



# Interventions

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# HIJRAS, SANGOMAS, AND THEIR TRANSLECTS

Trans(lat)ing India and South Africa

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.....*This essay focuses on hijras in India and on male women sangomas in Zulu gender-differentiated possession cults in South Africa. We approach these individuals through the travelling concept of “translects”, in the sense in which hijras and sangomas as “transgender individuals” cultivating a culture-specific, gender liminality use words to refer to themselves, their body parts, sexual orientation, societal rituals and practices, usually not in the dominant or standard language and often in a language form intelligible only to them. While these words were pushed out of the public domain and were colonized, subjugated, or expunged from history, the essay seeks to find out how these individuals and their translects survived their subjugation by leaving their heterotopic traces across time, punctuated by four “moments”: the implicit divide; the explicit divide; the post-/re-colonial moment; decolonizing translects. Hinging on “transing” and “translating”, the essay also evokes how decolonizing attempts oscillate between two extremes: on the one hand, translects are made gradually to come to terms with the modern and dominant language of “law”, “reason” and “contract” and, on the other hand, seek to subvert the hegemony of*

**(De)colonization**  
**(spiritual) possession**  
**comparative hermeneutics**  
**genderlects**  
**heterotopias**  
**hijras**  
**India**  
**public sphere of the hinterlands**

**sangomas**

**South Africa**

**standardization**

**translects**

.....

*the standard languages. The essay concludes by showing how the incorporation of translects into the western-style transsexual grid often results in the erasure of gender-variant translects. If translects were to survive, they could only do so through being used as coded language and subterfuge practices in what we call “the public sphere of the hinterlands” – constantly interrogating the legitimacy of the dominant languages and standard sexual practices.*

1 The term “hijra” may derive from *Hijrat* or “withdrawal” in remembrance of the Prophet’s withdrawal from Mecca to Medina. Hijras are thus called because of their withdrawal from mainstream society (Chakraborty 2015, 369). Hijra is also an Urdu word, derived from *bij* meaning “leaving one’s tribe”. Hijras were powerful and influential, especially as court dancers, during the Mughal empire (1526–1858).

2 *Ngoma* is the Bantu root for “drum”. The isiZulu term *sangoma* or diviner is often used interchangeably with the often-male *inyanga* or herbalist.

This essay focuses on *hijras*<sup>1</sup> in India and on *male women sangomas*<sup>2</sup> in Zulu gender-differentiated possession cults in South Africa. Both hijras (often translated as “ancestral eunuchs”) and sangomas (often translated as “traditional healers”) go back to precolonial times when, enhanced by their “transgender” status, they held power and used to officiate in their blessing and divining capacities. Despite the markedly different colonial histories of both countries – India and South Africa – an English-oriented comparative hermeneutics has been favoured on account of their relatively recent legislations on gender-variant categories and the ensuing implementation of laws aimed at breaking with the erstwhile British sodomy laws of the 1860s and their amendment through the Labouchère Amendment Act of 1886, and with general common law. We approach such comparative hermeneutics through the travelling concept of “translects”, and its resonance with transing and translating.

The term “translects”, usually referred to as a second-language variety in Hindi/English, is here derived from “genderlect”, which, in feminist theory, is a style of speech, used by a particular gender. In the early 1990s Elaine Showalter had lamented that, “unlike Welsh, Breton, Swahili, or Amharic, that is, languages of minority or colonized groups, there is no mother tongue, no *genderlect* spoken by the female population in a society, which differs significantly from the dominant language” (1991, 192, our emphasis). We here use “translects” to address the way hijras and sangomas as “transgender individuals” cultivating a culture-specific, gender liminality, have used words to refer to themselves, their body parts, sexual orientation, societal rituals and practices, usually not in the dominant or standard language and often in a language form intelligible only to them.

Against the grain of commonplace periodization, four *moments* as contingent configurations of forces rather than determinate, chronological stages in history have been distinguished in the Indian and South African context, with special emphasis on West Bengal (mainly Kolkata) and Johannesburg (Soweto or southwestern townships). The four moments are: the implicit divide; the explicit divide; the post-/re-colonial moment; decolonizing translects. While any “reliable collection” of translects in India from “pre-modern times” is “not easy” (Basu 2005, 52), Kidwai and Vanita (2000) and Chakraborty

(2015), among others, have proposed to retrieve them from the literature. Chakraborty argues translects only have a “fictional history” (2015, 199). In the absence of any linear history, Foucauldian “genealogical analysis” (1977) is appropriate for understanding how translects have been subjugated, excised, or expunged from history and how they survived these serial subjugations by leaving their heterotopic traces in various texts and contexts.

In the Indian historical context, translects escape the otherwise available fourfold division into its ancient, medieval, colonial, and contemporary ages (cf. Reddy 2005) through confronting and negotiating the dominance of standard languages in nineteenth-century India. The standardization of regional and vernacular languages such as Bengali, Odiya, Hindi, Tamil, and Assamese contributed to the marginalization of these languages by privileging only one acceptable dialectal variant.<sup>3</sup> As a result, hijra translects were colonized through the creation and then the widening of the divide between standard and non-standard languages. This trend also coincided with “the standardization of modern Western bourgeois behaviours” in nineteenth-century India, colonizing in the process a plethora of sexual practices, including those of the hijras (Sabsay 2016, n.p.).

In South Africa, African languages, including isiZulu, were demoted through the process of colonization during the nineteenth century. While Zulu sangomas, their activities and sexual behaviour were stigmatized, their translects were *a fortiori* vilified, especially during Apartheid (1948–1994). Some of these translects later came to clash and then coexist with imported western vocabularies resulting from the trickle-down effect of western liberation struggles to the African continent in the mid-twentieth century.

3 In the case of Bengali, the dialect that was considered as the only acceptable form used to circulate in the town of Krishnanagar of the district of Nadia. In the case of Assamese, it is the Sivasagari dialect (circulating in the district of Sivasagar in Upper Assam) that relegated into the background as many as twenty-eight prevailing dialects.

### Moment one: the implicit divide

While “same-sex love” is now believed to be an integral part of pre-modern “Indian cultures” (Kidwai and Vanita 2000; Vanita 2009), our ethnographies suggest that the same “cultures” not only kept sexuality confined to the domain of the non-hijras but also cleansed the hijra body of its sexuality by highlighting its spiritual character. In present-day India, hijras continue to internalize this. Rupali, a hijra from the Bondel Gate area of Eastern Kolkata, tells us:

4 We interviewed Rupali on 4 May 2015 in her Bondel

This body I have been given by the Almighty is both unique and pure. It is merely the vehicle through which His wishes are carried out. His wishes are etched in my body. I am only the bearer of His will.<sup>4</sup>

Gate Khol  
(residence).

Much of this pre-modern divide between the hijras and the non-hijras coincided with the binary division between the spiritual and the sexual realms. Love with or amongst hijras was viewed predominantly as spiritual rather than sexual. Most Sanskrit texts portray such love as divine.

Similarly, in South Africa, as elsewhere on the African continent, it is now established that precolonial Africa was far from being “heterosexual” and that homophobia rather than homosexuality is a western import (Epprecht 2008). Yet, in the course of the nineteenth century, an implicit wedge was driven between gender variance and gender conformity. Male women sango-mas’ sexuality moved from being spiritually endorsed by ancestor-worship to being demonized through Christianization as of 1799, while the wars between the Xhosa Kingdom and the Europeans were ongoing (1778–1881); sango-mas were dubbed “witch-doctors” in English, which was imposed as the official language of South Africa as of roughly 1822.

**Neuter, possessed**

The hijra body in India is predominantly regarded by the ancient Sanskrit texts as *kleeb* or a neuter, inanimate object divested of any sexual desire or as too sublimely aesthetic to be vulgarized by any sexual act. Hijras are usually classified under *kleebalinga* under the commonly acknowledged four-fold scheme of classification of gender into *punglinga* (masculine), *streealinga* (feminine), *kleebalinga* (neuter), and *ubha-linga* (bi-gender), in Bengali, Odiya, and Assamese languages. While fully recognizing the specifics of the “local moral economy” (Reddy 2005, 17), our ethnographies remain dispersed in the Indian states of West Bengal – mainly Kolkata, Karnataka (Bengaluru in particular) – and Delhi, and aim to develop a comparative understanding of their “discursive convergences” (Arondekar 2007, 339).

Except for Sanskrit, most Indian languages do not discriminate between *he* and *she*. The hijra body is thus an asexual body but differs from individuals who recognize themselves under “A” for “Asexuality” in the LGBPTQI2A+ spectrum<sup>5</sup> in the sense that asexuality has been ascribed to hijras through an imposed nomenclature.

Neutral personal pronouns are also common to some African languages and can affect sex roles, as in woman–woman “marriages”, an ancestral nexus whereby the “female husbands”, generally widows without a male offspring, take on “wives” to produce heirs for their husbands’ lineages. The “wives” then take in male lovers and have children who are in turn handed over to the female husbands. Amadiume (1987) demonstrated how the Igbo grammatical erasure of the distinction between *he* and *she* in Eastern Nigeria facilitated woman–woman marriages. In Kenya one Kikuyu female

5 Lesbian Gay  
Bisexual Pansexual  
Transgender Queer  
Intersex Two-Spirit  
Asexual Other.

husband affirmed in an interview that she was “neither a man nor a woman” (qtd. Njambi and O’Brien 2007, 124). Aside from the fact that *yena* in Zulu can translate both *he* and *she*, this Kikuyu assertion comes close to some pronouncements by South African male women sangomas in Zulu spiritual possession cults. In these cults the Zulu body of the *male woman* is rendered “neutral”, like the *kleeb* individual in India. The female sangoma’s body acts as the conduit for the male dominant ancestor, who renders it passive through possession, thereby locating agency outside of the subject.

### **Of gods, goddesses, and ancestors**

Possession by “dead” ancestors from the spirit-world is common to most African ancestor worship systems, which antedate the advent of imported monotheistic belief systems. Ancestors remind the living of their presence among them through various processions, festivals, and councils. In Zulu spiritual possession cults, an ancestor can be a dead member of the family and, if male and dominant, will be strong enough to inhabit the male woman and dictate her conduct.

Ancestor dominance comes with an array of isiZulu ceremonial translects, associated with the call (*ubizo*) from the ancestors (*amadlozi*), generally through dreams, that act as communicating tools for the *Amathwasa* or trainees (literally: “children of the ancestors”); as well as with the ceremonial training (*ukuthwala*) of male women by a spiritual mother; and the relationship which a male woman can have with her “ancestral wife” (*unyankwabe*) or female sexual partner. Other isiZulu translects include *amabhayi* (piece of cloth girdled around trainee); *ekuthwasemi* (sangoma training period); *enamo* (place where remedies are concocted); *impepho* (herb which is burned prior to invoking the ancestors); *imyalo* (rules of conduct for a sangoma); *khalela inkani* (lit. “cry for stubbornness”, a stage in sangoma training involving the dominant ancestor’s taming); *mnguni* (ancestors from a family line); *mteto* (a same-sex ceremony in which novices are “married”); *mundawu* (ancestors often outside of the family line); *phehla* (a sangoma stick); *ukubhula* (divination), *ukuphehla* (procedure whereby the sangoma churns a decoction of medicine or *ummuthi* in a pot); *ukuphothula* (graduation or culmination of a sangoma’s personal journey); *ukushonisa* (a ritualistic invitation to ancestors to seek rest); *ukuthwasa* (call from the ancestors); *ummuthi* (traditional remedy).<sup>6</sup>

In colonial times the most common translects like *sangoma* and *amadlozi* were often translated as, respectively, “witch-doctors” and “spirits” (Briault Manus 2011, 52). These pre-colonial, often secret, Zulu translects survived the shift to modernity in South Africa, along with the Zulu male woman’s employ as a sangoma, despite the adverse influence of the Church.

<sup>6</sup> These were collected or their existence was confirmed in the course of two one-month fieldtrips in the southwestern

townships (Soweto) of Johannesburg in 2016.

7 A notable exception was the House of Rainbow Church in Lagos, Nigeria, set up by Reverend Roland Jide Macauley in 2006. It hosts a community of LGBTIQ believers. In South Africa, outside of Christianity, one should mention the queer mosque at the Inner Circle founded and headed by Imam Muhsin Hendricks, whom we interviewed on 31 May 2016 in Wynberg, Cape Town, at the Inner Circle.

8 A mazar is a saint's tomb or a shrine established in memory of a Muslim saint where both Hindus and Muslims assemble to pay homage.

In her research findings on transgenderism in KwaZulu-Natal (2013) in eastern South Africa, Zulu sangoma Mkasi Lindiwe has held both Christianity and African Independent Churches (AICs) in South Africa responsible for oppressing gender-variant individuals and associating them with demon possession. The anti-gender-variant arsenal deployed by the AICs comprises, as is often the case in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, the use of prayers and “the cure” through exorcism by a Christian priest or pastor which, if unsuccessful, results in excommunication. Some rejects from the AICs join “a Pentecostal Church which claims to accommodate lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender in Durban” (Lindiwe 2013, 51). However, the church, an imported, colonial institution, continues to reinforce the implicit divide between gender variance and gender conformity and is still today more often a hostile place than a sanctuary.<sup>7</sup>

In India, the “Gods” and “Goddesses”, whom the hijras still worship today, are alien to the mainstream Hindu Pantheon. Behind the celebrated “same-sex love” in pre-colonial India lies a form of apartheid. It is seemingly in force in the two worlds of Gods and Goddesses – one for heterosexual mainstream society and another for hijras, including Bahuchera Mata, Aravan and transgressive others (Tiwari 2014, 21). In many Muslim mazars,<sup>8</sup> like Ghutiary Sharif near Kolkata, and Hindu temples like the Kali temple in Kalighat, hijras are not allowed entry, while there are pilgrim centres in South India where only hijras are allowed. By classifying the hijras as transgender or as “third gender” in 2014, the Supreme Court of India lost sight of these complex, spiritual experiential forms and “foreclose [d] the multiple possibilities of sexuality” (Chhah! 2005, 29). “Third gender” tends to “essentialize” the transgender individual as a single, homogeneous category by collapsing all the transgender forms into it (Reddy 2005, 29) or, as Dutta and Roy put it, by “failing or refusing to recognize many forms of gender variance” (2018, 321).

Indian hijras are usually classified in hijra parlance into types that the outside world does not know of. These types, which are all subsumed under the category of “hijras”, comprise, among others, *Akuas* or those who become hijras without castration, i.e. transvestites; *Jenanas* (or males); *Chhibris* (or females); and *Chhinnis* (or the castrated). In a survey conducted on a sample of 1,100,000 hijras in India, published in 1997, only an estimated 2 per cent are transgender by birth (Majumdar and Basu 1997, 16). While the definition of transgender is not the same in any two surveys, about 55,000 children, as per the latest census of 2011, have been identified by their parents as transgender, “traditionally called hijras” (qtd. Pande 2018, 208). Male-to-female *Akuas* identify themselves as females. Although the term *Jenana* implies “woman” in hijra parlance, they are phenotypical males cross-dressed as females. *Chhibris* are women, who do not suffer from any gender incongruence, but are usually bisexual and become professional

9 Their “profession” consists in moving from door to door, blessing the newborns by dancing with them on their laps (*bachcha nachano* or literally “making the newborns dance”); they are given money against such blessings. Besides this traditional means of livelihood, many of them beg at the busy intersections of Indian cities.

10 <http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-non-hijra-transgenders-struggle-for-identity-1588421>.

hijras.<sup>9</sup> While some men are castrated in their journey to become *Chhinnis*, for many the transformation is primarily a spiritual act associated with sacred rituals. Whereas the often primitive and painful process of castration (significantly called *nirvana*, which refers to enlightenment in Buddhist philosophy) is performed by “quack doctors’ or senior hijras (called *Thai Amma*)”, hijra access to sex reassignment surgery (SRS) is “limited” (Narain and Chandran 2016, 315), whether in terms of money or knowledge or both. According to the 1997 survey, an overwhelming majority of hijras belongs to this category (Majumdar and Basu 1997, 43–47). Although dated, this seems to be the latest pan-Indian survey of such magnitude available to us.

Alongside the hijras, there are FTM transsexuals who, as Laxminarayan Tripathi notes, are “derogatorily called tomboys or butch females” (2015, 173). While in India the term *hijra* does not encompass them, the plight of FTM individuals is tangible, as shown in a first-person account by Gee Ameena Suleiman, himself an FTM transsexual activist who argues that the excessive focus laid on the hijras in India’s public discourse has displaced people of his ilk into the margin of margins. He laments that unlike transsexuals, hijras “have a system”.<sup>10</sup> For reasons of space, discussion of FTMs and MTFs lies beyond the scope of our purview.

## Moment two: the explicit divide

The implicit divide came into the open and became explicit as a result of the standardization of languages and sexual practices as well as of legislations. The standardization of Indian languages and the concurrent legal reforms initiated in colonial India created two distinct spheres of language use: one for the public sphere cutting across such social constituencies as family, peer group, caste, ethnicity, sex, and gender; and another meant strictly for coded communication within each of these social constituencies in a way that renders translects unintelligible to outsiders. The production of standard languages, as scholars (e.g. Kar 2008; Mohapatra 1993; Nath 1987; Sarangi 2009) have shown, did enormous violence to the wide variety of dialects already in circulation in colonial times, much in the same way as the standardization of sexual behaviours resulted in driving the non-standard forms out of circulation. In that respect, Bandyopadhyay (1989) introduced the divide between “the parlour” and “the streets” in nineteenth-century Bengal. The hijras dance in the street processions to the accompaniment of loud band music for the entertainment of the general public, while they are excluded from the dancing halls where *mehfils* (classical or classical-based music) caters to the refined taste of the cognoscenti, that is, the discerning landlords, zamindars, and the nobility. Just as hijra language use does not qualify as

standard, hijra sexual practice does not qualify as standard behaviour and is relegated to “the streets”.

### **The public sphere of the hinterlands**

The parlour/street divide persists in many parts of India today. Alta Hijra, in her autobiography *Antahin Antarin, Proshitabhartrika* (2002), describes the scene of a wedding procession in Bihar in which both the father and the son eye the hijra lustily while dancing and “there is absolute confusion about who the father and who the son are” (Bandyopadhyay 2002, 10). In India, father and son chasing the same object of desire is taboo, all the more so since, in the template of dyadic relations between different age groups, the object of desire is here considered as the “mother” of the son. Alta compares hijra life to the “pecking by the crows” of society, implying that hijras fall prey to mainstream society’s sexual hypocrisy. Tellingly, this form of entertainment is forbidden inside the wedding house and if the “desires” are to be kept secret, they are nevertheless an open secret to be fulfilled in a liminal space – the streets – that does away with many an established hierarchy, including that between father and son.

Dasgupta argues that far from putting a stop to sex with hijras, “colonialism pushed it underground and acted as a device to obscure queer identity, [producing in them] an unwillingness to ‘come out’ to the public” (2011, 660). Significantly, Alta Hijra writes that, in present-day India, at nightfall, “men silently cross the barrier of social life and attain momentary pause of *moksha* (liberation) by taking a dip into the asocial life – and then return to the social life in the morning conveniently forgetting what happened at night” (Bandyopadhyay 2002, 38). Nasreen, a hijra from northern Kolkata, ponders: “Even the high and mighty of society visit us. They remain unnamed, pure, and clean while we become subjected to all kinds of humiliation. Why are we considered as dirty?”<sup>11</sup>

11 Nasreen (Hijra) was interviewed by us on 3 December 2015 in her Khol in north Kolkata.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault shows how the sexual “other” and the “different” are “reintegrated” by “taking their infernal mischief elsewhere”, by “surreptitiously transferring pleasures that are unspoken in the order of things” to “those places where untrammelled sex would have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality and to clandestine, circumscribed and coded types of discourse” (1990, 4). Hijra sexuality thus remained unacknowledged by the upper-caste, western-educated, middle-class intelligentsia of the *babus* and the *bhadraloks* (genteel or polite society), although their sexuality was very much in demand by the same male members of the hallowed public sphere of Bengal. Hijras, along with the “prostitutes”, were

12 “Hinterland” is here used in its figurative meaning: “an area lying beyond what is visible or known” (*New Oxford Dictionary of English*).

pushed into “the streets” or what we venture to call the public sphere of the hinterlands.<sup>12</sup>

The explicit divide for South African sangomas, who were apt, as diviners, to expose and then punish a person guilty of witchcraft through rituals, occurred in the Cape Colony’s Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1895, which was inspired by the English 1735 Witchcraft Act. During Apartheid the Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 of 1957 prohibited generic witchcraft but also specific activities carried out by male women sangomas like “witch-hunting” and “witch-smelling”, which consisted in rooting out evil hosted in “witches” through a trance-like ritual. This judicial intervention, which can also be observed in Swaziland through the Crimes Act of 1989 (No. 6, Statutes of Swaziland, Chapter 4), was successful in separating healing power and political power, in that the sangomas lost “their power to order and reorder social relations” and their “ancestral power [was] declared illegitimate” (Reis 2000, 68).

The word “sangoma”, itself a translect which is common to Zulu and Xhosa, as well as the corollary activity of “doing ngoma” (Janzen 1992) were, as of the end of the nineteenth century, interpreted negatively. During Apartheid, these “witch-smelling” sangomas were, somewhat ironically, labelled “witches”, which echoes an earlier colonial demotion of traditional healers or *inyanga* to “witch doctors”. Likewise, the sangomas’ woman–woman marriages were construed as moral abominations as of the nineteenth century by the Church and the Law, which opposed customary law. This Church-and-law pincer plot worsened during Apartheid, which also saw the implementation of Immorality Acts and their various subsequent amendments.

Along with spirit possession, witchcraft was part of an array of practices like polygamy and facial markings which nineteenth-century colonial administrators and missionaries in most African Anglophone countries found primitive and immoral. Witchcraft was prohibited by a colonial clause referred to as the Repugnancy Proviso, which limited the recognition of customary law.<sup>13</sup> Such limitation was recognized by the South African Commission Law of 1996 as “a legacy of colonialism and a clear reflection of the ethnocentric bias in South Africa’s legal system”.<sup>14</sup> The sangomas’ ancestral power and therefore the full-fledged “transgender” status of male women and their translects were thus driven underground and only restored with the 1996 South African Constitution, and its amendments through 2012, which recognized sangomas as legitimate practitioners.

In India the divide became explicit as it culminated in the enactment of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in 1860, which proclaims:

377. Unnatural offences: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine.

13 The Repugnancy Proviso was applied in most African colonies. For more detail, see Hinz and Paterman (2006).  
14 Chapter Three under (e): “the Repugnancy proviso” of the South African Law Commission Issue Paper 4, Project 90: [http://www.justice.gov.za/salrc/ipapers/ip04\\_prj\\_90\\_1996.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.za/salrc/ipapers/ip04_prj_90_1996.pdf).

It thus follows that penetration or anal sex, which was in 1935 broadened to oral sex and more recently to thigh sex (Narrain and Chandran 2016, 306), is sufficient to constitute the “carnal intercourse” described in this section. The law, like the traditional gender specification, also presumes that the hijra body is not a pleasure-seeking body and sex by and with hijras will be a criminal offense punishable by law, as long as Section 377 can now be read to allow consenting adults to have sex in private in any form they desire.

While hijras, according to our fieldwork, mostly identify themselves as women, they are invested with what we describe as the impossible body, perennially unable to bridge the divide between being “like a woman” and being “a woman”, which Laxminarayan Tripathi calls the “true woman” (2015, 7). Being “like a woman” is both a challenge and an advantage. Hijra-ma, the “mother” who heads the matrilineal household of hijras, reminds Alta Hijra that she should feel endowed with a “valuable” body that, unlike that of “a true woman”, will “feed” her: “It will enable you to give [your customers] what women of the household cannot give, what even the [female] prostitutes cannot give” (Bandyopadhyay 2002, 43–47).

Our fieldwork further suggests that the hijra is endowed with a pleasure-seeking body as much as the cisgender body is. Hijra Sonamani from Krishnapur (also called Keshtopur), a north Kolkata neighbourhood, argues: “I am happy that men derive pleasure by enjoying my body. The kind of pleasure they would not have from a woman. They prefer me to a woman”.<sup>15</sup> That one can beat the “true women” in red-light neighbourhoods and deflect customers away from the biowomen, as Alta Hijra informs us, marks the “ultimate triumph” for a hijra (Bandyopadhyay 2002, 21). As the proverb would have it, “women are available in lakhs,<sup>16</sup> whereas hijras are available – one in a lakh” (Bandyopadhyay 2002, 142).

The framework of law continues to inform not only the case laws and judicial verdicts but also all subsequent legislation. Thus, although the Supreme Court of India recognizes hijras as Third Gender in one of its 2014 landmark verdicts, and the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill has been introduced in Parliament in 2015, neither of these speaks a word about their sexuality, nor do they take into account the gender diversity that historically exists in India beyond the male–female binary. Only recently, in January 2018, did the Supreme Court of India resolve to reconsider its verdict on Section 377 that reversed the earlier Delhi High Court verdict criminalizing homosexuality. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously in the *Navtej Singh v. Union of India* case that Section 377 was unconstitutional “in so far as it criminalizes consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex”.

Although Zulu sangomas do operate in the public sphere, sexuality within woman–woman marriages between male women sangomas and their ancestral wives is still very much taboo, since they carry a stigma associated with the Church and the Law’s aforementioned exacerbated stances during

15 Interviewed on 11 December 2015 in her Khol.

16 The Indian count of lakh means a hundred thousand.

Apartheid. Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa report that “younger lesbian sangomas are living openly in same-sex relationships in the urban areas but older same-sex identified sangomas have a high level of secrecy around their same-sexuality within traditional same-sex marriages” (2007, 19). Some interviewees, however, resist the conflation of “lesbian” with the translect “sangoma”. For instance, FTM Tebogo, a sangoma who was first introduced to the word “lesbian” in Standard 6 (when he was 11), reports in 2008 (when he was 21) that he had to convince his girlfriend that he was a not a lesbian:

[I and my girlfriend] met because her mother was a trainee of mine ... [My girlfriend] perceived me as a lesbian because she heard that her mother’s trainee was lesbian ... I then managed to convince her that I am not a lesbian; because she made it very clear that she doesn’t date lesbians – that she won’t do!<sup>17</sup>

17 Interviewed in Auckland Park on 13 October 2008 by Busisiwe Kwasha from GALA, Johannesburg.

The relationship is, however, in the open, but the girlfriend is not identified as an “ancestral wife”. Since Morgan and Wieringa carried out their interviews in the immediate post-Apartheid period, secrecy has been very much linked to survival, as corrective rape directed against “lesbians” continues to be perpetrated by specialized male urban gangs of *Tsotsis* (gangsters) such as the Jack-rollers, who used to rule over Soweto.

There is an average of 1.4 corrective rapes of lesbians reported per day in Cape Town alone.<sup>18</sup> The practice aims to coerce women into heterosexual relationships, thereby pointing to “the naturalization of heterosexuality” (Abelove, Barale, and Helper 1993, 229). As a result, a lot of lesbians, among them male women sangomas, contracted HIV, which caused the thus far taboo question of sexuality to be brought into the open. Sangomas have even been enrolled as foot soldiers in the fight against HIV. Although their HIV training was thought to be limping along at the beginning of the millennium (Bateman 2004), sangomas’ active partnership with the western-oriented medical establishment cannot be circumvented in the present-day fight against HIV/AIDS (Moagi 2018).

18 YouTube, *Action Against Corrective Rape, Cape Town, South Africa*. 15 May 2011. 4 m, 07 mins. Presented by Joburg Pride.

Despite this seeming publicness, translects used by sangomas are not known or acknowledged by the South African population at large. However, some of them, especially medical ones, are known. The most famous one, *umuthi*,<sup>19</sup> designates Zulu traditional remedies as administered by sangomas to the average citizen, but connotes pseudo-medicine involving major health risks and is even considered by born-again Christians as part of “demonic forces” (Ashforth 2005, 135). The Zulu distinction between *umuthi omnyama* (literally: black tree) and *umuthi omblope* (literally: evergreen tree) is rendered into English as, respectively, “poison” and “medicine”. Secrecy is associated with the “poisoning” function (especially in food or drink, known as *idliso* from the verb *ukudlisa* or “to eat”) whereas

19 Also known as *muthi*, the word derives from the Nguni root *thi* meaning “tree”.

“medicinal” *muthi* is in the open. The English translation operates as a Deridean pharmakon, in which “remedy” and “poison” function as binary oppositions, as befits western logocentrism. The overarching term *umuthi* is therefore generally subsumed to secret evil rather than being a translectual part of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and secret knowledge aka “African science”.

Out of the three types of sangomas – diviners, faith healers, and herbalists – the latter *inyanga* group clashed with Doctors for Life International (DFL) after the South African Parliament passed the Traditional Health Practitioners Act of 2004 (Act. 35). Even though DFL won on a technicality in 2006,<sup>20</sup> the DFL’s efforts against what they perceived as malpractice were to no avail, as the Government then published the Traditional Health Practitioners Bill (620/2007), which ensured the efficacy, safety, and quality of traditional health services. The use of *umuthi* was also endorsed by the South African Medical Association and the Traditional Healers Organization (THO).<sup>21</sup> Such feuds leave undisturbed the popularity of the 200,000 sangomas who are consulted by 60–80 per cent of the South African population (Ashforth 2005, 51).

The general receptiveness to spirit possession makes the seemingly same-sex sexuality of Zulu sangomas acceptable in the public sphere. Yet, as Parker and Aggleton have cautioned, although most African communities are aware of same-sex relationships, “they do not understand the concept of homosexuality” (1999, 22). A double Foucauldian “reintegration” thus occurs when sangomas provide advice to families to “cure” their progenies of homosexuality. Most progenies who are deemed “uncurable” join possession cults, often as “herbalists” (Epprecht 2004, 248–249), which is the activity, in both Zimbabwe and South Africa, most amenable to their being accepted within the traditional healers’ circles despite the fact of not having received the call from the ancestors.

One reason evoked by sangomas for being in same-sex relationships is that “heterosexual sex is regarded as unclean and can weaken the medicine”, while relationships between a male woman, who is “too patriarchal”, and a submissive ancestral wife “are perceived to be male–female relationships rather than same-sex relationships” (Lindiwe 2013, 40). The 2013 Lindiwe interviews thus contribute to the visibility of same-sex practices in a country where they are legally protected by the 1996 Constitution but stigmatized by ordinary citizens who, however, take it for granted that the gender of sangomas “is not fixed” (Lindiwe 2013, 14).

Just as the standardization of languages and sexual behaviours in Bengal had the effect of bringing the implicit divide into the open, the colonial demotion of African languages and *a fortiori* Zulu translects was also felt in the demotion of ancestral powers and nexuses that were hospitable to gender diversity and were only partly restored with the new South African Constitution.

20 See Doctors for Life International v. Speaker of the National Assembly 2006 6 SA 416 (CC) on 17 August 2006 at <http://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2006/11.html>.

21 <http://www.tnha.co.za/government-intends-regulating-african-traditional-healers-and-their-medicines/>.

### ***Inverted language and slippery contenders***

The translect, which in hijra parlance of West Bengal is called *Ulti Bhasha* (literally, inverted language), is meant for hijra communication that should remain unintelligible to others. To call *Ulti Bhasha* a language *per se* is a misnomer, as it is only made of semantic units describing, for example, sexuality, body parts, criminal acts, kinsmen, and hijra work that needs to be kept hidden from public hearing (Bandyopadhyay 2002, 132). In Kolkata, for instance, one of the authors collected an extraordinarily rich variety of gender-variant terms deployed by the hijras to refer to a person in terms of one's diverse states of sexual orientation and practice. Some of these are sampled here: *Anrimara* (imbecile male), *Barkansi* (prostitute or sex worker), *Bati* (a passive homosexual), *Battu-Bhukki* (one who has excessive hunger for anal sex), *Bhadure* (oversexed), *Bhatar* (derogatory reference to husband), *Bherua* (male accomplices of the hijras), *Chabkabaj* (one who takes an active part in anal sex), *Chapatabaj* (homosexual woman, lesbian), *Chhakka* (hijra), *Chhaoa* (one who takes a passive part in anal sex), *Chhibri* (a woman faking as hijra), *Dhamri* (pregnant), *Dhurani* (male with female attributes, androgynous male), *Dupli* (one who can both actively and passively take part in anal sex), *Gilitor* (one who takes an active part in anal sex), *Giriya* (sexual partner), *Gotiya* (fellow or buddy hijra), *Kodi-Panthi* (a hijra who hides herself under male dress), *Komti* (immature, imperfect hijra), *Kot* (imbecile/castrated male), *Koti* (male with female attributes), *Likamdhari* (one who retains one's male genitals despite being a hijra), *Londa* (male adolescents used for anal sex), *Mailakhor* (actively oversexed), *Meddi* (male with female habits), *Moga* (stupid and infertile male who prefers the company of hijras), *Nona* (one who takes a passive part in anal sex), *Parik* (male customer/sexual partner who regularly visits a particular hijra), *Randi* (prostitute or sex worker used in a derogatory sense), *Shanda* (neuter).<sup>22</sup> Such a wide variety of terms related to gender variance is simply not available in any of the standard languages used in present-day India.

22 Some of the other words collected are *Bhagirath-Janani* (lesbian), *Bina-Totika* (hijra), *Bonki* (hijra), *Chhab* (one who wants anal sex), *Hokorbaj* (neuter), *Khansi* (literally, he-goat that is castrated and reared for making its meat juicy and tasteful, hijra), *Khojur* (hijra), *Niharan* (young woman), *Nune-nun* (homosexual), *Pith* (a hijra cousin of a

In South Africa, Bantu-Nguni languages, including isiZulu, were demoted to the status of barbaric tongues by the British colonial administration. This “glottophagia” of Bantu languages (Zabus 2007, 18) was effective despite missionary efforts to transcribe them in Roman characters and translating important texts, albeit for evangelizing purposes. Prior to that, the indigenous languages of the ancestral KhoeSan peoples had been deemed onomatopoeic and imitative of a turkey's gobbling. During the Apartheid era, language policies favoured English and Afrikaans in education and “reduced the Bantu languages to little more than tribal markers” (Briault Manus 2011, xxix–xxxv). Indigenous Bantu languages, which were the object of much classification and Babel-like subdivisions,<sup>23</sup> were rehabilitated in the 1996 South African Constitution, which raised the nation's nine indigenous languages –

hijra), *Poune-Atta* (passive partner in anal sex), *Tonya* (young males as referred by the hijras), *Tunyi* (woman).  
23 For instance, in 1921, Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu subdivided Sotho into North Sotho, also called Pedi, and South Sotho, also called Moshesh; he further subdivided Tswana, Xhosa, and Zulu. For instance, he subdivided Zulu into Zulu, Swati, and Ndebele. See Jabavu (1973).  
24 <http://www.mambaonline.com/2015/05/20/gay-sangomas-demand-recognition/>.

Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu – to the status of official languages alongside English and Afrikaans. However, upon closer scrutiny, it turns out that the language section 6 of the definitive new Constitution of 1996 is much shorter than the more promising section 3 of the 1993 Interim Constitution and that this reduction might confine indigenous languages to regional development and adversely affect their national development (Briault Manus 2011, xxxi). The supremacy of English still prevails today and is best captured through the equation:  $9 + 2 = 1$ , whereby English is the triumphant “1” over the nine indigenous languages and Afrikaans (Kamwangamalu 2000, 50).

Against this background of linguistic attrition, sangomas’ translects in isiZulu have undergone a translational process because of their forced contamination with imported lects from LGBPTIQ2A+ configurations as of the 1980s, which witnessed the first Gay Pride marches in South Africa. As a result, a proliferation of hybrid collocations such as “gay sangomas” to refer to traditional “female men” emerged and such individuals even demanded their rights during the Khumbulani Pride events in Cape Town in 2015.<sup>24</sup> Male women sangomas and their ancestral wives were first read as “lesbians”, as corrective rapes painfully illustrate, and their relationship later recoded against the legal grid provided by the “sexual orientation clause” (9/3) in the new Constitution’s Bill of Rights. This recolonization added another linguistic twist to the explicit divide outlined here.

A case in point is the way Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde referred to herself as a “lesbian sangoma” in her autobiography, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008). As a male woman “possessed” by a male dominant ancestor, Nkabinde also went by the name of Nkunzi, the eponymous “Black Bull”, after her great-uncle’s totemic self-designation. As a non-menstruating male woman, situated beyond sexual dimorphism, Nkabinde is also part of a trans-continental continuum of spirit mediumship, which includes the “female eunuch” in ancient Hindu texts, who does not menstruate and is therefore “a not woman” not to be confused with a *hijra* (Nanda 1990, 377).

Equipped with only Zulu secret translects, Nkabinde self-identified, in the space of her English-language autobiography, as a “tomboy” in childhood; at thirteen, as a “lesbian”, which is a word she looks up in an English dictionary; and later as a “butch” (2008, 23). Guided by an American-trained amanuensis, Nkabinde adopted the imported word *butch* to describe her preference for sexual dominance without calling her “ancestral wife” a *femme*. The phrase “ancestral wife” was coined by Morgan and Reid (2003, 378–379) to refer to women who “marry” male women sangomas but with this coinage, the isiZulu translect *unyankwabe* or *ukhala Iwenanga* to refer to the wife (also called a “child”, presumably because the wife is younger) whom a female sangoma is given by the ancestors is put under erasure.

25 We interviewed Zaen (also spelled Zane and Zean) Nkunzi Nkabinde on 27 May 2016 at 9148/61 Extension 12, Protea Glen, Soweto, Johannesburg. Likewise, Nkabinde's "ancestral wife", Muipony, also called Felicity, was interviewed on the same day and in the same place and referred to herself in isiZulu as "nkozi" (short for *unkozikazi*) and in English as "wife" to her "husband".

26 Zaen Nkunzi Nkabinde was interviewed on 25 February 2015 by Khosi of GALA and translated (for the isiZulu part) by Thabiso Mhlengi Bhengu.

Although Nkabinde is familiar with the word *unyankwabe*, as shown in her interviews in Morgan and Wieringa (2007, 242), she later used the Zulu word *unkosikasi*, which, she told one of the authors in 2016, "is the name for wife in all relationships".<sup>25</sup> This linguistic shift coincides with her FTM transitioning. In the course of an earlier (2015) interview, conducted in English but with recurrent code-switching between isiZulu and English, Nkabinde uses the word *unkosikasi* (in isiZulu) and "wife" (in English) instead of the isiZulu translect while using mixed vocabularies: "I went through my sexual exchange [*sic*] and being a child of the Ancestors".<sup>26</sup> In the meantime, the ancestors' or *Amadlozi*'s messages to their initiates have gone viral and the sangoma group on Facebook is appropriately called *Dlozi land*.

These "slippery contenders" or terminological shifts between African translects and European, imported terms thus show that "sexuality's biological base is always experienced, culturally, through a translation" (Blackwood 1986, 5). This translational ambiguity can also occur within the bounds of English usage. For instance, a South African "masculine man" playing the dominant role in a relationship with another man is not called "gay" but rather "a straight man" (Nkabinde 2008, 126) when in fact "straight" in western parlance refers to heterosexual individuals. Likewise, through such "inverted" translations, the Zulu translects are rendered legible for use in the public sphere, as shown in the shift from *unyankwabe* to *unkosikasi*; yet lose their potency in adequately rendering transgenderism in traditional healing milieus in the sense that they are appropriated to designate a western-style homosexuality or to obscure indigenous realities.

### Moment three: the post-/re-colonial moment

While the standardization of language and sexuality since the mid-nineteenth century thus "foreclosed" the infinite possibilities of gender variance by pushing the translects out of circulation in the public sphere, these "resignifications" are also read as "a symptom of colonialism" (Chatterjee 2018, 316). The post-/re-colonial moment in India is marked by at least three overlapping means of re-colonizing the transgender body: spatial segregation as a means of keeping the hijra body from the public gaze in the name of urban sanitation and beautification; growing medicalization; and return of the shame by the hijras themselves. Each of the three attempts is mindful of the well-being of the postcolonial Indian body. Thus, the re-colonization of the hijra body is implicated in the advent of the postcolonial moment.

Such an advent is imbued with the impossible promise of making everyone, irrespective of what the Constitution of India describes as "religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth", an equal and rights-bearing citizen. The promise also

triggered off hijras' attempts at breaking into the thus far denied public sphere inhabited by the *babus* and the *bhadraloks*. It is precisely at that point in time that the segregation of space becomes an imperative so that interactions between the two spheres are effectively avoided. While segregation as a social practice is in the process of being discarded thanks to legal and social reforms in postcolonial societies, hijras are now subjected to other forms of invisibilization through urban gentrification and sanitation.<sup>27</sup>

27 <http://www.nswp.org/ru/node/2300>.

In April 2011 the Karnataka government in South India passed an amendment to the state Police Act, introducing section 36A, which aims at controlling the “objectionable activities” of “eunuchs”. According to the law, the police must record in a register, in their respective jurisdictions, the names of “eunuchs” suspected of kidnapping boys or committing “unnatural offences”. The hijra movement in India’s silicon city of Bangalore (now Bengaluru), as an initiative by Sangama, a local NGO, took off as a protest against this amendment.<sup>28</sup>

28 [http://old.ilga.org/news\\_results.asp?LanguageID=1&FileCategory=1&FileID=264](http://old.ilga.org/news_results.asp?LanguageID=1&FileCategory=1&FileID=264).

Re-colonization is marked by a concern for the well-being of the *body politic* by upholding and observing the essentially heterosexual and patriarchal norms and “safe sex” practices. The postcolonial concern for the hijra has undergone medicalization, particularly in the wake of the global campaign against AIDS. Global awareness to combat the disease coupled with various neo-rights movements underlined the need for recognizing the Foucauldian other and different, but essentially within the same heterosexual framework. These campaigns target hijras on the suspicion that they are carriers of AIDS and “keep the lesbians out of their net because of the non-procreative nature of their sexual conduct”.<sup>29</sup> Increased medicalization through recent campaigns for “safe sex” threatens to turn transgender into “a hegemonic category offering representation and upward mobility for people who fit [these] definitions” (Dutta and Roy 2018, 323).

29 Transcribed from the interview with Pawan Dhal, the CEO of SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against HIV Infection in India), an AIDS support group

### ***The compulsion to shame***

taken up by Sucharita Sengupta on 15 June 2010 in Kolkata.

If hijras have become the objects of fun and entertainment, as some surveys (Majumdar and Basu 1997, 132–133) rightly point out, it is also true that the *babus* and *bhadraloks* feel embarrassed and humiliated when seen with them in public and having vituperative translects hurled at them even if they barely understand the latter. Our interviews with the Bengali heterosexual, upper-caste, western-educated *babus* and *bhadraloks* lead us to conclude that their fear of hijras is not only real but also extremely pathological. This abusive lingo, hugely loaded with explicit references to the body’s private parts and their malevolent functions, invariably destabilizes the settled family and kinship relations. The hijras’ offensive accompanying body language,

such as lifting their sarees to expose their genitals or the lack thereof, completes the arsenal of shame deployed against the *bhadralok* males.

Postcoloniality seems to return the shame that hijras have historically been subjected to without taking off the stigma of humiliation. Delhi Police launched a campaign in 2015 against jaywalkers and offenders of traffic rules by getting the hijras to discipline the errant traffic on the dangerous roads. The campaign, which was apparently designed to shame the offenders, is based on the time-honoured assumption that it is shameful for a gentleman to be humiliated by hijras. *Hijra* has indeed become a word of abuse in India. In 2017 a district leader of an opposition party “abused” the lady Chief Minister of West Bengal, Ms. Mamata Bandyopadhyay, by addressing her as “a hijra”. Instead of dignifying the lives of transgender persons, the postcolonial state and its law enforcers have rediscovered in hijras their traditional power of shaming the public while adapting its use to recent times.

### ***The compulsion to become an activist***

The post-/recolonial moment in South Africa is best encapsulated in Nkabinde’s already mentioned *Black Bull* (2008), as it is visually linked with human rights. In a black-and-white picture inside the autobiography, Nkabinde the “butch” with shaven head, dressed in dark trousers girdled with a leather belt, a leather jacket, and a man’s shirt, proudly holds on to a railing at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, the seat of the Constitutional New Court, which commemorates, among others, the Civil Union Act of 2006, under which Nkabinde could envisage a marital union with her then ancestral wife in the Rainbow Nation.

The famed sexual orientation 9/3 clause of the Bill of Rights reads thus:

The 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, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.<sup>30</sup>

30 [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/South\\_Africa\\_2012.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/South_Africa_2012.pdf?lang=en).

As already argued elsewhere and contrary to what the 9/3 clause intimates, however, male women and their ancestral wives are not united in a common identity based on a shared *sexual orientation*, but rather are distinguished from each other according to gender difference, complicated by spirituality (Zabus 2018, 53–55). Presumably because it is written in English, the new Constitution has no room for isiZulu translects as they pertain to sangomas’ “marriages”. “Gender” and “sexual orientation” to refer to the “sex” of those to whom one is sexually attracted are conceived in another clause,

clause 9/5, as two separate grounds. These do not encompass “gender identity”, that is, one’s sense of oneself as cisgender or as transgender, understood loosely as the sum of practices of embodiment that cross or transcend normative boundaries of gender.

Nkabinde’s reclaiming of rights at Constitution Hill, which she did as a “lesbian” in 2007, took on an extra political dimension when he started working at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, in the LGBTI Unit in 2014. The time gap between the publication of *Black Bull* in 2008 and this later activism allowed for his FTM transition. In her autobiography, Zandile Nkabinde evoked her poor finances (2008, 19) to justify not considering a mastectomy; she is not the only one. Usually, male women resort to breast binding, a strategy which is very much akin to “tucking”, known in hijra parlance as *likom-potano* or hiding male genitals behind the thighs. Nkabinde then underwent hormonal treatment, a mastectomy, and was awaiting a phalloplasty at Bara Hospital in Soweto. When one of the authors visited him in Soweto in May 2016,<sup>31</sup> he had renamed himself Nkunzi Zean (also spelled Zane and Zaen) Nkabinde and was living as a trans man with his ancestral wife, Felicity, who was also a sangoma. He was dividing his life between his training of sangomas and his work at Constitution Hill and had asked the Administration for his identity card to match his recovered identity. Zean Nkabinde, until his untimely death in May 2018, self-identified as “transgender”. This made him a member of the international transgender community (he petitioned in 2017 on change.org to seek funding). But his very location in Soweto, still a quintessentially Black neighbourhood, kept him as a sangoma in the periphery of Johannesburg. The recolonial moment is thus marked by an implicit post-Apartheid colour line and a linguistic recolonization of isiZulu, twinned with the compulsion to become an activist, possibly the price to pay to work in downtown Johannesburg and to access western sources of funding.

Likewise, transman Tebogo Nkoana, formerly a sangoma, almost as a matter of course took up activism, first working as an outreach officer for Gender DynamiX, a human rights organization in Cape Town, and later directing Transgender and Intersex in Africa (TIA) outside Pretoria. He did not spontaneously embrace activism – he wanted to be “a health inspector” – just as he did not wish to be a sangoma; his relatives interpreted his dominant behaviour as a sign that his “ancestors were male”.<sup>32</sup> However, thanks to Tebogo’s activism, MTF Kgaogelo recalls that “he came to understand the difference between transgender and gay” (qtd. Morgan, Marais, and Wellbeloved 2009, 54). This testimony emanates from someone whom *gogos* (isiZulu for “grandmothers”) would call *ngwaninyana* (Sepedi for “little girl”); was called “gay” and yet “felt like a *moffie* or *isitabane*”, that is, respectively, “a derogatory Afrikaans word for gay people” or “a derogatory isiZulu word for gays and lesbians, meaning ‘hermaphrodite’ or ‘intersexed

31 We interviewed Zaen Nkabinde on 27 May 2016 at 9148/61 Extension 12, Protea Glen, Soweto, Johannesburg.

32 Tebogo was interviewed in Auckland Park on 13 October 2008 by Busisiwe Kwasha from GALA. The interview was later edited and features in the chapter “Tebogo’s story: ‘My Ancestor was Living

Through Me’” in Morgan, Marais, and Wellbeloved (2009). The title is, however, misleading as, in the original interview, Tebogo makes this assertion in an effort, tinted with irritation, to explain his parents’ reasoning and final acceptance of him: “So therefore: my ancestor was living through me because he is male!”

person’” (Morgan, Marais, and Wellbeloved 2009, 52). These elusive labels confirm the translational unease referred to earlier.

Despite its 2012 amendments, the current Constitution fails to encompass local interpretations of transgenderism based on preexisting translects and cultural patterns. The South African narrative of transgenderism is therefore in transition. Rather than gayness in the immediate post-Apartheid period, transgenderism is the new litmus test for ascertaining the “modernity” of the South African nation-state. Like sangomas, hijras are made to live “under the banner of secular categories of transgendered and rights-based subjects” (Atluri 2012, 727).

#### **Moment four: decolonizing translects?**

All such projects seem to oscillate between two extremes: on the one hand, translects are expected gradually to come to terms with the *modern* and dominant language of “law”, “reason”, and “contract” and, on the other hand, deliberately to subvert the hegemony of the standard languages altogether.

By raising such demands as the right to inherit the property of the partner, the right to work, and the repeal of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code before the Supreme Court delivered the landmark verdict in favour of the decriminalization of homosexuality, the hijra rights-claiming bodies have forced their entry into the previously denied public sphere. In the last decade, the transgender movement in India began to organize around the rights of hijras and same-sex desiring people not just to live free from violence, but also to access basic rights such as the ability to provide medical histories to their doctors without shame or fear of criminal action, to hold a passport, and to be free of discrimination in workplaces, schools, hospitals, and within their homes (CREA 2006, 1). As they gradually come out of the closet, organizations like Sappho for Equality or Durbar Mahila Samnway Samiti (Coordination Committee of the Unstoppable Women) seem increasingly to discard translects – the language of what Adam Smith would have described as their “immediate sense and feeling” (Smith 1853, 47) – and learn to speak “the language of rights”. The translects being exclusive to hijras, they, as these organizations would argue, find it impossible to articulate their rights claims in a language intelligible to others. As the hijras’ search for a place in the public sphere begins, they are embarking on a long journey from the closeted world of translects to the wider world of human rights, which involves conversing with those who are unlike them.

Durbar Mahila Samanway Samiti, for instance, has demanded reclassification of the hijras as professionals or sex workers, depending on the profession they choose, alongside other groups of professionals and sex workers. This, Samiti thinks, will not only provide hijras with a means of livelihood and

lend legitimacy to their profession, but will also protect them from arbitrary raids and extortion by policemen and hooligans (Dutta 2005, 171–175). Much in the same vein, SAATHI also asks for human rights, non-discrimination, and livelihood opportunities for hijras (2009, 15–16). This intervention introduces a language – one of rights and contract – that mainstream society understands and appreciates.

The second alternative is to continue using translects with renewed vigour by indiscriminately using them in the public sphere and thus “profaning” it, particularly in prose writing published by local, mainly niche publishing houses. These writings are intended mainly to shock and awe the readers unfamiliar with them. The idea is not only deliberately to break the rules and protocols of standard language practice, but also to expand its resources and repertoire. In Roy’s words, “it is only by raping the words [of the standardized language of the public sphere] that literature can become squarely pregnant, only rape can confer motherhood on the literature” (2005, 30). Tellingly, this dubious metaphor aims to deal a lethal blow to the “standard” language and sexual practices.

Indigenous South African translects are, like hijra translects, shuttling between extremes: surrender and subversion. A case in point is Zulu sangoma Lindiwe’s definitional interpretation of western concepts reeking of liberation struggles, which she can only define by using the overarching translect “sangoma” and the corollary idea of ancestral possession, typical of gender-differentiated spiritual cults:

- i. Lesbian – A female sangoma who is possessed by a female spirit;
  - ii. Bisexual – A female sangoma who is possessed by a female and a male spirit;
  - iii. Transgender – A female sangoma who is possessed by a male (authoritative) spirit, or vice-versa;
  - iv. Hermaphrodite – A sangoma with both sexual organs.
- (Lindiwe 2013, 48)

Confusion is at its peak when the interviewees themselves claim “to be lesbian one day, the next day ... bisexual; the following day ... transgender” (qtd. Lindiwe 2013, 56). Lindiwe’s explication is therefore a “translation back” into sangoma parlance as a decolonial way of relocating ancestral institutions in the hinterlands, where terminological fluidity is allowed.

In his second novel, *Bengithi Lizokuna* (“I Thought It Would Rain”), published in the same year (2008) as Nkabinde’s *Black Bull*, IsiZulu writer Nakanjani Sibiyi writes in Zulu: “Unbunkonkoni bugqame kakhulu enkathini yamanje. Nanonma babekhona abantu ababengaqondakali kuqala kwakulukhini ukuphumea obala. Manje umuntu usephumela nje obala aziveze ukuthi uyinkonkoni” (Sibiyi 2008, 166).<sup>33</sup> The word *uyinkonkoni* (from *inkohnkoni*) to designate male gayness may derive from *benkonkoni* to refer to the South African male *wildebeest* or gnu, famous for mounting other males. However, Sibiyi here reappropriates the translect

33 “Male gayness is very common these days. Though in the past there were

people who were suspected of being gay, it was difficult for them to come out. Today gay people easily reveal their orientation”.

34 This is confirmed by Sheriff Mthopeng, Tshepo R. Kgositau, and Immaculate Mugo at Gender DynamiX, Cape Town, in an informal interview one of the authors carried out on 31 May 2016.

35 Kamwangamalu notes that the elementary township schools, where indigenous languages are used as media of instruction, are gleefully emptied of their most promising students, who join the Model C schools, formerly whites-only schools where “English is the sole medium of instruction” (2016, 168). isiZulu is, however, not considered “endangered” by UNESCO standards. UNESCO only lists ten languages, including Korana, Nluu, and Xiri, as “critically endangered.” <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>.

36 Such is the case with hijra A. Revathi’s Tamil autobiography, *The Truth about Me* (2010), translated into

*ikonkoni* (lit. “deviation”) to refer to a gay male, which he uses to supplant the isiZulu words *izitabane* and *ungqingili/uncukumbili/ubungqingili*. The latter words are used derogatorily to refer to a homosexual and also cover the misnomer “hermaphrodite”. Tellingly, they are not used by sangomas and therefore are not translects mindful of gender diversity. They are more likely to be used by prominent Zulu leaders who campaigned to have the 9/3 clause on sexual orientation removed from the 1996 Constitution. By contrast, the imported words “gay” and “lesbian” have recently acquired positive associations with South African liberation movements and media acting as triggers of visibility.<sup>34</sup>

However, in the same novel by Sibiyi, the son Mhlengi, who has come out to his father as “gay”, envisages SRS (now also called gender confirmation surgery) in order to perfect his liberation: “wayezizwa ekhululekile ngaphakathi” (Sibiyi 2008, 12), that is, “he felt free/comfortable inside” and, as MTF Mhlengi, she wishes to love men. Not only does Sibiyi connect the two litmus tests for the nation’s modernity but he also writes about these taboo issues in isiZulu, a language long colonized by English and reportedly faced with attrition and even possible death (Kamwangamalu 2016)<sup>35</sup> for a Zulu readership still confined to the hinterlands. Clearly, decolonization is a botched enterprise fraught with a major paradox.

Whether discussing Indian hijras or Zulu male women sangomas, the ancestral transgender grid is now superposed on the western-style transsexual grid so that this conglomerate of ancestral translects is compelled to embrace transsexual, legal, and medical vocabularies. The superposition was uneasy and has had long-term ramifications. The incorporation of translects into the western-style transsexual grid often resulted in the erasure of an entire spectrum of gender-variant translects already in existence in these societies. If translects were to survive, they could do so only through being used as coded language and subterfuge practices – in the public sphere of the hinterlands – constantly interrogating, if not interrupting, the legitimacy and sanctity of the dominant and “standard” languages.

Subversive attempts of this nature in the past decade such as prose writings on the hijras in local publishing houses or isiZulu-language novels are hardly sold on the market. However, popularity is no measure of the critical nature of these writings. Quite the contrary, insofar as these attempts acquire popularity, they are likely to be absorbed into the regime of the normal by conveniently discarding their ethical concerns.<sup>36</sup> As Derrida warns while debating with Habermas: “There is no more responsibility when there are norms ... If one wants to normalize, to norm the ethical overload, it is finished, there is no more ethics. There is ethics precisely where I am in performative powerlessness” (Derrida 2006, 113).

Translects will retain their ethical value insofar as they can subvert the hegemony of standard or dominant languages from a position of “performative powerlessness”, that is, without wielding the necessary power of being

English for Penguin, or Dayanita Singh's *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) based on hijra Mona Ahmed's emails to Singh.

normalized into the dominant, standard languages themselves, with which they are fated to stand in a tenuous relationship at the beginning of the millennium.<sup>37</sup>

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