# Chapter 7

## *Thokoza Ngwenyama*!—Unsettling Gendered African Language(s) Using *Umsamo*

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### Introduction

Starting from a critique of Western conceptions of gendered identities, we unearth the role of European colonialism as instantiating mis/recognition(s) of non-binary gender paradigms through language. This suggests that our conception of language appreciates how power and social organisation revolve around this institution.[6] Our analysis, while cognisant of the Anglicisation of African languages through orthography,[7] is not confined to orthography.[8] By this, we mean that we



6 Framing language as a social institution comes from an observation of how language acts as a carrier of meaning—not only through intellection and discourse but also in institutions. Furthermore, '[insofar] as the capacity for acting and speaking—and speaking is but another mode of acting—makes us political beings, and since acting always has meant to set in motion what was not there before' (Arendt 2018: 383), language becomes this social institution to which we are referring. As it is the tool that promulgates action, language defines social institutions and cultural practices in meaning-making processes, both in indigenous languages as well as in the linguae francae of global communication, i.e., English and French.

7 Consider Noni Jabavu's contention when she writes, '[may] I have a word surreptitiously with Xhosa-speaking readers—*"bite their ear"*, as we say? The present Orthography of the language came into general use after I had learnt its predecessor and I have never become reconciled to it. I dislike the appearance of symbols like "th" for aspirated 't'; marks for tone pitch; double vowels in plural noun-prefixes, verb tenses, demonstratives, ideophones and so on. This is the reason why, where I have written out a Xhosa sentence, my spelling is erratic. I am among those who, *"eating with the old-fashioned spoon"*, believe that for languages so "dominantly vocalic in character" [...] nothing short of a new script should be devised. The roman is not suitable and will always make for troublesome – and ugly – reading or writing' (authors note in *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life* 1963).

8 For the purposes of this analysis and in line with our conception of language as a (social) institution, we move away from an orthographic analysis and pay attention to the implicit power of language in fashioning ontological categories that are either erased or substantiated. The rationale behind this move will become clearer to our reader shortly.

recognise how the changes in orthography instantiate the shifts that have been instituted in our languages, subsequently leading to contemporary understandings of society. From this framework, it follows that language cannot be divorced from our understandings of the world as it describes the world. To substantiate this claim, we draw the readers' attention to Jabavu's (1963) contention:

> And may I ask English-speaking readers also to forgive me in their turn? For I have here and there unconsciously inflected a word according to Xhosa rules in trying to convey a non-English thought. When my publisher's reader pointed out that it was an invented construction, I decided to risk letting it remain because it seemed to me that the 'new' word came closer to the meaning I hoped to render than the one which would have been grammatically correct.

In this excerpt, the reader is privy to the observation we make about language in footnote 6 above. What Jabavu (1963) demonstrates through her 'inventions' is the notion of 'speaking [albeit in the written form, as] but another mode of acting—[making] us political beings, [which in itself highlights how we] set in motion what was not there before' through language. This act of setting in motion what was not there before is perhaps what compelled Mudimbe (1988) to claim, in his seminal treatise on *The Invention of Africa*, that Africa was invented.



The invention(s) analysed by Mudimbe (1988) compelled us to undertake a project that critiques the transfigurations that have altered our gender economies and moral codes based on an imported understanding of sexuality. It was in driving a conservative sexual moral economy that was rooted in Victorian (read British) values that 'the early missionaries who were also founders of Africa's early schools, were somewhat shocked at what they considered a rather loose sexual morality among the Africans' (Mazrui 1978: 26). Pointedly, and in demonstrating this alteration of moral codes, Mazrui (1978: 26) details this political process as follows: '[The] headmistress of Gayaza High School in Uganda, for example, right at the outset regarded her vocation as going beyond the confines of the boarding-school compound to the lives of the people beyond.'

In the first section, our analysis thus seeks to demonstrate how, through language transformations, language has instituted new categories of thought that are derived from colonial misreading(s) of our ontologies as African peoples. In other words, we acknowledge how morality in our contexts has been framed as associated with sexual economies of desire, with the apartheid state, using a Christian conception of morality, going so far as to outlaw and criminalise same-sex desire and relations through the Immorality Amendment Act of 1969. Our analysis, therefore, does not rest

on a moralising/moralistic rationale, as said analysis is aware and cognisant of the shortcomings in framing a debate on gendered identities in this way. The argument suggests that a moralistic approach reproduces ingrained conceptions of sexuality that were imposed on African subjectivities as a result of colonial encounters. The reader should not misunderstand this undertaking. The argument does not suggest that African modes of being did not have their own problematics, which would be a romanticisation of reality, while substantive evidence exists to suggest that such a claim would indeed be tantamount to the romanticisation of realities on the African continent. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate readings and understandings of the sexual economies of desire that substantiate evidence of the fluidity that constitutes Black/Indigenous ontologies.

To move away from a moralistic framework, this analysis uses Amadiume's (1987) seminal book titled *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* to highlight colonial misconfigurations of African gender systems through the imposition of strictures that delimit the capacity for flexibility in gender construction.[9] In line with Amadiume's (1987: 89) argument, we contend that European colonialism, which is predicated on the false assumption of Western universality, undermined the '[flexibility of] gender construction in language', ultimately arresting the capacity to mediate or break down the dual-sex barrier. It is useful to note that this duality was imposed on Africans.



To substantiate this claim, the argument details the erasures and misrecognitions of precolonial African conceptions of gender with the little evidence at our disposal.[10] There are two distinctions to be made: First, insofar as the chapter details the dual-sex binary, our critique is not new but rather highlights existing debates that are crucial for the theoretical developments advanced by our work. Second, in pointing out the contribution made by this philosophical treatise in articulating these erasures, a niche is created for our theoretical contribution. Amadiume's (1987) detailed analysis of the 'ideology of gender' provides an entry point into the critique of Western universalisms

9 To detail this point, we direct our reader to the scholarship of Kumalo (2019), who critiques Chemhuru's (2018) notion of an African compatibilist view on rights. Kumalo's (2019) argument critiques the moral economies that are fascist and homophobic, which have been internalised by African ethics that are derived from colonial categories of thought.

10 The lack of scholarly evidence in this instance is what provides the opportunity for a novel contribution in the form of this chapter. What is meant by this is that with the lack of work that has been published on this particular subject—a lack that itself demonstrates the lack of Western epistemic positions—ours fills this gap by way of drawing from epistemic locales that have always been treated as lesser than, owing to their associations with Blackness/Indigeneity.

from a decolonial[11] perspective. This critique considers contextual realities that unsettle the dual-sex barrier/binary. Analysing Nguni cosmology, which is heavily predicated on *izithakazelo*, the chapter interrogates the interface between phenomenological and metaphysical reality in keeping with the philosophical contribution made by this chapter. This interrogation supports the claim that *Umsamo* destabilises the fixities of gendered dualism represented through the binary (fe)/male sex paradigm.

To claim that *Umsamo* destabilises the fixities of gendered dualism, this chapter must prove two interconnected propositions. First, that language instantiates power as a social institution, and second, through *izithakazelo* isiZulu, as one of the Nguni languages, mediates between phenomenological and metaphysical reality. The first move, which shows how language inscribes power, will direct us to consider how identity is obfuscated or legitimated through language. It is on the basis of this rationale that the argument frames language as an institution. This consideration will reveal the abnegation of queer identity as an outcome of colonial imposition. Put simply, this chapter implicitly highlights the existence of queer identities prior to colonisation and their continued existence even as contemporary identities have imbibed colonial moral economies; this is done through an analysis rooted in language. An intricate analysis of the concept *thokoza ngwenyama* substantiates the claim of abnegation derived from colonial moral economies and suggests the second move relating to our claim. By revealing how this concept functions as a mediation of phenomenological recognition that is connected to the metaphysical/spiritual realm(s), the chapter highlights how language inscribes power, either acting to destabilise homophobic thinking or negate and erase particular identities.



These two elements—language as institution of power and the use of language (isiZulu) to mediate between phenomenological and metaphysical reality—substantiate our primary claim that *Umsamo* destabilises fixities of gendered dualism and highlights the rich cultural conceptions of Nguni ontology. This epistemic wealth facilitates the project of transforming socially entrenched notions of strictly gendered sexualities by appealing to the metaphysical/spiritual realities manifesting through the phenomenological reality of *ubuNgoma* (divination) (Ongana and Ojong 2015).

11 We subsequently premise our argument on a decolonial critique, even as we do this in implicit ways that align our work with decoloniality. This is to say that the premise of our argument is decoloniality; however, this will function implicitly as we are more concerned with a linguistic analysis that aids the advancement of a rearticulation of African sexuality and sexual identities that are not derived from a colonially imposed social framework but rather from the cultural milieu of African subjectivities.

*Thokoza ngwenyama* then denotes a salutation informed by the speaker's cultural-historical context and connotes the recognition of the other in a cultural-historical narrative that shapes contemporary identity. Further, we argue that contemporary identities in these cosmologies comprise the ancestral lineage of the speaker, which manifests through the speaker's existence. The analysis of this salutation shows that African cosmologies are shaped and informed by an oral tradition in which understandings of social governance, ethics and morality are intrinsically embedded. Our analysis, while making use of ethics and morality as indicated above, does not rest on this tenet as the argument focuses on theoretical developments premised on language analysis. The second section of the chapter performs this function—theoretical development through linguistic analysis—in our claim of non-binary citizenship as located *Emsamo*.

The argument presented in this chapter maintains that the privileging of homophobic uses of African languages masks the continued rationality impositions endured by African subjectivities due to colonialism. This injustice elucidates conceptualisations of African citizenship, which is arrested with regard to queer subjectivities and heteronormative identities that subscribe to and continue to use derogatory terminology. The continued use of this derogatory language highlights the injustice endured by heteronormative subjectivities who are oblivious to the reality that these terms are rooted in colonial imposition(s), which frames queerness in Blackness as a rogue and social deviance, and therefore requiring violence as a method of correcting it. To foreground our analysis, we start with libations to demonstrate the notion of language as institution.



*Ngithokozisa iThongo, ngithokozisa umndiki nomndawe, ngibiza oMbulaze abamnyama, oMashobane, oMakhunga, izikhali zaMantungwa ezawela iZambezi'gcwele. Ngithokozisa ondlondlo, ney'nyoni ezihamba emkhathini weZulu; oNdabezitha ngoba beludaba ezitheni zabo. OMkhatshwa oZikode, abakhatshwe ngezinde nangezimfushanyana, ibutho lezikhali zaMantungwa osihlangu salo singuMzilikazi, isilo sakwaNdebele sawoZimangele. Izizwe ezamangazwa indumezulu yenxuluma eyagcotshwa ngegazi lesitha sikaNdaba. OMabaso ababasa entabeni ilanga lishona, oMbulaze abamnyama, abakhothamisa izizwe, ithombe likaLobengula elaxebula umunga libheke kwesi kaBhaca ngaphesheya ko'Mzimkhulu, liyogawula induk'enhle-*

*Emagcekeni oScina, koNongawuza, koGaba, koNqolo, omahlamba'hla'etsheni ngenxa yokuswela ithawula, abakhi beqonya bengasay'kuleluka. EManqolweni, agcab'ibovu bexwayiswa ukungadluli nabadluli ngendlela ngoba bebahle kakhulu. OnoDzanibe kaDzakatshana, uNdathane eyahlula*

*umbathalala, oGaba ongapheli. Okwathi ngokuchithwa kwenyongo, kuhlanganiswa imizi yoMbulaze noNdathane, kwayiyiza izalukazi, kwethulwa indlalifa kaNyathela, balitha usana ngeSisekelo somuzi kaNdaba, lutshanaza koDzanibe, kaDzakatshana. Lithi melizithutha lubiza konina lumemeze amakhehla nezalukazi zakhona oSihleza, omaJilajila, omaNdlangisa, izinyanya, ezakhanyisa kumnyama. Lumemeze ekhaya kubo komaNzimande, komaZondi, luthi Thokoza Ngwenyama!*

## Hybridities of erasure and negation

'We have always been consigned to responding from the place where we ought not to have been standing'—Ato Quayson (2002: 587).

This analysis starts by detailing the notion of language as institution. Footnote 12 frames this conception of language as the process by which we make meaning not only through intellection but also as meaning-making is related to social institutions[12] that determine the daily realities of our lives. Amadiume (1987: 89) demonstrates this point when she writes: '[It] can, therefore, be claimed that the Igbo language, in comparison with English for example, has not built up a rigid association between certain adjectives or attributes and gender subjects'. She showcases the role of language as institution, specifically as it constrains and prohibits gender fluidity within the colonial constructs that have come to determine life on the African continent. This, however, requires some clarification concerning the link between gender, language and politics since these three components play out on the continent.[13] Detailing language as an institution emphasises how it regulates and informs the economies of rationality that govern gendered identities and their construction, which all exist in a political domain. Fanon ([1952]/2008: 1) makes a useful contribution to explaining this claim when he says that '[we] attach a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language and consequently consider the study of language essential for providing us with one element in understanding the Black man's dimension of being-for-others, it being understood that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other'. Our explanation suggests that the reader cannot fully understand



12 By social institutions is meant the family, social bonds and relations as they are determined by a communal ethic that infuses social life along with social spaces and cultural meeting ceremonies that define the ontic-ontological existence of Africans. These ceremonies are those such as *umkhosi woMhlanga, umkhosi wokweShwama, uMhlonyane*, etc.

13 Parts of this argument, specifically the link between language as institution and gender, are spelt out in the first section of the chapter, wherein the argument details non-binary citizenship as *Umsamo*. This conceptual move highlights the link between these components for our reader so as to foreground the overarching objectives of this argument.

this analysis without an acknowledgement of the function of the political[14] in the speech act itself. The framing of language in this way is inspired by Fanon ([1952]/2008: 1–2), who writes: '[To] speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilisation.'

We therefore realise that before colonial imposition on the continent, gender strictures were not as they are now since the current sociopolitical economy that defines existence on the continent is a derivative of colonial categories of thought. This comes as the African subjects have assumed a culture that is alien to them and the weight of a civilisation that was imposed. To elucidate, Fanon ([1952]/2008: 2) contends that '[all] colonised people—in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave—position themselves in relation to the civilising language: that is, the metropolitan culture.' This claim is substantiated by Mamdani (2005), who maintains that the African continent remains ensnared in colonial categories of state organisation, which were established under direct colonial rule. Amadiume (1987: 90) substantiates this point when she writes: '[In] indigenous Nnobi society and culture, there was one head or master of a family at a time, and "male daughters" and "female husbands" were called by the same term, which translated into English would be "master."' This surfaces the transfigurations that took place on the continent owing to colonial imposition. Surfacing these changes highlights two things: First, the political as a result of colonial imposition. Second, the language used in the cultural framework of the Nnobi instituted a particular social economy, subsequently substantiating what is meant by 'language as institution'.



The concept of language as institution denotes the power of language in willing certain realities into existence while denying other modes of being. This claim rests on Fanon's ([1952]/2008: 2) assertion that 'all colonised people [...] position themselves in relation to the civilising language'. The power of the speech act as willing certain realities into existence while denying others is detailed by Das (2007) in her book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. The ability to will reality into existence through the speech act is itself demonstrative of the political component that is constitutive of language as institution. Das (2007: 46) writes:

14 The political here means power as it relates to the governance of social subjects that constitute a given community. In speaking about power relations, we recognise that power can be viewed both in its positive form, in the sense of curating meaningfully fulfilling existences, as well as in the negative sense, which denotes coercive uses of force that occlude, erase and even negate existence. Our use of the political thus works to understand and think through both the negative and the positive components in the political. Our definition of the political will be clarified further using the work of Douzinas (2013).

> The young men find Sakina, the daughter, hiding in the forest, half crazed with fear. They reassure her by evoking the name of her father and how he asked them to find her [...] we next see a clinic. A near-dead body is being brought in on a stretcher. The father, Sarajjudin, recognises the corpse. It is his daughter. Numbly he follows the stretcher to the doctor's office. [...] there is a movement in the dead body. The hands move towards the tape of the salwar (trouser) and fumble to unloosen (literally open) it. Old Sarajjudin shouts in joy, 'My daughter is alive—my daughter is alive'.

In the exclamation 'My daughter is alive!', we see the power of language in willing reality into existence. This observation is based on how gendered economies work in Indian society, for in the rape and 'sexual defilement' of a woman, she is seen to have brought shame to her father's house—a shame that only her literal death can erase. Thus, in Sarajjudin's claim that his daughter is alive, we see him willing life back into his daughter's body and allowing/permitting her to live, as it were. Das (2007: 46–47) goes further to demonstrate how language wills reality, which portends our conception of language as institution:



> As I understood this story in 1986, I saw Sakina condemned to a living death. The normality of language has been destroyed as Sakina can hear words conveying only the 'other' command.[15] Such a fractured relation to language has been documented for many survivors of prolonged violence, for whom it is the ordinariness of language that divides them from the rest of the world.

The power of language becomes the basis from which life and death are given, literally dispensed, if we support the argument developed here in Das' (2007) work. Enunciation—through the speech act—performs a political act in that the speech act becomes the tool by which one's existence is instantiated and permitted. The speech act, as a mode of coming into existence, surfaces an observation of the political detailed by Douzinas (2013: 16) when he observes that '[the] "political", on the other hand, refers to the way in which the social bond is instituted and concerns deep rifts in society. The political is the expression of the irreducibility of social conflict'.

This chapter, therefore, pays brief attention to the political as the expression of the irreducibility of social conflict. Douzinas' claim substantiates our conception and framing of the political as

15 The other command in this instance is a command to life, a willing of life back into her body as her father proclaims that his daughter is alive.

detailed in footnote 8. In explicating this proposition, we foreground it in the following argument by Douzinas (2013: 16):

> Politics proper erupts only when an excluded part demands to be included and must change the rules of inclusion to achieve that. When they succeed, a new political subject is constituted, in excess to the hierarchized and visible group of groups and a division is put in the pre-existing common sense.

Douzinas (2013) details our framing of the speech act as an expression of the political, as the speech act is the premise for the call of/to inclusion. This will become clearer to the reader when we detail the erasures of queer subjectivities that call for inclusion in the South African context. To further demonstrate the notion of the speech act as a political move, a demonstration that aims to substantiate the claim that frames our analysis—this being language as institution—we return to Amadiume's (1987) view of the imposition of Christian belief in the Nnobi community and how she showcases this point specifically in relation to the female goddess and her displacement by colonial imposition:



> Christian disrespect was directed not only against the totemic symbols; they are also said to have been fond of killing and eating animals sacrificed to the goddess. Again, the DO's response to the complaints was nonchalant. He would tell the people to leave it to the goddess to show her power. In this way the Christians hoped to expose and confirm their claim of the impotence of the 'idols' (Amadiume 1987: 122).

In this instance, the speech act (of those attempting to safeguard their ideals, beliefs and practices) is disregarded in favour of a responsive speech act that wills the destruction of one mode of life, a speech act that reinforces colonial categories of thinking. The political, as surfaced by the speech act, is political insofar as the speech act is a dialogical exchange between the speaker and the audience. The framing of the speech act as dialogical is rooted in the claim 'that to speak is to exist for the other' (Fanon [1952]/2008: 1). Here, the political is inherently tied to the speech act that denotes an utterance heralding an intention, purpose or effect. The effects of the speech act as political are summed up as follows by Fanon ([1952]/2008: 12):

> When someone desperately strives and strains to prove to me that Black men are as intelligent as white men, I say that intelligence has never saved anyone; and that is true, for if philosophy and intelligence are invoked to proclaim the equality of men, they have also been employed to justify the extermination of men.

The speech act, therefore, as a dialogic exchange, leads us to consider modes of being as a form of substantiating the claim of erasure and negation.

## The speech act as modes of being

The speech act is indicative of two things: the political as tied to language and language as institution. We frame the speech act as instantiating phenomenological reality, which itself resists the colonial notion that '[there] is nothing comparable to the Black man. He has no culture, no civilization and no "long historical past"' (Fanon [1952]/2008: 17). Our analysis reveals that the speech act not only showcases the legacies of long historical pasts but, as in the case of the use of izithakazelo, further underscores the role of power and culture in aiding us along the path of imagining ourselves out of the colonial strictures that limit modes of being. Any reality comes into being only through its enunciation—its being called into being. The speech act as izithakazelo calls into being the historical realities of the Black/Indigenous person and provides us with what Coetzee (1988: 9) frames as an 'Adamic language'. However, the power of language and its politics may very well be limiting for two reasons: In the first instance, when Blacks/Indigenous subjects possess their own language, they are regarded as backward, retarded and uneducated. In the second instance, when Black/Indigenous subjects possess and control the coloniser's language, they are seen as suspicious. Fanon ([1952]/2008: 19) frames this suspicion by saying that '[there] is nothing more sensational than a Black man speaking correctly, for he is appropriating the white world'. The appropriation of the white world is underlined by the fact that '[as] we said at the beginning, there are mutual supports between language and community. To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture' (Fanon [1952]/2008: 21). The use of language in appropriating culture substantiates the distinction made by Sartre between the object and its meaning.

Jean-Paul Sartre ([1957]/2003: 5) contends that '[the] essence is not in the object; it is in the

meaning of the object, the principle of the series of appearances which disclose it'.[16] In this framework, insofar as it reveals what is meant by the notion of the speech act as tied to language and language as institution, we are drawn to 'the meaning of the object', meaning that which can only come into being through language. Language describes meaning while mediating between phenomenological reality insofar as it—language—describes this reality. In framing the role of language, we follow Sartre's ([1957]/2003: 5–6) cue when he writes:

> If the being of phenomena is not resolved in a phenomenon of being and if, nevertheless we cannot say anything about being without considering this phenomenon of being, then the exact relation which unites the phenomenon of being to the being of the phenomenon must be established first of all. By not considering being as the condition of revelation, but rather being as an appearance which can be determined in concepts, we have understood first of all that knowledge cannot by itself give an account of being: that is, the being of the phenomenon cannot be reduced to the phenomenon of being.



The speech act, therefore, instantiates phenomenological reality in its ability to describe it, a description that manifests an ontology. In other words, 'the phenomenon of being is "ontological" in the sense that we speak of the ontological proof of St. Anselm and Descartes' (Sartre [1957]/2003: 6). One can go further by stating that perceptual reality becomes phenomenological insofar as it is called into being, is enunciated. Here, our thinking is once again substantiated by Sartre ([1957]/2003: 11), who writes: '[The] "how" (essentia) of this being, so far as it is possible to speak of it generally, must be conceived in terms of its existence (existentia)'. This taxonomy facilitates our claim that the speech act mediates phenomenological reality and encodes said reality in our ability to speak of it. The speech act, as representative of phenomenological reality, is useful when considering the language used *Emsamo*. *Umsamo*, as a phenomenological space, doubly enriches the speech act that mediates between phenomena and the metaphysics of both being and the being. The connection between the phenomenological and metaphysical is lubricated through the use of *impepho* and language—in the speech act of libation—*Emsamo*. The intricacies of this reality

16 Sartre ([1957]/2003: 5) continues with this line of argument by stating that 'but being is neither one of the object's qualities, distinguishable among others, nor a meaning of the object. The object does not refer to being as to a signification; it would be impossible, for example, to define being as a *presence* since *absence* too discloses being, since not to be *there* means to be. The object does not *possess* being, and its existence is not a participation in being, nor any other kind of relation. It is. That is the only way to define its manner of being; the object does not hide being, but neither does it reveal being.'

implicitly reveal the place of queer identities in our context.

Being here denotes a double embodiment for our argument as we borrow it from the Sartrean context. The first relates to the ancestral world, which can be accessed through *impepho* and *izithakazelo*, and the second relates to the physical presence of the individual conducting the libation and intercession. Expressed differently, *impepho* and libation combine to invoke spiritual/metaphysical beings that are not governed by the gender strictures of Victorian sexual codes and moral values.[17] This signifies the capacity to adapt, change and modify phenomena through the speech act that calls into existence modalities of being that coloniality attempted to erase. This erasure is substantiated by our contextualising analysis in footnote 11.

Articulating one's identity through speech acts as libation defines being as that which can be adapted and modified, therefore suggesting being continuously changing and adaptable. In this framework, the speech act substantiates the claim that 'the being of the phenomenon'—the experience of inhabiting the world of those invoked through libation—'cannot be reduced to the phenomenon of being'. Mohanty's (1993: 42) claim that cultural experience can be a starting point for meaningful contributions to knowledge is taken seriously by Sartre. The ambiguities *Emsamo*[18] allow for the imagination of new possibilities outside the parameters of the contemporary gender binary norms that govern our existence. From this perspective, we maintain the need to take seriously Zulu epistemic positions regarding knowledge production. We stake our claim on the premise that Zulu epistemic frameworks allow us to broaden our conceptions of gendered identities beyond the confines of the prescriptive and limiting Euro-Western sexual economies.



Modification suggests the function of being in conceptualising identity formation, adjusting

17 It might be useful for the reader if this chapter were to go into some detail, even if cursory in form, of what is meant by this claim. The gender economy that we speak of is one that exists outside of the sexual moral codes of Western ontologies. These codes that are site-specific to our context continue to manifest in the present day as the embodiment and negotiated existence of the contemporary individual as they relate to their lineage and ancestors—specifically, individuals who are undergoing *intwaso* or those who are *izangoma*. An individual undergoing this process, or one who has undergone *ukuthwasa* and is a practising *sangoma* might have a male spirit guiding their practice, even as they are female. The same can be said vice versa, wherein a female spirit embodies a man. The flexibility and acceptance of these sexual moral codes can best be articulated by the idiomatic phrase *'akudlozi lingayi ekhaya'*, which will be best understood by our Zulu readers. For this reason, the reader can begin to appreciate why we claim that these site-specific realities differ from the Victorian sexual moral codes.

18 A distinction ought to be made between the use of the concept as a noun *(Umsamo)*—which, when used in this format, is written as such, even in the analysis—versus its uses as a locative *(Emsamo)*, which is denotative of the space of Umsamo itself.

and adapting existence in the social setting—a claim that supports the notion that 'the being of the phenomenon cannot be reduced to the phenomenon of being' (Sartre, [1957]/2003: 6). Fully understanding this modification necessitates an appreciation of the reality that the phenomenon of existence exists between a willing and/or forced reality—owing to the role of language as institution. To demonstrate this, Todd (2016: 6) argues for the place of indigenous ways of knowing when dealing with the global commons, while we suggest that language as institution plays a critical role in this framework. Framing knowledge as part of the global commons from which societies draw solutions to issues of injustice and oppression, and make propositions for inclusive societies, underscores the need to reconceptualise language as a tool that can either act as a useful resource to encourage and foster social change or as a mechanism inhibiting the inclusion of alternative epistemic positions. This limitation undercuts the possibilities of new futures and continues to support bigoted and bifurcating language usage.

Suppose being is to be understood through mode(s), which denote(s) the capacity to alter and modify the phenomenon of being. In that case, injustice arises when a modification to being is directed by an imposition that obfuscates being as conceptualised and articulated by the self. In simple terms, in the conception of language as institution, it is useful to take heed of how language might modify existence in ways that are outside the self-directed existence of the being. In this case, the being is forced to comply with an imposed existence owing to the curative uses of language since language acts to permit particular existences while negating and erasing others. Therefore, our position suggests that this institution, language, is already being used to challenge the binary gendered strictures that we currently witness through its use *Emsamo*. This will be discussed in the next section. From an onto-epistemic perspective, language as institution and how it influences modes of being (the phenomenon of being), either through erasure or substantiation, becomes a fundamental tenet in clarifying how the being is constituted. Modification of being through an imposition, owing to derogatory language—*inkonkoni, isitabani* and so forth—gives credence to the claim of epistemic injustice within the social milieu in which the queer person exists. If the being is denied its identity through modification by imposition, this is a fundamental negation of personhood. A negation of this proportion highlights an act that is inherently objectionable and morally abhorrent while it serves the purpose of illuminating the charge of an epistemic injustice that has been committed.



Conceptualising being as sufficiently modified by language to recognise a person constructing themself through a particular mode and manifesting as a particular being leads to an appreciation of the dialectical nature between language and being. The assertion by Grosfoguel (2013: 76) that

knowledge is created in social relations implies the recognition of equality among individuals in a given society. In her discussion of race-based epistemologies, Almeida (2015: 86) underscores a fundamental point in the argument advanced here, which contends that the hierarchies of knowledge frame Oriental epistemes and ontologies as merely existing to substantiate Western epistemic traditions.[19] The consignment of African ontologies and epistemic frameworks to a position that highlights the superiority of Western knowledge traditions explicitly unearths the colonial yoke under which, even now, queer African citizens find themselves existing—with language acting as an institution that continues to perpetuate this rationale. The South African context, in its modalities of denigration and erasure that are informed and underpinned by silencing certain modes of being through the use of particular language, continues the act of colonial tropes that deliberately erase and negate certain existences.

The contemporary uses of language in South Africa can only be understood through a historical project that reveals the erasures and negations derived from coloniality, the Christianisation of indigenous peoples, and the obliteration of our epistemic frameworks. Grosfoguel (2007: 214) contends that the universalisms that allow Western modernity to classify these epistemes as inferior and 'other' is rooted in the subzero, god-eye-knower position. In a later argument, Grosfoguel (2011: 6) suggests that this philosophy has morphed into 'I conquer, therefore, I am'. While there is much to be gleaned from this Western philosophical tradition, which regards African epistemic frameworks as provincial and thus unable to make meaningful contributions to the knowledge production processes of the world, it is worth noting the provinciality with which this very philosophy speaks, as effectively outlined by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018). The vanguard of the intellectual community that clings to the claim of provinciality in African epistemic frameworks derives its legitimacy in silencing these positions from an implicit moral substantiation rooted in colonial conquest.



The Christianisation of indigenous peoples has further played a crucial role in arresting Blackness in a state that Mudimbe (1988: 7) has termed the gradual backward conception of the African. It is clear how Christian civilisation played a role in establishing a hegemony of Western knowledge and entrenching Western cultural values such that our own taxonomies and frameworks of existence were expunged even from our own vocabularies and continue to exist only in confined pockets of cultural identities. This imposition has subsequently defined African cosmologies as mythical in the tangential reading of our ontologies, while in extreme circles of Western epistemic

19 In framing African sexual moral codes as *other* and by implication assuming a superior mode of existence, is witnessed as the views of European voyeurs, as early as the 17th century in our context. J.M. Coetzee (1988: 16) details this aptly in *White Writing* when he contends that 'the Hottentots sleep by day (idle Hottentot character) in a hut (Hottentot dwelling), lying all over one another (Hottentot sexual mores) like hogs (place of Hottentots on the scale of creation)'.

traditions, our customs, practices and cultures have been defined as devilish, demonic and evil.[20] The role of Christianity in Africa and African epistemic frameworks has continued to entrench the colonial conquest narrative, subsequently highlighting and substantiating our claim of language as institution. In this sense, we claim that due to coloniality and subjugation, African subjects have been denied their birth right to name the African landscape (Nkosi 1989: 158), thus further alienating Indigeneity/Blackness from its ontology. It is fundamental to mention, however, that oppression does not automatically mean that the speaker is thinking from a subaltern perspective (Grosfoguel 2011: 5). Negations that inspire the native to speak like and adopt the characteristics and cultures of the oppressor (hooks 2009: 90) reveal the extent to which Black ontology has been suppressed through the historical realities of colonialism and coloniality.

Returning to the earlier claim that knowledge is created in social relations, it is clear that the historical injustices and inequalities that fashion the contemporary dispensation led to the assertion by Gqola (2001) that South Africa has adopted a tokenistic approach to the inclusion of Blackness in the transformative project of the country.



> This pseudo-Africanisation of places, commodities etc. is emblematic of a tokenistic relationship between new-South-Africanese and the concept, idea and politics of Africa generally. It is reflective of the opportunistic links made conveniently with Africa, which do not seem, paradoxically however, to encourage a reflexiveness or reveal the ironies [of epistemic inequality] even as many headlines scream 'African Renaissance' (Gqola 2001: 102).

The negations and erasures experienced in South Africa are emblematic of what Jones[21] calls a violent white silence in the country, which dictates the rules of engagement regarding issues of righting the epistemic injustices perpetuated by whiteness. In language, the implications of this silence have far-reaching effects in that the linguistic tapestry that could permit possibilities of imagining new realities is denied existence owing to the silence of white intellectuals and whiteness in the broader sense of it. This is to say that there continue to be negations, erasures and denunciations that relegate certain existences to the zone of non-being. This perpetuates the continued relegation of liberatory language to the confines of culture—a reality we seek to challenge here.

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20 See the Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 of 1957.

21 Personal correspondence.

## Non-binary citizenship as *Umsamo*

*Izinyane lemvubu kalidliwanga yingwenya kwacweba iziziba*

In this discussion, it is useful to consider citizenship and how we understand its application and contestations. To begin with, we draw our readers' attention to Gqoba's *Ingxoxo Enkulu Ngemfundo*, wherein this question was considered from the perspective of Blackness/Indigeneity as far back as 1888. Gqoba, who sets up a debate between 32 participants—both as speakers and observers—makes a poignant observation (through Fanathethe, one of the characters in this debate) of the place of indigeneity in response to the question of citizenship in the context of colonial South Africa, what has been termed by contemporary legal scholars and philosophers 'Conqueror South Africa' (see Dladla 2018; Modiri 2018). Having traced the implications of coloniality on Blackness/Indigeneity, Fanathethe maintains:

> *Xa ndilapho ke mawethu,*
> *Alusapho oluNtsundu,*
> *Intliziyo ibuhlungu.*
> *Aba bantu mhla bafika*
> *Kwakuyole 'de kwancama,*
> *De sancama amawonga,*
> *Akowethu, obunono;*
> *Sawushiy'oweth'umbuso.*
> *Sawuchitha, inanamhla*
> *Sasibinza kwelo khaya*
> *Ngezi zandla ncakasana*
>
> (Gqoba [1888]/2002: 68–69).



This excerpt is intriguing. As we have identified previously in our scholarship (Kumalo 2020), the speaker's name is already indicative of the contribution he will make to the conversation/debate. One could make a claim that either contests or affirms the statement made by Fanathethe; however, that is not the point of our argument presently. We do recognise and acknowledge, however—as does Gqoba ([1888]/2002: 47), who speaks through Bhedidlaba when he introduces the debate—the place from which Fanathethe speaks as he bemoans the reality that defines the place of Blackness/

Indigeneity in the land of his forefathers. Gqoba ([1888]/2002: 47) maintains that '*[mna] okwam, nindibona nje sendincamile, ingaba nini kambe madodana, nani mthinjana wakowethu eningaba nisakholwa; koko ningekabaqondi aba bantu kuba nisengabantwana'*. This contention highlights the contestations that Fanathethe brings to the debate of belonging, citizenship and the erasure of Black mores, values and culture epitomised in his assertion '*de sancama amawonga, akowethu obunono; sawushiy'oweth'umbuso*'. Bhedidlaba continues, specifically on the question of governance, rule and citizenship, when he avers that '*[le] mpatho basiphethe ngayo, neli khethe likhoyo kuzo zonke izinto; sahlala thina sibuyiselwa emva kuzo*' (Gqoba [1888]/2002: 47). In these assertions lies the claim made by the poet in the introduction to the poem in which he distinguishes between those who embraced wholeheartedly the place, role and function of colonial education and those who contested it as they saw how it eroded the very being of Blackness/Indigeneity in the way that Blackness '[assumes] a culture and [bears] the weight of a foreign civilisation' (Fanon [1952]/2008: 2). This erosion of the ontological foundations of Blackness/Indigeneity can inaugurate a debate rooted in Sartrean analyses of *Being and Nothingness*—as indeed has been the case in our previous (Kumalo 2018) treatise on abjection. The implications of bearing the weight of a culture that is foreign are also discussed by Gqoba when he further maintains, through Fanathethe:



*Ngamangqina ayathetha*
*Ngathi thina abaMnyama*
*Sabulala amawethu*
*Elo nxeba libuhlungu;*
*Sawachitha loo makhaya,*
*Sathi gongqo amakhaka*
*Sawabinza, sawachitha*
*Ngezi zethu thin'izandla*
*Ibuhlungu loo nyaniso*
*Kwezi mini zalo mbuso*
*Usidike sakruquka,*
*Usidudu, naso semfe.*
*Siyafuna siquleka*
*Sibuzana, xa sixoxa*
*Ngobu bume beli gwangqa,*
*Thina bantu sekudala*

*Sawashiya amakhaya,*
*Sawagwaza, sawantama,*
*De sanxiba nemixhaka*
*Ngezo mini zokuyola*
*Kwakungathi kuthi thina*
*Sithelele kweli gwangwa*
*Singabile kuko konke,*
*Kanti mawo ngamampunge,*
*Namhla sonke ngokwenene*
*Sesijoje amasele*
(Gqoba [1888]/2002: 69–70).

The reader will recall that this argument began by claiming that we should treat and see language as an institution to appreciate its role and function in substantiating or dismissing certain realities. Maintaining the claim of language as institution in the realm of citizenship and belonging reveals, through the lamentations of Fanathethe, the institutional arrangements of Black ontology as they differ from Western colonial impositions. Put simply, Fanathethe—even as he does so in cursory form—reveals that there existed and continue to exist divergences in the formation, conception and understanding of the citizen in the two traditions. The one is premised on a hierarchy devoid of a humanness through historical social phenomena such as slavery, racism and apartheid, while the other presents us with a framework that elides rigidities that are policed and enforced with and through violence. This claim is substantiated by Mahmood Mamdani (2001: 31) when he states: '[Thus] the conservative variant of the postcolonial state accepted as "authentic" the colonial construction of the native: as an ethnic being ruled by a patriarchal authority with an authoritarian and unchanging custom that needed to be enforced officially as "customary" law.' These rigidities that were imposed on Black/Indigenous conceptions and definitions of citizenship and belonging continue to influence the ways in which Blackness/Indigeneity perceives itself, even in the (post)-colonial context.



When Black/Indigenous people understand themselves through a certain mode or enter being through a self-fashioned mode that aids them in making sense of their reality, this mode expresses the meaning-making processes through which they interact with the world. In this regard, it is useful to highlight further how language is the tool with which said expression of self-understanding and articulation can be realised. Framing epistemic justice as a virtue of social institutions, Anderson

(2012: 165) acknowledges each knower's sense-making processes to engender epistemic justice. Denying beings their mode of being is indicative of a fundamental change and altering of said beings, epitomised by epistemic injustice. This fundamental obfuscation leads Grosfoguel (2013: 77) to enquire about the possible conditions left to those who have been silenced. The erasure of the epistemic framework and the ontological negation that are the result of colonial impositions necessitate alternate conceptions of citizenship and belonging that are rooted in language; such alternatives give rise to the conditions of possibility accessible to Blackness—when using a decolonial lens.

## *Umsamo* as a response—reclaiming Black/Indigenous ontology

Presented with the reality of being constantly silenced through the ontological negations that deny the existence of queer subjectivities owing to how Blackness/Indigeneity itself has imbibed colonial categories of thought, this reality requires the consideration of the response left to Blackness/Indigeneity. We suggest that the space of *Umsamo* offers these alternatives. Simply expressed, *Umsamo* is the respected sacred space in the Zulu hut where ancestors are invoked before any traditional ceremonies such as *umemulo* (a young woman's coming-of-age ceremony) and *umgcagco* (Zulu traditional wedding) take place (cf. Zondi 2020). The destabilisation of the fixities of the gender dualities within the contemporary social context requires the mediation of phenomenological and metaphysical reality, as argued above. This takes place by using libation and *impepho Emsamo* through the invocation of and appeals to the ancestral realm, which is not governed by the gender strictures that continue to dictate the contemporary world (cf. Zondi and Ntshangase 2013). The reader is privy to new worlds (potentially) being conceived, articulated and realised.



Adhering to the more radical decolonial theoretical assumptions developed in the scholarship of Indigeneity in Canada, Tuck and Yang (2014: 7) would suggest a re-invasion, with our argument leading off from theirs in our suggestion regarding the re-settlement of the topography of language that defines our experiences and existence. *Umsamo* acts as the tool with which we begin to re-invade thinking in its gender-non-conformist modalities of existence and the possibilities it presents to us in the contemporary world. This means that *Emsamo,* people can become, through the phenomenon of being, androgynous beings as they negotiate their existence of embodying and being embodied by a spiritual being that is antithetical to their sexed identity. *Umsamo*, therefore, not only presents us with the rare opportunity to correct binary conceptions of gendered

identity but is the very instantiation of inclusive citizenship and the subversion of Euro-Western conceptions of gender and performative identities. To this end, *Umsamo*, through its language—in the case of libation—reaffirms the notion of re-invasion by breaking down the strictures that define phenomenological reality as it is inherited from categories imposed on the indigene. In *On Violence*, Fanon ([1963]2004: 14) argues that truth for the native 'is what hastens the dislocation of the colonial regime, what fosters the emergence of the nation. Truth is what protects the "natives" and undoes the foreigner. In the colonial context, there is no truthful behaviour. And good is quite simply what hurts them most.' Concurring with the claim that good is what hurts them most, Tuck and Yang (2014) contend that it is this white fear—if we were to call it such—that acts as the barrier to substantive decolonisation as all efforts at decolonisation are co-opted into interests that serve white settler colonial descendant futures. They maintain:

> There is a long and bumbled history of non-indigenous peoples making moves to alleviate the impacts of colonisation. The too-easy adoption of decolonising discourse (making decolonisation a metaphor) is just one part of that history and it taps into pre-existing tropes that get in the way of more meaningful potential alliances. We think of the enactment of these tropes as a series of moves to innocence (Tuck and Yang 2014: 2–3).



Anderson (2010), who writes about the white closet, reveals these moves to white innocence that secure white settler futures through modes of white fragility, otherwise known as white tears. White tears and white fragility flair up violently when attempts are made to shift the 'geography of reason' (Gordon 2014) beyond the colonial self-referential position. The white silence mentioned earlier shatters, facilitating the capacity of whiteness to speak, but not as a means of fostering justice and an ethical commitment to righting the wrongs of white violence meted out upon those who have suffered under the heel of white oppression and subjugation. In speaking, whiteness serves as a mode of securing and ensuring white colonial futures in the colony and dictating the modes of engagement with the discussion at hand. In this very instance, the claim of the speech act as political is vividly demonstrated to the reader. What is highlighted is the negation that takes place owing to the insecurities of whiteness in our context. Such negations are aptly dealt with when Coetzee (1988: 11) enquires: 'Do white hands pick the fruit, reap the grain, milk the cows, shear the sheep in these bucolic retreats? Who truly creates wealth?' Before asking this question, Coetzee

(1988) highlights how whiteness negates Blackness/Indigeneity by imposing strictures that define and delimit those who belong and those who are alien. He maintains:

> So, quite aside from the question of whether it is practical for a European to enter African culture in sufficient depth, quite aside from European doubts about whether the black man anyhow "appreciates" the landscape into which he was born any better than an animal does, the question has to be rephrased: Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity then of a highly problematical South African colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa? (Coetzee 1988: 7–8)

The more radical approach would be to follow suit with the suggestions made in the work of Fanon ([1963]/2004: 8), who writes that the natives 'know they are not animals. And at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory'. Here, Fanon reminds us of the idiomatic phrase quoted above, which suggests that the inherent nature of *ubuntu*—not to be mistaken with the white liberal conception of the philosophy but rather humanness expressed in the linguistic-cultural underpinnings of social interaction—speaks to reminding one's oppressor of the humanity of the oppressed. Intrinsically linked to this reminder is violence that is governed by ethical limitations. Ethical limitations in the sense of violence that merely seeks to remind the oppressor of the consciousness of the oppressed, and not the annihilation of the oppressor, is a constitutive part of humanness, understood here from our loci of enunciation, which is an isiZulu idiomatic cultural framework.



## Conclusion

Citizenship, as presented to us by the language use of *Emsamo*, becomes a category that is useful in addressing and correcting the problematic linguistic norms that abound in South African society. The uses of language, with the power to permit particular realities to exist while silencing and erasing the experiences of queer subjectivities, can be the starting point in addressing the problems that define how South Africans relate to these subjectivities. Owing to the internalisation of colonial categories of thought and the notion that queer identities are un-African—a proposition put forward by Chemhuru (2012) and contested by Kumalo (2019)—a popular discourse has developed that is rooted in bigoted and bifurcating language that is oppressive and, in the legalistic sense,

unconstitutional. *Umsamo*, in this case, contests this popular discourse by inviting us into the close intimacy of a sexual moral economy that is not predicated on borrowed conceptions of being. *Umsamo* allows us to explore and draw from our own repositories of knowledge, being and sexual moral codes. This move is decolonial in its capacity to subvert and contest the coloniality of being that has been theorised by scholars such as Tlostanova (2010). By this, we mean that the language used *Emsamo* allows us to imagine new possibilities owing to the androgynous nature in which the space is curated and exists. *Umsamo*, as we understand it, unsettles fixities in gendered identities by appealing to new and different ways of existing and relating to one another that are not arrested by the impositions of coloniality.

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