

Black Bull, Ancestors and Me My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma (I)

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In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde explores issues around sexual culture and sexual identity from the vantage points of an African cosmological framework and feminist epistemology. Female same-sexuality is identified as a site of struggle between the interests and African ways of knowing as embodied through traditional Zulu culture, and the peculiarities of modern life. She draws tight links between African spiritual ritual performances as manifested through spirit possession and female same-sex practices to frame her thesis for analysing and understanding female same-sexuality and culture. She attempts to uncover the struggles and dangers associated with freely articulating one's own same-sex orientation, particularly among African females in current-day South Africa. To do this, she locates us in the 1970s South African political and cultural history and places the struggle among same-sex oriented female sangomas to articulate their sexual selves openly alongside some radical elements of our past - anti-apartheid, civil rights and feminist movements - depicting the wide spectrum of sometimes threatening but historically important creative actions to achieve social change.

In this simply written autobiographical narrative, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde makes a commanding and impassioned contribution to the struggle for Africans to start to explain themselves in ways that must assert the African cosmological frame and break free from the chains of both colonialism and conservative traditionalism and their oppressive legacy. She asserts in this book, that a vibrant spiritual-religious culture as embodied through the practice of *iSangoma* (2) holds the power to stimulate and accommodate other types of sexual culture and creativity. Judged through the African cosmological lens and looking specifically at the practices of *iSangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde presents us here with a conceptual understanding of female same-sex practices in Africa so radical and potentially transgressive that it may startle some readers, even those who have been prepared for it after reading her chapter with Ruth Morgan on Ancestral wives in *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives. Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*. (3)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps difficult to shock readers with an idea that sounds as potentially radical as an African Lesbian. This is because most of the progressive radical concepts that have been dreamed of and implemented since the Enlightenment have gained some public acceptance. One would include here such diverse and groundbreaking concepts as the idea of feminism and human integrity for women and children, the advent of the labour and civic movement, the disassociation of reproduction from heterosexual activity, the desacralisation of 'whiteness' in western culture and reconstruction of the concept of 'Africanness' and/or 'blackness' to reinscribe dignity in African culture,

and the rise of the idea of same-sex orientation as a distinct and commendable identity.

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Yet in fusing African cosmological framework with radical feminist epistemology, a position which Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde clearly seems to privilege when examining South African life, African culture and female same-sexuality in Africa from the late twentieth century, we begin to see radical raptures emerging as she tries to articulate other constellations of identity and sexuality. By positioning herself as a lesbian sangoma, she is claiming a historical, cultural, political and even ideological set of experiences which I briefly touch on in this review. A quick reading of the title of the book evokes, at least for me, a set of problematic questions that point to pertinent theoretical and even epistemological issues worth reflecting upon. The first problem that some readers may identify is the tendency to qualify what is African (specifically here, the healing practices of *iSangoma*) by fitting it into some established dominant way of understanding, at least in this case, female same-sexuality. The qualification of the concept 'sangoma' with lesbian I find to be somewhat problematic and wonder whether there are not models within the prescribed practice of *ubungoma* (4) that can inform us to see things slightly differently and talk about these issues in a language that captures the essence of the practice. While one should acknowledge the difficulty of finding in African vocabulary a similar corollary for the English concept lesbian, we also need to resist reinforcing whatever is African as a difference needing to be qualified for it to be regarded as 'normal' and appropriate. It is at this point, perhaps, that we need to ask whether we can find a genealogy in being a sangoma that can help us understand and appreciate different constellations of sexual identities and forms of articulating ourselves that are still respectful of what remains sacred in the practice. Are we able then, if possible, to drop the conceptual framework of lesbian and still be able to explore these issues? Are we able to imagine African cosmology as a legitimate conceptual tool in its own right that can provide understanding and still be able to treat these issues in a way that does not return things to the past, but that can inform our current practices and understandings of who we are at this point in time? Is there space within this cosmological framework to articulate one's political agenda and interpret power relations of domination, struggle and emancipation without reinforcing certain epistemological superiority?

Regarding some of these concerns, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde draws our attention to the element of flexibility that is characteristic of the practice. This is perhaps where we notice the most important thesis of the book, when Nkunzi makes tight connections between forms of identity and spirit possession. Identity and sexuality, within the context of the practice of *iSangoma*, encompass many different ways of expressing, experiencing and appreciating self and the presence of the sacred. It is logical that the flexibility of the practice is accommodative of a crossing of boundaries (be they, cultural, religious, sexual, racial or gender based). Spirit possession in this religious sense constitutes the spiritual groundwork that can enable Africans to frame their distinct thoughts and feelings, while at the same time embodying their ideas of the sacred which bears endless potential that can be used to adapt to the changes of life. This assertion disrupts our ideas about what constitutes normative constellations of identity and sexuality; and what represents normality and pathology. In equating identity (in its various manifestations) with the processes of spirit possession in traditional healing practices of *iSangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde provides us with a useful tool for

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The book does something else, as important, as well. Apart from the fact that you can easily manifest any number of identities while engaging directly with spiritual entities (both your direct bloodline and those alien to your blood ancestry) during spirit possession, we are also shown that this space is charged with the power to provide a sense of belonging; a sense of physical, emotional and psychological safety. The capacity within this prescribed practice to inscribe positivity to what happens during this creative process can allow us to transform the ways we choose to be present in the physical world that is respectful to our diversity and uniqueness and vanquish the shame, hatred and violence that we associate with differentness. However, one is also sharply aware of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's lament of the 'invisibility' of female same-sex life and culture (not only within the healing practice of *iSangoma*) as constituting a significant loss, not just for same-sex oriented people, but for African culture in general whose effect turns us all into a drab and homogenous mass of identical citizens. This raises a couple of questions for us: how do we stretch this practice in new ways that can inform our modern struggles meaningfully? How does a Sangoma, health professional, academic in 2009 practice in a way that is relevant to current day issues? How do we as ordinary men and women, young and old, make life in current day South Africa in ways that acknowledge and embrace our interconnectedness? We find the key to these questions through the symbolism of the Constitution Hill and the work she does there provided in the chapter '*Doing Things Differently*'. What Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde does in this chapter forces us to look not only at the joys of liberation (political, sexual or otherwise), and/or the dire and debilitating effects that the shame of colonialism's apartheid projects had on our lives, but to see that the only way to fight constructively is take a middle path: a path that can return the dignity of a vision of flexibility, where creativity and innovation can instead be an expression of our liberation.

In the book, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde challenges us not to fear the awkward questions and to ask ourselves how can we teach younger same-sex oriented persons, male and female alike, to value themselves and their lives if they do not value their sexuality? Sexual liberation, she is claiming, will come when we are able to go beyond our biases and prejudices about what constitutes normative sexuality and acceptable standards for expressing ones sexual orientation. This, she asserts, can be gained from adopting some of the flexibility of the practice of *iSangoma*. An open expression of one's sexuality and same-sex orientation, is not a cause for hostile violation of the integrity of others, but the motivation to see potential in our diversity and uniqueness. This, Nkunzi proposes, is not only liberating but may be the only way out of this senseless tendency to respond to anything and everything that we regard as different to ourselves as deserving of punishment and annihilation. The practice of *iSangoma* thus provides us with possibilities for experimenting with various ways of expressing our various persuasions without shame. The celebratory and liberationist intentions that she draws from the healing practices of *iSangoma*, is that they possess the ability to create a public space of queer shamelessness, and to conquer the violence that has become the certainty of our South African life.

We needed this book! The insights are timely and can facilitate constructive dialogue around issues of indigenous knowledge, a topic which is currently at the axis of local and global debate. Our contextual histories, politics, spiritual and cultural considerations are respectfully interwoven together. We see this more powerfully in how Nkunzi starts off her first chapter with a poem which not only announces who she is to us, but also honours those that have come before her. As a fellow Sangoma, I know and understand that it is only proper and respectful to acknowledge her poem and work and hold these in a sacred space. The following poem is a representation of this acknowledgement:

Nathi sesidabuka nge njabulo
 (We also originate with joy)
Sithi abese kunjalo kakhulu, Khehla
 (We say, Lo! it is now well so, Old One)
Kakhulu kakhulu!
 (Very well so!)

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Notes

- (1) This is a review article of: Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde (2009), *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me My life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg / Cape Town.
- (2) *iSangoma* is a Zulu term (in plural form) for traditional healers.
- (3) The title of the chapter is: "This has happened since ancient times... it's something you are born with': ancestral wives amongst same-sex sangomas in South Africa", p. 231-258, in: Ruth Morgan & Saskia Wieringa (2005), *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives. Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*, Jacana Media, Johannesburg).
- (4) *Ubungoma* is used here to refer to the practice of traditional healing characterised by specific principles of what it is that makes us heal and how the process of healing unfolds. To all intents and purposes, sangomas are possessed by the ancestral spirits. Many *sangomas* throw bones and some will trance.