

Regulation of Female Sexual Morality: The Gendered Meaning of *Intethelelo* within the Nazareth Baptist Church

Sinenhlanhla Nomfundo Sinethemba Bhengu

Master of Social Science (Anthropology) Candidate

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, South Africa

216002035@stu.ukzn.ac.za; nomfundo.bhengu98@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper draws on an ongoing Master of Social Science (Anthropology) research thesis that explores the meanings, use, and social implications of the term *Intethelelo* among Nazarite female students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The thesis adopts a qualitative research design grounded in social constructionism and African feminism. The study intends to utilise semi-structured interviews with Nazarite female students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, alongside an analysis of public discourse and church teachings. In IsiZulu cultural discourse derogatory terms are used to label unmarried women who have premarital sexual experience, including those who have children out of wedlock. Existing literature primarily defines *Intethelelo* in broader Christian or linguistic contexts as forgiveness, salvation, or spiritual purification. However, the use and meaning of the term *Intethelelo* within the specific context of the Nazareth Baptist Church remain underexplored in existing scholarship. Therefore, this paper critically explores the linguistic, cultural, and religious meanings attached to the term *Intethelelo* within the Nazareth Baptist Church. Moreover, it critically examines how the term functions as a mechanism for regulating female sexual morality. The paper argues that although *Intethelelo* is a respectful term compared to other derogatory labels in Zulu society, it nonetheless constructs moral categories, regulates behavior, and reinforces gendered expectations surrounding female sexuality.

Keywords: *Intethelelo*; Nazareth Baptist Church; female sexuality; gender; morality; Social Constructionism; African feminism

1. Introduction

Religion and culture play an important role in shaping moral understandings of sexuality and acceptable gender behaviour within society. Through religious teachings, cultural traditions, and social expectations, communities construct ideas surrounding purity, respectability, chastity, and appropriate sexual conduct. However, scholarship consistently demonstrates that these moral expectations are often gendered, with women subjected to greater scrutiny and regulation regarding sexuality than men (Souza, 2016; Mamponya, 2021). Within many religious and cultural settings, female sexuality becomes closely associated with morality, dignity, and social respectability.

Scholars within linguistic anthropology argue that language plays an important role in shaping social meanings and moral identities within communities. Within religious communities, language becomes central to the communication of moral values and behavioural expectations. Through everyday discourse and symbolic terminology, communities construct categories that distinguish between morally acceptable and unacceptable forms of conduct.

These dynamics are evident within the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), an African initiated church that combines Christian teachings with Zulu indigenous cultural traditions. Within this context, the term *Intethelelo* is commonly used to refer to unmarried women who are no longer virgins.

Existing scholarship primarily defines *Intethelelo* within broader Christian and linguistic contexts as forgiveness, salvation, or spiritual purification (Ntuli & Groenewald, 1996; Landman, 2009; Climenhaga & Dube, 2015). Consequently, limited attention has been given to the specific gendered meanings and social implications attached to the term within the NBC. Furthermore, there remains limited scholarship examining how respectful religious-cultural language may simultaneously function as a mechanism of moral regulation and gendered social control.

Drawing on an ongoing Master of Social Science (Anthropology) study among Nazarite female students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, this paper critically examines the linguistic, cultural, and religious meanings associated with the term *Intethelelo* within the NBC. The paper argues that although the term appears respectful, it nonetheless functions as a gendered moral

category that regulates female sexuality and reinforces unequal expectations surrounding purity, morality, and respectable femininity.

The study contributes to broader debates within cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, feminist anthropology, and the anthropology of religion by demonstrating how religious-cultural language may operate as a subtle mechanism of gendered moral regulation. In addition, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions on sexual stigma, respectability, and the social experiences of unmarried women within African religious-cultural contexts.

2. Literature Review

History of the Nazareth Baptist Church

According to Tishken (2006), the Nazareth Baptist Church is the second-largest African-initiated church located in South Africa, established in 1910. Moreover, the Nazareth Baptist Church seeks spiritual enlightenment through a unique blend of Christian doctrines and Zulu indigenous cultural traditions (Mchunu, 2018). Other principles of the church include a strong emphasis on prayer, purification rituals, and submission to moral codes. The members of this church believe in a higher power and supreme being called uMvelinqangi or Unkulunkulu, who is seen as the creator and protector of all things (Mchunu, 2018). They also regard the founder of the church, Isaiah Shembe, as a prophet believing his teachings to be divine revelations. The church also maintains strict gender roles and dress codes; men wear white robes, while women cover their heads during worship (Tishken, 2006).

Religion, Culture, and the Gendered Regulation of Sexual Morality

Scholarship consistently demonstrates that religion and culture play a significant role in regulating sexuality and constructing moral expectations surrounding gender and sexual behaviour. Religious institutions often prescribe values such as chastity, purity, and premarital sexual abstinence as morally desirable forms of conduct (Moon, 2021). These moral expectations are reinforced through cultural and social institutions such as families, schools, laws, and religious organisations, which collectively shape understandings of acceptable femininity and womanhood (Risman, 2018). However, studies reveal that these moral expectations are unevenly applied across genders, with women frequently subjected to stricter forms of sexual regulation than men (Souza, 2016).

Mamponya (2021) argues that although many religious institutions advocate gender equality, religious systems grounded in patriarchal Christian ideologies often reinforce traditional gender roles that restrict women's autonomy. Similarly, Mills (2017) highlights that cultural beliefs surrounding purity, modesty, and femininity contribute to the regulation of female sexuality and the maintenance of gendered power relations. Within religious-cultural settings, female sexuality therefore becomes closely tied to morality, honour, and social respectability.

These intersections between religion, culture, and gender are also evident within the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC). According to Tishken (2006), the church maintains strict gendered roles, moral expectations, and codes of conduct that regulate members' behaviour. The NBC combines Christian teachings with Zulu indigenous cultural traditions and places emphasis on prayer, purity, modesty, and moral discipline (Mchunu, 2018). Such gendered moral frameworks provide an important context for understanding how concepts such as *Intethelelo* function within the church.

Female Virginity, Respectability, and Sexual Stigma

Existing literature further demonstrates that female virginity has historically been associated with purity, honour, sacredness, and feminine respectability across different societies globally. Studies conducted in Mediterranean, Brazilian, Iranian, Indonesian, American, and broader African contexts consistently show that women's sexuality is often socially regulated through moral expectations surrounding virginity and premarital sexual abstinence (Mernissi, 1982; Rahmani et al., 2016; Wijaya et al., 2024; Olamijuwon & Odimegwu, 2022). Consequently, women who deviate from these expectations are frequently subjected to shame, stigma, and social exclusion.

Within many African societies, virginity continues to hold cultural and religious significance because it is associated with dignity, purity, and family honour (Owusu, 2024; Ntuli, 2023). In the South African context, virginity testing among Zulu communities reflects the continuing social importance attached to female virginity and sexual morality (Durojaye, 2016). Ntuli (2023) argues that virginity within Zulu culture symbolises pride, dignity, and respectability, while women who are no longer virgins are often subjected to ridicule and moral judgement.

Literature also reveals that language plays a central role in constructing and communicating sexual stigma. Across different societies, women with premarital sexual experience are

categorised through morally charged labels that portray them as impure, shameful, or socially undesirable (Mosley et al., 2022). Within isiZulu cultural discourse, terms such as *iqhashamlenze*, *isixhavu*, and *pemepeme* are used to stigmatise unmarried women who are no longer virgins or who have children outside marriage (Machi, 2020). Bhana and Salvi (2022) further demonstrate how practices such as *inhlawulo* reinforce cultural expectations surrounding female virginity and sexual respectability.

These studies demonstrate that sexual stigma is not only interpersonal but also embedded within broader cultural and religious systems that regulate women's bodies and sexual behaviour. However, while existing scholarship has examined derogatory forms of sexual labelling, limited attention has been given to respectful religious-cultural terminology that may simultaneously operate as mechanisms of moral regulation.

Language, Social Identity, and Moral Regulation

Scholars within linguistic anthropology and social constructionist traditions argue that language does not merely describe social reality but actively constructs social meanings, identities, and categories (Burr, 2024; Woolard, 2020). Wa Thiong'o (1998) argues that language carries culture, worldview, and social identity, while Lakoff (2004) demonstrates that language reproduces gender norms and reinforces power relations within society. Consequently, language functions as an important social tool through which communities define morality, belonging, and acceptable behaviour.

Within religious contexts, moral language plays a particularly significant role because it communicates religious values and social expectations regarding gender and sexuality. Through sermons, teachings, everyday discourse, and symbolic terminology, religious institutions construct categories of moral and immoral behaviour. Such language may therefore regulate women's sexuality by defining what constitutes respectable femininity within religious communities.

Although scholarship has explored the meanings of *Intethelelo* within broader Christian and linguistic contexts as forgiveness, salvation, or spiritual purification (Ntuli & Groenewald, 1996; Landman, 2009; Climenhaga & Dube, 2015), the use and gendered meaning of the term within the specific context of the Nazareth Baptist Church remain underexplored. Furthermore, limited scholarship has examined how respectful religious-cultural language may function

simultaneously as a mechanism of moral regulation and gendered social control. This paper addresses this gap by critically examining how *Intethelelo* operates within the NBC as a gendered moral category associated with female sexuality.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Social Constructionism

This paper is theoretically grounded in Social Constructionism, which argues that social realities, meanings, and categories are not naturally fixed but are produced and maintained through social interaction, discourse, and cultural practices (Burr, 2024; Phillips, 2023). From a social constructionist perspective, language is not merely a neutral tool of communication; rather, it actively constructs social meanings, identities, and forms of knowledge. Consequently, meanings attached to morality, sexuality, purity, and respectability are socially produced within particular historical, cultural, and religious contexts.

Within the context of the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), the term *Intethelelo* functions beyond its literal linguistic meaning. Although the term broadly translates to forgiveness within isiZulu and Christian discourse, its meaning within the NBC is socially constructed through religious teachings, moral expectations, and communal understandings surrounding female sexuality. Through everyday religious-cultural discourse, the term constructs a specific social identity associated with unmarried women who are no longer virgins.

Social Constructionism is therefore relevant to this paper because it provides a framework for understanding how language constructs moral categories and regulates behaviour within religious communities. The theory helps explain how *Intethelelo* becomes socially meaningful within the NBC and how the term contributes to shaping perceptions of morality, femininity, purity, and social respectability. Furthermore, the theory assists in examining how religious-cultural language normalises certain gendered expectations and presents them as socially legitimate and morally natural.

3.2. African Feminism

This paper also draws on African Feminism to critically examine the gendered power relations embedded within the regulation of female sexuality. African Feminism foregrounds the lived experiences of African women while critically analysing patriarchal structures operating within

African cultural, religious, social, and political contexts (Amaefula, 2021; Oyekan, 2014). Unlike some Western feminist traditions that are often perceived as dismissive of African cultural practices, African Feminism seeks to engage culture critically by questioning practices and belief systems that reinforce women's marginalisation while remaining attentive to African social realities.

Within many African societies, women's sexuality is frequently linked to morality, family honour, purity, and social respectability. Consequently, women are often subjected to stricter moral expectations and greater social scrutiny regarding sexual conduct than men. African Feminism therefore provides a useful framework for analysing how religious-cultural systems regulate female sexuality and construct gendered standards of acceptable behaviour.

In relation to this paper, African Feminism assists in critically examining how *Intethelelo* functions as a gendered moral category within the NBC. The theory therefore enables a critical analysis of how *Intethelelo* reflects unequal gendered expectations surrounding sexuality and morality.

The combination of Social Constructionism and African Feminism provides an important analytical framework for this paper. While Social Constructionism explains how the category *Intethelelo* is socially produced and sustained through language and religious discourse, African Feminism critically interrogates the gendered power relations and social consequences embedded within that categorisation. Together, the theories make it possible to examine how respectful religious-cultural language may simultaneously function as a mechanism of moral regulation, gendered social control, and identity construction within the Nazareth Baptist Church.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Intethelelo* as a Moral Category

Within the context of the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), the term *Intethelelo* functions as more than a descriptive label. Although the term broadly translates to forgiveness within isiZulu and Christian discourse, its meaning within the NBC extends beyond its literal linguistic definition. The term operates as a social and moral category associated with unmarried women who are no longer virgins. Through this categorisation, the term becomes

embedded within broader religious-cultural ideas surrounding morality, purity, femininity, and sexual respectability.

From a social constructionist perspective, categories are not naturally fixed but are socially produced through language, discourse, and cultural practice (Burr, 2024). In this context, *Intethelelo* reflects how religious communities construct meanings around sexuality and morality through language. The term therefore contributes to defining moral boundaries within the church by distinguishing between women considered sexually “pure” and those who are not. Although the term may appear respectful and less overtly offensive than derogatory labels used within broader isiZulu cultural discourse, it nonetheless creates a socially recognisable category tied specifically to female sexuality.

Importantly, the existence of such a category reflects the centrality of female virginity within religious-cultural systems of morality. Scholarship consistently demonstrates that women’s sexuality is often closely linked to honour, dignity, and moral respectability within many cultural and religious communities (Olamijuwon & Odimegwu, 2022; Owusu, 2024). Within the NBC, *Intethelelo* may therefore function as a mechanism through which ideas surrounding purity, morality, and acceptable femininity are socially communicated and maintained.

The term also demonstrates how morality becomes gendered within religious contexts. While the category specifically identifies women who are no longer virgins, there appears to be no equally visible or socially significant category used to identify men with premarital sexual experience within the church. This suggests that women’s sexuality becomes more socially monitored and symbolically regulated than men’s sexuality. Consequently, the term reflects broader gendered expectations surrounding sexual conduct within religious-cultural settings.

4.2. Respectful Language and Hidden Regulation

One of the significant issues emerging from this discussion is the role of respectful language in sustaining hidden forms of moral regulation. Within isiZulu cultural discourse, derogatory terms openly stigmatise unmarried women who are no longer virgins or who have children outside marriage (Machi, 2020). In contrast, *Intethelelo* appears comparatively respectful, particularly because it does not directly insult or degrade women in explicit terms. However, the absence of openly derogatory language does not necessarily mean the absence of regulation or stigma.

From an African feminist perspective, systems of gender regulation do not always operate through direct violence or explicit discrimination. Instead, power may also function subtly through moral expectations, social categorisation, and culturally accepted forms of language. In this regard, *Intethelelo* may be understood as a softer or more socially acceptable mechanism of regulation that nonetheless reinforces gendered expectations surrounding sexuality.

The term therefore reveals how respectful religious-cultural language can simultaneously conceal and normalise moral regulation. By presenting the category in respectful terms, the regulation of women's sexuality may become socially acceptable and less likely to be critically questioned within the religious community. Consequently, women categorised as *Intethelelo* may continue to experience symbolic differentiation and moral surveillance even in the absence of openly hostile language.

Furthermore, the term demonstrates how language may regulate behaviour indirectly through social recognition and identity formation. Once a category becomes socially meaningful within a community, individuals may internalise the expectations associated with that category. In this way, language contributes not only to communication but also to the maintenance of moral order and social discipline within religious settings.

This suggests that stigma should not only be understood through openly derogatory labels but also through subtle linguistic processes that construct difference and reinforce unequal moral expectations. Therefore, respectful terminology may still reproduce systems of gendered social control while appearing culturally appropriate and morally acceptable.

4.3. Gendered Sexual Double Standards

The discussion surrounding *Intethelelo* further reveals the persistence of gendered sexual double standards within religious-cultural contexts. Existing scholarship demonstrates that women are frequently subjected to stricter forms of sexual regulation and moral judgement than men (Souza, 2016; Mamponya, 2021). Female sexuality is often tied to notions of purity, dignity, family honour, and moral respectability, while men's sexuality is less intensely monitored or publicly categorised.

Within the NBC context, the existence of the category *Intethelelo* reflects this unequal moral framework. The term specifically identifies women who are no longer virgins, thereby making

female sexuality socially visible and morally significant within the church community. This visibility reinforces the idea that women bear greater responsibility for maintaining sexual morality and religious respectability.

African feminist scholarship argues that patriarchal systems frequently position women's bodies as sites of cultural and moral control (Amaefula, 2021). Consequently, women who deviate from expected sexual norms may experience forms of judgement, exclusion, or symbolic differentiation that men do not experience to the same extent. The regulation of female sexuality therefore becomes normalised within religious and cultural systems through everyday discourse, expectations, and social practices.

Importantly, the term *Intethelelo* illustrates how gendered regulation may persist even when framed in respectful religious language. Although the category may not appear openly degrading, it nonetheless reflects unequal expectations surrounding sexual behaviour. The moral significance attached to women's virginity suggests that women continue to be evaluated according to standards of purity and sexual respectability that are not equally imposed on men.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that *Intethelelo* operates as more than a religious-cultural term. Rather, it functions as a gendered moral category that reflects broader systems of sexual regulation, identity construction, and social control within the Nazareth Baptist Church. Through language, religious communities construct moral meanings that shape how women's sexuality is understood, monitored, and evaluated within society.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the meanings and social implications associated with the term *Intethelelo* within the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC). By situating the term within broader discussions of religion, gender, language, and sexuality, the paper demonstrated that *Intethelelo* functions as a socially meaningful category linked to ideas of femininity, morality, and sexual respectability within the church community.

Using Social Constructionism and African Feminism as analytical frameworks, the paper showed how religious-cultural language contributes to the construction of social identities and moral expectations. The analysis highlighted that categories surrounding sexuality are not natural or fixed but are produced through cultural and religious discourse shaped by unequal

gender relations. The analysis further demonstrated how gendered moral expectations are reproduced through religious-cultural discourse.

The paper further contributes to existing scholarship by moving beyond dominant understandings of *Intethelelo* as forgiveness or spiritual purification and examining its context-specific meaning within the NBC. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of examining everyday religious-cultural terminology as part of broader systems through which gender, morality, and belonging are negotiated within African religious communities.

As this research continues, further exploration of Nazarite women's own interpretations and experiences of *Intethelelo* may offer deeper insight into how women negotiate, challenge, or redefine these meanings within contemporary social and religious life. Ultimately, the paper argues that the study of language remains essential for understanding how religious communities construct moral worlds and shape gendered social experience.

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