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# African theology of reconstruction and queer epistemic violence: A theo-ethical discourse

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The legacies of colonialism in South Africa and broadly in Africa have problematised discourses on violence and discrimination. To counter coloniality and its continued efforts to dehumanise Africa, many Africans have often uncritically embraced certain notions of African culture that exacerbates the problem of homophobic violence and discrimination. This has left certain African discourses embracing ubuntu without critically addressing the violence and discrimination where ubuntu is often promoted. Recognising the attempts of African reconstruction theologians such as Mugambi and Ka Mana who advocate the necessity for African epistemic paradigms or epistemic justice, I engage their paradigms considering epistemic violence from the context of the queer community. Ubuntu must be understood within the context of African holism, a framework which African reconstruction theology makes use of. Using Dotson's three orders of epistemic oppression, I argue that Mugambi's theological paradigm could become problematic for the queer community because of the epistemic shells it carries into the future from the past. Considering the queer community, I argue that the epistemic flexibility of Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction allows for more engagement because of its commitment to an ethic of African holism. At the heart of such an ethic is a commitment to the unity and the interconnectedness between God, humans, ancestors, plants and animals. This paper makes a theological contribution by engaging queer epistemic violence from the context of two African theological reconstruction paradigms.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This paper engages discourses from African masculinities, social sciences, African theology and philosophy with reference to epistemic violence enacted against the queer community.

**Keywords:** epistemic violence; queer; reconstruction; holism; African; culture; *Izangoma*.

## Introduction

Ongoing racial discrimination, landlessness, economic exploitation and violence in South Africa because of the impact of colonialism continue to problematise discourses about violence and discrimination in a post-apartheid South Africa. The quest for the annihilation of colonialism in South Africa and broadly in Africa because of its violence has led to the uncritical embrace of African culture without being critical of discrimination attached to certain notions of African culture. As shall be seen further on, I will expose this using the epistemic framings of Africa through the words of the late former President of Zimbabwe Robbert Mugabe and the former President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma. This uncritical embrace has also failed to expose the intersections of what is known as African cultures and the colonial project. This is exposed by the violence experienced by women and the queer community. The Centre for Violence and Reconciliation (2016:8) argues that the commercialisation of the practice of lobola in which women are seen as objects is one of the reasons for gender violence in South Africa. It must be noted that while such commercialisation is bad, little time is spent addressing the role that the colonial state played in the commercialisation of African practices through land dispossession and economic exploitation. Tonono (2019) exposes how lobola was one of the cultural practices viewed as evil by the colonial enterprise.

Similar to this is the discrimination and the violence enacted against the queer community because it is deemed 'Un-African' and 'Anti-Christian'.[1] This can also be observed in Langa (2020) who briefly exposes the epistemic framings of queer relationships in his study. These framings have led to the criminalisation of same-sex relations in some African countries. The notion of same-sex

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1. https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-07-23-pupils-offered-counselling-after-pastor-says-gaypeople-are-going-to-hell/.

**Note:** Special collection: Decolonialism in Theology today.

relations as 'Un-African' has been refuted by those such as Mnyadi (2020:159–177) and Mkasi (2016:1–6) who argue that same-sex relationships are not foreign to Africa. Similarly, Mnyadi (2020) have attempted to expose the existence of same-sex relations in precolonial and colonial Africa. The uncritical acceptance of what is accepted as 'African culture' in certain instances and the impact of colonial violence have exacerbated the ongoing homophobia and discrimination in Africa. This has often led to the internal contradictions of 'African culture' that centres human relationships through ubuntu as argued by Mothlabi and Munyaka (2009:63–84) while failing to address violence and discrimination at the same time (Sanni & Ofana 2021:384–394).

Recognising the impact of colonialism in Africa, Jesse Mugambi (1995, 2003) proposed an African theology of reconstruction which embraces African culture as a way of epistemic survival. Paying attention and respecting the values of African cultures, Mugambi (1995) argues that there is a necessity for the recreation of myths and African customs as necessary for rebuilding of Africa after colonial conquest. Mugambi (2003), for instance, commends South Africa for integrating African cultural ways of being in the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This is with particular reference to how forgiveness was dealt with during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Mugambi's epistemic tools for his reconstruction project are important considering the discourses of those such as Mkasi (2016) who have called for the recognition of African epistemologies, particularly as it relates to same-sex relations. Using Kristie' Dotson's (2014) three orders of epistemic violence, in the paper, I shall argue that while Mugambi's African theology of reconstruction may be helpful in addressing the epistemic displacement of the queer community in African discourse, I will attempt to show that it becomes guilty of Dotson's third order of epistemic oppression. As shall be noted in Dotson, the persistence of any epistemological system automatically becomes oppressive when it refuses to be critical of itself. Recognising Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction (Mana 2000b) and its Africanist axiological ethic, I argue that this framework is better suited to deal with epistemic oppression and the contradictions of violence, particularly as it relates to the queer community in Africa.[2] This paper makes a theological contribution by problematising certain Africanist readings which epistemically co-opt the queer community into epistemological systems in order to curb oppressive epistemic violence.

## Dotson's epistemic violence

It is important to provide a brief definition of the term 'epistemic oppression' before I discuss Dotson's three orders

2.The late Ka Mana is an African theologian from the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is important to state that because he is from what was known as the francophone region, most of his writings were written in French. His books engaged in this paper were translated using Google Translate. Aiken (2019) has exposed the accuracy level of translation from French to English giving it a 95% while placing Spanish to English at 98%. Without disputing the limitation that comes with any translation, good translation assists us to foster fruitful engagements about Africa with theologians from francophone region, despite the limitations of translation such as a word or meaning or word that can be lost in translation. The author of this article acknowledges any of such limitations.

of epistemic oppression. In Spivak's use of the term, epistemic oppression is a way privileged people speak for a marginalised people that compromises the credibility of the marginalised other (Spivak 1988). Spivak discusses the term 'epistemic violence' with reference to the way in which leftists such as Foucault and Deluze in the West epistemically framed the struggle of marginalised people in the south that silenced their voice (Spivak 1988). For Spivak, this is similar to the subaltern group, often elitist, that attempted to provide a unified voice of struggle for the Indian people without acknowledging the different forms of marginalisation within the Indian people. Dotson (2014) discusses two forms of epistemic violence which is reducible epistemic violence and irreducible epistemic violence.

Dotson classifies three orders of epistemic violence under these two categories which I shall now explain. For Dotson, reducible epistemic violence is a form of epistemic oppression that exists because it is caused by socio-political factors in a particular context. For Dotson, the first order and second order of epistemic oppression can be classified under reducible epistemic oppression. The first order of epistemic oppression is a form of violence enacted by epistemically privileged communities because of their socio-political contexts. In this case, the power that comes with their epistemic privilege allows their negative attitudes, views and opinions about the epistemically marginalised to illegitimately question the epistemic agency of such marginalised people. Scientific racism can be used as an example of this form of epistemic oppression. According to Saint-Aubin (2005:23–42), scientists in Europe between 1700 and 1800 made racist scientific discoveries that black men developed sexually faster and intellectually slower than white men. This meant that black men had to be policed and controlled because they were not safe on their own (Saint-Aubin (2005:23–42). This became a good tool for colonial conquest. It was also believed that small skulls of women in general and that of black men meant that they were intellectually inferior to white men (Saint-Aubin 2005:23–42).

The second order of epistemic oppression is the insufficient epistemic collective resources of the marginalised people who in turn use the language of the epistemically marginalised to define themselves. An example of this is how people in the queer community often use heterosexual notions of the feminine and the masculine to define themselves. This is perhaps best noted in Langa (2020:95–119) who exposed how a gay high school boy he interviewed identified as the girl in his relationship. Lowu (2001) exposes how same-sex relations took the form of white weddings in a town called Mkhumbane in KwaZulu-Natal. The third order of epistemic violence is irreducible epistemic violence wherein the irreducibility of an epistemological system becomes oppressive because of the epistemic shells of such an epistemological system. It must be noted that according to Dotson, all irreducible epistemic systems can be termed epistemically violent but not oppressive as it is that the very irreducibility of the epistemological system is what we require to make sense of the world. In the context of epistemic injustice and colonial

violence, there is a necessity for African epistemologies that dignify African people whose ways of knowing have been demonised. The necessity of such epistemologies has been necessitated by colonial violence which has been exposed by Tonono (2019) who illustrates how initiation rites of passage for manhood and other practices such as lobola were demonised. This is important to consider in light of the fact that initiation schools in Africa which formed part of this rite of passage were places of learning. Mfecane (2016), who is critical of western theories of masculinity used in Africa, calls for Afrocentric theories and uses the Xhosa rite of passage called *ulwaluko* to theorise about masculinities.

It is important to note that for Dotson, the reason for the violence of any irreducible epistemological system is that no such system has the ability to adequately capture the lived experiences of everyone because such systems are from a particular context. This is the challenge Mfecane (2018) has with the failure of discourses on gender in Africa to consider African cosmology in deliberations on gender-based violence. The challenge, however, is the persistence of any irreducible epistemological system that fails to recognise its loopholes and attends to them that makes it oppressive. This is primarily because of its failure to be open to other possibilities.

Using Dotson's irreducible epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014), it is the argument of this paper that while Ka Mana' theology of reconstruction is epistemically irreducible similar to Mugambi, it, however, has the ability to deal with its persistence. Its ability to deal with its persistence, I argue, is a way of being open to other ways of being and to understand being within the context of African holism where life between the living, the dead, animals and plants are interconnected. As opposed to Mugambi, I argue, the lack of epistemic rigidity of Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction broadens the discourse on queer identities in Africa. This, in turn, provides some level of protection against epistemic violence for the queer community. This article theologically contributes to African discourse on the queer community by problematising gender epistemic frameworks into which the queer community is co-opted into.

## Mugambi's theology of reconstruction

Mugambi's theology of reconstruction with a post-colonial posture is firmly situated within a period marked as 'Independence' after colonialism in Africa. Recognising the end of colonialism as an event, Mugambi proposes a theology of reconstruction aimed at rebuilding Africa after its destruction because of colonialism. There are two central texts which expose Mugambi's theology of reconstruction. The first text is *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (1995). The second text is *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (2003). Of fundamental concern for Mugambi is the way in which Africa will become independent from colonial powers after the retreat of the colonial regime. For Mugambi (1995:37),

for Africa to survive epistemically and ontologically, the reinterpretation, the creation and the recreation of ancient African myths, cultures and customs are of vital importance. Being critical of the West's distinction between the secular and the spiritual, Mugambi's African theology of reconstruction embraces African holism where there is no distinction between the secular and the religious (Mugambi 1995:75). For Mugambi, this history is important, particularly as it relates to the retrieval of values, customs and traditions. It must be important to note that Mugambi argues that the relationship between retrieval and recreation of ancient myths does not mean that we should legitimise some of the wrongdoings of our ancestors. Wrongdoings of our ancestors refer to practices that legitimise discrimination and oppression, although he does not provide much detail about what they are (Mugambi 1995). For Mugambi, reconstruction must take place in at least four levels. These four levels include personal, cultural, religious and ecclesial (1995:14–17). Recognising the aftereffects of colonialism, the creation, recreation of myths and values of pre-colonial conquest in reconstruction on these four levels are important. Mugambi (1995:78) advocates for a reformist approach where history and sources within history are used to reshape Africa's future. At the heart of Mugambi's concerns in a post-colonial Africa is the hegemonised western globalization after the demise of the Soviet Union (Mugambi 2003). For Mugambi, the West's intention to 'civilise' and 'democratise' Africa using international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund exposes how Africa continues to be violated.[3] For Mugambi (2003:32), this delegitimises the epistemic credibility of African ways of life and being. Although Mugambi (2003:1–40) is not entirely happy with the adoption of western forms of government in post-colonial Africa, he appreciates how some African countries have included African values within their democratic dispensations.

It is important to note that Mugambi has received a lot of criticism from a number of theologians such as Maluleke (1994:245–258) and Vellem (2007) for the post-colonial posture his theology of reconstruction assumes. Maluleke (1994) was critical of Mugambi's separation of liberation and reconstruction, and argues that Mugambi oversimplifies his criticism of liberation theology. According to Maluleke, reconstruction's critique of liberation makes it suspect. Mugambi received this criticism because he was very critical of liberation theology and its possible use after the 'colonial era'. Mugambi's critique of liberation theology is broad, ranging from issues of identity (Mugambi 1995: 14–17), the texts it uses (Mugambi 1995:14–17) and the way it uses the text (Mugambi 2003:167–168). In his later works on reconstruction theology, Mugambi has argued that the two are inseparable in a consecutive manner in which reconstruction succeeds liberation (2003:61). Vellem (2007:205–206) challenges Mugambi on this and argues that the two are inseparable not because the one has the possibility to succeed the other, but that they are both co-dependent on each other. Vellem challenges Mugambi's

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3. This is with reference to the terms and conditions imposed on impoverished African countries which borrow money from international organisations.

idea of the consecutive process and prefers liberative reconstruction in which the two cannot exist without the other at any point. For Vellem, once reconstruction proceeds without liberation, it can become oppressive (Vellem 2007). I must note that Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction enhances the engagement between liberation and reconstruction theologians.

## Epistemic violence and discrimination perpetrated against the queer community in Africa

At the core of homophobia is the epistemic violence perpetrated through Dotson's first order of epistemic violence. As previously stated, this relates to the negative attitudes and habits that an epistemically privileged community have about a marginalised group that questions their epistemic agency. This was clearly exposed by the words of the late former President of the Republic of Zimbabwe who claimed that homosexuals were not only 'Un-African' but also homosexuals were 'worse than pigs and dogs' (Justice 2015). He claimed that there was no place for same-sex relationships in Africa (Justice 2015). In his recent criticism against queer community, the former president of South Africa claimed that he wanted the Dutch-law scrapped and was in pursuit of the African law (Nonyukela 2024). Central to the argument of the former president is who the women would be left with if men date each other (Nonyukela 2024). At the heart of such a form of epistemic violence is the role that power plays in the formation of being that epistemically marginalises the queer community. In this case, there is a way in which power constructs an Africa that marginalises and excludes the queer community through historical denialism without paying attention to documented discourse on same-sex relations in Africa. Similar to the antichristian and homosexuality discourse, the first order of epistemic violence which questions the epistemic agency of the marginalised has expressed itself in different ways. Langa (2020:95–119) exposes how the gay boy in his study had at some point contemplated committing suicide because of the discrimination he experienced at school. Similar to De Villiers (2022) who tried to pray 'the gay' away believing it was something he suffered from, there are members of the queer community who are often taken to the traditional healers so that they can be cured of same-sex attraction.

Mckaiser (2012) has previously argued that the statement that same-sex relationships are un-African is a historically embarrassing statement. Mckaiser (2012) bases his argument on the fact that the 'African' within un-African in same-sex discourse fails to account for the colonially based laws formed during the colonial era criminalising same-sex relationships that has not been transformed in post-colonial African states. Haskins (2014) supplements this discourse by not only linking the discourse on homophobia and the law to colonialism but by tracing it to ancient Roman laws on same-sex relations. McKaiser also exposes the historical denialism

within such a statement that evades historical accounts of same-sex relationships in Africa. Epprecht (2006), for instance, exposes how anthropologists documented the nature of same-sex relations in Africa. Epprecht, for instance, argues that instead of exposing discourse on sexuality adequately, anthropologists in the past painted the African as the sexual pervert full of lust. Epprecht (2006:189) cites the words of an English man named Andrew Battell during the colonial period who said, 'They are beastly in their living, they have men in women's apparel whom they keep among their wives (Purhas 1905 vol. VI:376)'.

It is important to note that Epprecht attempted to expose the diverse understandings of same-sex relations that even extend to medicinal purpose and the work of divinities through human beings. Epprecht (2006), for instance, engages Gunther who exposes spiritual medicineship considering same-sex relationships in Africa.

Elsewhere, Epprecht has also exposed how the historical denialism of the existence of same-sex relationships in Africa exacerbated the problem of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) particularly in South Africa (2008:100–131). He argues that while HIV was believed to have started with queer people in Europe, its existence in Africa was blamed on the sexually perverse nature of the African heterosexual men. The treatment plans for HIV failed to include the queer community in South Africa and therefore worsened the problem of HIV in South Africa and Africa at large. This treatment plan also failed because same-sex relations were believed to be an issue of Europe.

At the heart of this section is to expose how the negative attitudes, habits and the practices of the epistemically privileged continue to oppress marginalised communities and question their epistemic agency. Epprecht (2008:100–131) argues that the denial and erasure of same-sex existence contributed to the spread of the virus and the deaths of many people because of HIV. This denial is, of course, countered by authors such as Epprecht (2006, 2008), Murray and Roscoe (2021), Mkasi (2016:1–6) and Mnyadi (2020:159–177) who sought to prove the existence of same sex relations by looking at the historical account of Africa. In this case, what is prevalent is that at the centre of the denial and the criminalisation of same-sex relationship is the political power wielded to write same-sex relations in Africa out of existence just as colonialist discourse has done. This is exposed by how many countries are strengthening their laws against the queer community by arguing that it is un-African. One of the reasons for the proposal to criminalise same-sex relations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, is the respect for cultural sovereignty (Igual 2024).

Epistemic agency of the queer community is that it resembles epistemically privileged conversations. It is important to note that a critical part of queer community relations is that they resemble gender-social norms of heterosexual relationships. Murray and Roscoe (2021:6) identified at least

three forms of same-sex relations in Africa. The first form is egalitarian relationship in which same-sex relations are not determined by class or gender hierarchy. The second form of same-sex relationships was age-based relationships. Murray and Roscoe argue that in these relationships, the young boy would play the passive and submissive role, while the older men would be the dominant and play the active role in the relationships. These types of relationships are at best exemplified by the relationship between *Inkotshane* and *Ihlabonga*.[4] The third type of relationship that Murray and Roscoe identify is the husband-wives' roles. In these relationships, the anally receptive partner would play the role of the wife for the anally penetrative partner. Murray and Roscoe note that it was rule for the anally receptive partner to never ejaculate on the dominant masculine partner. Langa (2020:95–119), who studied township masculinities in Alexandria in Gauteng as previously stated, noted how a gay boy who was a participant in his study expressed that he was the girl in the relationship. What is important to note is how role play is a key identifying marker for queer community relationships. In defence against the anti-queer community rhetoric, Mnyadi (2020) argues that the claim that same-sex relationships are un-African is far from the truth. Mnyadi supplements her argument using *Izangoma* known as traditional healers to justify her argument. Mnyadi argues that same-sex relationship existed in Africa, particularly among traditional healers. Mnyadi argues that this relationship would come about as the result of a dominant female ancestral spirit who would be the main guide of the male traditional healer. According to Mnyadi, a male dominant ancestor could also enter a female traditional healer.

It is the argument of this paper that the epistemic shells birthed from the privileged collective epistemic resources co-opt those with insufficient epistemic collective resources into their language and become violent. At the heart of such a problem is how same-sex relationships often epistemically assimilate heterosexual relationships. Similar to Mugambi's call for reconstruction, Mkasi (2016:1–6) calls for the recognition of African epistemologies particularly as it relates to same-sex relationships. Mkasi raises the point that *Izangoma* who are traditional healers are highly respected in the African society. She exposes how dignified this discourse should be in light of the queer community. Referring to her earlier work where she exposes how the European terms *Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual* can be understood within the context of *Ubungoma*, she draws our attention to the importance of healing as it relates to *Izangoma*. Recognising the gendered structure of *Ubungoma*, Mkasi (2016) argues that traditional healers have found a safer place in African patriarchy even within the context of same-sex relations as it relates to *Ubungoma*. Recognising the toxic elements of patriarchy and gender inequality even within the African context and challenging it, she calls for more nuanced discourses on African patriarchy and gender inequality. Nuance in this instance refers to the realisation that African patriarchy and gender inequality are not exactly the same as patriarchy and gender inequality in the West. She supplements that gender within the African context is based on the role one plays within the family and society. Same-sex relations, according to Mkasi, are practised under African patriarchy. Mkasi calls for a move away from western discourses on same-sex relationships.

Mnyadi (2020:159–177), in her study, also exposes how the sexual identity of *Izangoma* was not a choice but was imposed by ancestral spirits. Recognising the importance and the necessity for African epistemologies, the critical question with reference to this is the extent to which the epistemic shells that come with recreation, insufficiently capture the experiences of the queer community in the African context. The fundamental challenge is whether such an epistemic framework can sufficiently cater for the queer community without co-opting them in a heterosexist framework even from an ancestral framework. The point here is to open up the conversation on how discourses on epistemic framework on ancestors also shape queer conversation using the African holistic framework.

Recognising the diversity of same-sex relations, it is the argument of the paper that recreation from epistemically dominant texts produces epistemic violence through epistemic co-optation of marginalised groups into privileged narratives. This is significant to note considering the quest for epistemic justice in the context of an Africa where colonialism epistemically marginalised Africa, to which the very same queer community is also victim. The fundamental challenge with Mugambi's theology of reconstruction and similarly the ancestral framework for same-sex discourse, is the epistemic rigidity that excludes and therefore becomes epistemically violent. This is because same-sex relations are framed within hetero-binary frameworks. Recognising Ka Mana's axiological ethic, it is the argument of this paper that Ka Mana's African theology of reconstruction provides a much more flexible theological framework for questions on the matters of epistemic violence and the queer community in Africa.

## Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction

Christian theology of reconstruction in Central Africa was introduced by Kangudie, known as Ka Mana, a philosopher and a theologian from the Democratic Republic of Congo.[5] As an ethics lecturer deeply concerned about the sociopolitical challenges in Africa, Kangudie penned down many books related to the challenges that people in the Democratic Republic of Congo experience (Dedji 2001:254–274). At the centre of Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction is the reinvention and the re-thinking of an Africa troubled by corruption, deaths, poverty, sickness and other catastrophic issues (Mana 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002). Ka Mana was an academic deeply concerned by the effects of colonialism in Africa and its intersections with traditional African political

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4. *Inkotshane* refers to the young boy who is in a relationship old man called *Ihlabonga* in the mining compounds as discussed by Murray and Roscoe (2021:169–181).

5. This section that frames Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction is part of my Masters dissertation that was submitted in February 2024.

leadership and its destruction of Africa. Leaning on an African Christian theology of reconstruction, Ka Mana criticises the western colonial enterprise and its destruction of Africa, while also remaining critical to African culture and how it has been a symptom of the death in Africa (Mana 2000). Concerned with an ethics of crisis pervasive in Africa, an ethic that attempts to save Africa from the clutches of colonial violence, Ka Mana addresses the danger of this disorientation and drift that has befallen the African people.

The first of these writings include *Theologia Africana para tiempo de crisis: Christianism y reconstruccion de Africa* (2000b). In this book, Ka Mana develops his theology of reconstruction between African indigenisation and colonialism in Africa. In this book, he calls for a theology of reconstruction that is critical of both colonialism and indigenisation. It is the alternative beyond these that stimulates the inseparability and intersection of liberation, indigenisation and reconstruction in the rebuilding of Africa. As Dedji (2001) correctly asserts, this is the line of thought that is consistent throughout his entire discourse on reconstruction.

The other discourse where he sets his theological foundation for his theology of reconstruction is *Le souffle pharaonique de Jesus-Christ* (2001). In this book, he sets his theological premise by bringing Christianity into engagement with contemporary Egyptology which contains an ethic of African holism. Ka Mana is of the firm view that bringing these two into conversation sets the ground for innovatively rebuilding Africa. He crystalises this discourse by presenting a Christological engagement on the power of myths present in such a theological grounding for rebuilding Africa in the book *Christians and Churches in Africa: Envisioning the Future* (2002). Another book where he discusses colonialism and indigenisation is *La Nouvelle Evangelisation en Afrique* (2000a). In this book, he discusses the role that Christianity and the gospel can play in the rebuilding of Africa. It must be mentioned here again that he centralises the intersections of the gospel, indigenisation and reconstruction by being critical of colonial Christianity and elements of African indigenisation and their intersections which have led to the demise of Africa. For Mana (2002), elements of African indigenisation that lead to the demise of Africa refer to the uncritical embrace of African cultures with practices that legitimise oppression and discrimination.

Central therefore to Ka Mana's African Christian theology of reconstruction is the possibilities that lie within the culture of Africa with the primary mission of saving all lives in Africa (Mana 2001). For him, the attempt of reconstructing Africa lies not only in being sceptical of the colonial missionary enterprise of the West but also in cultural identities which have sowed division and brought destruction among African people (Mana 2000b). He exposes this by reflecting on the Rwandan genocide that was based on ethnic cleansing which he firmly believes is birthed by the spiritual crises the West has left Africa to bear (Mana 2000a:83–89). It is within the context of such violence, poverty and economic degradation that Ka Mana calls for an African Christian theology of reconstruction firmly based on African values.

For Mana (2001), African Christian theology of reconstruction is not simply inculturation theology in which ways are devised to implement the abstract nature of an abstract Christianity using African epistemologies and cosmologies. Inculturation refers to African values with a concern for solidarity between God, ancestors, humans, plants and animals.

The critical aspect to note in this case is the relationship between God, the living and the dead with mutual consideration for the significance of liberation and reconstruction. Drawing on this dynamic interconnectedness between the God, the ancestors, plants and animals from a Kemetic perspective, he places Jesus Christ as one who is birthed within contestation (Mana 2001). Contestation in this context refers to the life of Jesus between oppression and liberation similar to the narrative of Osiris, Horus, Isis and Seth.[6] Drawing from this Kemetic story in his engagement with Biblio Mubabinge and Kotto Esome, he depicts Osiris as the victim of history, Isis as forces which refuse to become immobile in quest for liberation, Seth as forces of oppression and Horus such as Jesus, a liberator (Mana 2002:29–36). For Mana (2002:26–33), mythologically and axiologically speaking, Jesus is a product of Africa. Axiologically, Jesus as God the son in the Christian paradigm is aligned with liberative reconstruction. Theologically, his framework of African holism is dynamic in the sense that although it appreciates the necessity for the interconnectedness between God, the living, the dead and the plants, it acknowledges and recognises the discontinuities between participants of this framework. His framework acknowledges the imperfect nature of human relations that destructively contribute to such discontinuities. Ka Mana recognises Egypt theologically as a place of correction and reconstruction using the story of Jesus Christ the flesh of God and the place of his birth in light of the fact that the very Egypt was once believed to be a place of slavery in the biblical narrative (Mana 2001). He recognises Jesus Christ as a phenomenon of reconstruction set to correct the oppressive regime starting as early as the exodus narrative (Mana 2001). For Mana (2001, 2002), history is not pure but consists of narratives of oppression and violence, but what essentially becomes important is how liberation is sought within the framework of African holism. At the heart of Ka Mana's proposal for reconstruction is to acknowledge that liberation, salvation and reconstruction are inseparable. This is something important to consider considering the discontinuities that arise within his framework for African holism.

## Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction and queer epistemic violence

At the heart of the argument of this paper is the extent to which being can be erased through epistemic co-optation as it

6. This refers to Egyptian mythological story where Seth is the son of Osiris, who was once Pharaoh, and Isis. In the story, Osiris gets decapitated by his half-brother Horus who wanted to be Pharaoh and scattered his body at different hidden places. The Egyptian Kingdom suffers under the rule of Horus. Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, finds the different body parts of her dead husband, becomes intimate with him and eventually Seth is born. Seth is born as the liberator of the Egyptian Kingdom under the hands of Horus and eventually conquers his uncle.

relates to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) community. The two key challenges I have attempted to address in this paper is that colonialism epistemically violated the queer community in Africa and this is exacerbated by historical denialism with regard to the existence of same-sex relationship in African history. In the attempt to address the misconception of same-sex relations as un-African, scholars such as Epprecht, Murray and Roscoe and Mnyadi have attempted to expose this as a lie. The fundamental problem, however, we have noted in this case is how the queer community might have been epistemically co-opted in gender narratives that even frame heterosexual relationships in Africa, as can be observed in Langa (2020). It is the argument of this paper that although Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction does not survive irreducible epistemic violence, just like any epistemological system as argued by Dotson, it broadens the discourse on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) epistemic violence.

As noted earlier, at the heart of Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction (2001) is the interconnectedness between God, the ancestors, plants, animals and humans. In this theological framework, there is a necessity to rethink, undo and reconstruct commitment to such a holistic framework. Epistemic rigidity from this framework is engaged from the context of commitment to the holistic framework. It is the ability to recognise that any disunity that breaks the holistic framework is a negation to the African life. The issue of queer identities within Africa can be explored with less epistemic rigidity and with much epistemic flexibility within the context of African holism. This is done by recognising queer people as humans within this framework and allows for critical thinking about the being from a queer perspective without being epistemically co-opted. Such epistemic flexibility, I argue, must be considered in discourses about queer identity within African ways of life, customs and cultural rites of passage. Queer identities cannot be crafted by epistemic shells that will in turn violate queer people. This is primarily because not all people who are part of the queer community are traditional healers. Ka Mana's theology embraces an openness to life that could exist beyond epistemic rigidity even in its very African foundationalist theological approach or epistemic resilience. The critical question this paper seeks to interrogate is what it means to be without being epistemically co-opted within the African context as someone who is part of the queer community.

In his call for decolonial masculinities using the Xhosa initiation rite of passage, Mfecane (2020:8–11) exposes the openness of this cultural rite of passage to multiple masculinities. A concern which he exposes, however, is that although the participation in the practice does not discriminate against people even on the base of sexuality, public display which could serve as evidence to being gay could lead to confrontation, discrimination and social exclusion from other men within the Xhosa culture. The issue at hand is the extent to which the epistemic framework and the epistemic shell of such a practice could exclude and marginalise queer men. The central concern addressed in the paper is the epistemic co-optation of the queer men in a heterosexist framework. In agreement with Mfecane, who for instance calls for decolonial masculinities, an important issue would be how such a paradigm would embrace a liberative reconstruction as an ongoing exercise that embraces self-critique and questioning within a theological paradigm such as Ka Mana's reconstructionist ethic of holism. This, I argue, is of significance as it relates to existence and being. Being in this instance could refer to Mothlabi and Munyaka's discourse on ubuntu in which both the individual and the community is dignified (Mothlabi & Munyaka 2009:63–84). The critical questions are, if cultural practices such as initiation rites of passage prepare men to become husbands in the future and if that is the role of African patriarchy as argued by Mkasi (2016), how can this practice contribute to the development and the future of gay, bisexual or transgender men without epistemically violating them by training them to find a place within the heterosexist framework? At the heart of the paper is to consider an Africanist framework that will allow for critical engagement, self-reflection and development of life for queer people within Ka Mana's African theology of reconstruction. The paper does not seek to propose a form of being for queer people, rather it attempts to create a platform for wrestling with the question of being for queer people without epistemic co-optation within the context of ubuntu. I argue that Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction that embraces self-critique with a commitment to liberative reconstruction is helpful in this regard. The inseparability of indigenisation, salvation, liberation and reconstruction in commitment to his ethic of African holism allows for further critical engagements with regard to the question of being for the queer community. This, I argue, happens remaining critical to epistemic co-optation.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to expose that the uncritical embrace of certain notions of African culture in quest for the annihilation of colonialism has exacerbated the problems of homophobic violence and discrimination in South Africa and broadly in Africa. This uncritical embrace of certain notions of 'African culture' has seen the construction of an Africa from the corridors of power that attempt to erase the queer community from the history of Africa. This has left us with the contradictions of embracing ubuntu without being critical to violence as argued by Sanni and Ofana (2021). Showing appreciation to the work done by African reconstructionist theologians such as Mugambi and Ka Mana, I affirm that the calls of African epistemologies are important for survival. Using Dotson's three orders of epistemic violence, I problematise Mugambi's African Christian theology of reconstruction by arguing that the epistemic shells that come with this framework epistemically co-opt the queer community into a heterosexist framework of life. In favour of Ka Mana's theology of reconstruction, I argue that his theological ethical framework of dynamic African holism allows for much broader conversation when it comes to the queer community. It allows for self-critique, questioning, undoing and reconstructing of commitment to its foundationalist framework. Even in its epistemological

resilience, it escapes the oppressive side of the persistence of any epistemological system. It is precisely the epistemic flexibility within his theology that allows it to escape the persistence of the resilience of any epistemological system. The Africanness of this system allows for us to grapple with questions of queer identity without being epistemically co-opted by heterosexist frameworks.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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