how individuals at church treated them as the most critical factor in whether or not they experienced acceptance at church. In addition, the women shared that their experiences of faith and faith spaces have forced them not only to redefine and reframe their relationship with God but also to construct and reconstruct their sexual identities.

Some of the women acknowledged that they have come to understand that their faith is all about what God wants for them. These women have, for the most part, come to the realization that God loves and accepts them the way they are, and they are able to carry that knowledge with them and allow it to comfort and guide them, and bring them a sense of peace and well-being. In addition, findings reveal that the women's personal experiences with faith, faith spaces, and other members of the Christian community have had a greater impact on how they view the relationship between their faith and sexual identity. Even though all of the women who responded have had difficulty

reconciling the teachings of the church about Ubutabane with their sexual orientation, they see this as just one part of living a true Christian life. The findings further demonstrate that many of the women in the study have struggled and have been negatively impacted while coming to terms with and reconciling their religious and sexual identity. However, they have been able to integrate these aspects of themselves. Some of the women shared their experiences of being in happy relationships with other women. These findings show the importance of creating communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg where harmful Christian norms can be addressed and where these women can feel welcomed and safe.

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